

The American Counseling Association's "*Counseling Corner*" Weekly Columns

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Avoiding The "Helicopter Parent" Trap

from the American Counseling Association

As parents we all want our children to be safe and happy. It's a natural reaction built into our genes ever since our cave man ancestors had to protect the young ones or the odds were good that the kids simply wouldn't survive.

Today's world usually isn't quite as frightening and dangerous, but our offspring still need a lot of care and attention, especially as babies. That's a time when "helicopter parenting," the hovering over virtually every aspect of a child's life, makes sense. The problem comes when that desire to always be there protecting and helping goes on too long.

It's difficult for parents to accept that sometimes children actually need to make bad decisions, to learn from natural consequences and possibly to just flat out fail. As a parent, you're all too aware of the mistakes your child may be heading for and the temptation is almost always to want to jump in, to stop the bad things from happening and to help your child avoid problems.

Yes, parents do need to help keep truly dire consequences from occurring ("No, taking a loaded gun for show and tell is not a good idea!"), but you also want to encourage your children's natural growth and independence by letting them learn on their own. Your staying up all night doing that school project does not help him or her prepare for the future.

Children with overly protective parents often have trouble making their own decisions because they know Mom or Dad is always there to point the way. Kids who have been constantly helicoptered may also end up rebelling strongly as their desire for independence grows.

Stopping yourself from being a helicopter parent can feel difficult, but it's important for healthy development that children have space to make their own decisions, good or bad. Yes, you can talk your children through their dilemmas and help them find solutions, but it isn't your job to find the solutions for them.

Help your children build independence and confidence by encouraging them to try new things, even things that may scare them a bit. Offer sympathy and understanding when something goes wrong, but don't always jump in to make it right. When a child is allowed to face possible failure, and sometimes to even experience it, he or she is learning valuable lessons about growing up.

Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACACorner@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org.

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words: 393