

# The dangers of 'overparenting'

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A series of UA-led investigations into parent-child relationships has revealed that those who overparent can lead to a reduction in an adult child's self-efficacy and an increase in a sense of self-entitlement. "These parents are hyper involved in their child's life. There is a blurring of boundaries," said UA alumna Michelle Givertz, now a faculty member at California State University, Chico.

(Medical Xpress)—Are you that parent who writes your child's essays, cover letters and job applications? Do you call in to encourage employers to give your son or daughter a strong look? If so, you may be doing yourself and your child a disservice.

It is one thing to be a nurturing, supportive and concerned parent, but numerous [negative consequences](#) can result when parents exert too much control over their adult children's lives.

That is one of the pivotal findings in a series of investigations into hundreds of parent-young [adult child](#) relationships in multiple states, led by Chris Segrin, who heads the University of Arizona communication department.

Segrin and his collaborators have co-authored three new articles – two already published and one forthcoming – that shed light on some of the negative effects of overparenting.

Among their findings are that adult children who are overparented tend to have lower [self-efficacy](#) and an exaggerated sense of entitlement, and that moms and dads who overparent are likely to be less satisfied with [family communication](#) and connection.

"On the one hand, I think these are all well-intentioned parents who are invested in their children's lives," said UA alumnus and collaborator Michelle Givertz, now an assistant professor for [communication studies](#) at California State University, Chico.

"But it is stunting the growth of these young people and creating other problems for them, in terms of depression, anxiety and negative coping behaviors," said Givertz, who worked with Segrin along with collaborators Amy Bauer of the UA communication department; Neil Montgomery of Keene State College; Alesia Woszidlo of the University of Kansas; and Melissa Taylor Murphy of Bloomsburg University.

So, what did the team find with regard to why people overparent?

The team found that overparenting is associated with lower-quality

communication within the family. Also, those who overparent tended to have lower family satisfaction.

What does this mean for adult children?

The team found that children raised by those who overparent tend to have a lower rate of coping skills.

"That ought to be a frightening message for a parent to hear because the world is a very scary place when you don't have the skills to deal with the problems the world presents," Segrin said.



The term "helicopter parent" was popularized within higher education contexts in the last decade. UA communication professor Chris Segrin and members of his research team began to investigate the potential causes and consequences of overparenting, publishing a series of articles on their findings.

Adult children also tend to have lower self-efficacy and an exaggerated sense of entitlement.

"This is also a pretty significant concern with what happens with this type of parenting. Narcissism and entitlement are bedfellows; they just go hand in hand," Segrin said.

"These parents are generating a child who really sees him or herself as the center of the universe. Being catered to becomes a norm for these children," he added. "They are raising kids with low self-efficacy and high entitlement, which is a near lethal combination of personality traits."

Segrin and Givertz each took an interest in the research after experiencing interactions with some of their students' parents.

Once, after one of Segrin's students earned a grade lower than required to be admitted into the program, the student's father called. Unable to speak to the parent because of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, Segrin met with the student instead.

"I found out that the young man who took the class was apologetic and didn't even want his father to call," Segrin said.

"Even though their 'children' are 20, 21 years old, these parents are still trying to influence actions in their children's lives," Segrin said. "That was a light bulb moment for me; that this overparenting might not be something a young person really wants but is something the parent superimposes on the family environment."

"Overparenting," or authoritarian parenting, is beyond the bounds of general parenting and can result in emotional and psychological harm for adult children, Segrin said.

"This is not an admonishment against heavy parental involvement," he said.

"Part of what we are interested in is when parents do more beyond what is needed for these young adults; more beyond what is needed developmentally at that age," he said, noting that the average age for [adult children](#) – whether it was the students or their parents involved in the studies – was about 20 years old.

Givertz said it is important to study parent-child dynamics because "nothing about social life is static." She also emphasized that additional research helps to explain the similar and dissimilar experiences people have.

"Social scientists have been studying parenting for about 100 years, and this has been a topic of interest that became a bigger area of research in the '60s and '70s," she said.

What has been learned is that open communication and fewer instances of authoritarian parenting indicated more balanced family dynamics, Segrin and Givertz said.

Some of the team members have continued the research, currently conducting online surveys as part of the fourth round of data collection to understand how parental anxiety may lead to overparenting. The UA-led research could lead to stronger models for effective parenting.

Also, researchers have begun moving beyond simply identifying and defining what it means to overparent; they are now trying to develop a model for understanding overparenting, which should lead to a better understanding of different parenting techniques and child-parent relationships.

"There are a lot of colloquial terms: 'helicopter parent,' 'black hawk parenting,'" Givertz said.

"What we're trying to do is to move things forward in more of a theoretical direction so that we can really develop a theory of overparenting," Givertz said, adding that some of the implications of overparenting remain unknown.

"This is still a fairly new area of research, so we don't know everything," she said. "But there is lots of room for investigation here."

Provided by University of Arizona

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