

Male versus female college students react differently to helicopter parenting, study finds

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Credit: Southern Methodist University

Helicopter parenting reduces the well-being of young women, while the failure to foster independence harms the well-being of young men but not young women.

Male and female college students react differently to misguided parenting, according to a new study that looked at the impact of helicopter parenting and fostering independence.

Measuring both helicopter parenting as well as autonomy support—fostering independence—was important for the researchers to study, said family dynamics expert Chrystyna Kouros, an assistant professor of psychology at Southern Methodist University, Dallas, and an author on the study.

"Just because mom and dad aren't [helicopter parents](#), doesn't necessarily mean they are supporting their young adult in making his or her own choices," Kouros said. "The parent may be uninvolved, so we also wanted to know if parents are actually encouraging their student to be independent and make their own choices."

The researchers found that [young women](#) are negatively affected by helicopter parenting, while [young men](#) suffer when parents don't encourage independence.

"The sex difference was surprising," said Kouros, an expert in adolescent depression. "In Western culture in particular, boys are socialized more to be independent, assertive and take charge, while girls are more socialized toward relationships, caring for others, and being expressive and compliant. Our findings showed that a lack of autonomy support—failure to encourage independence—was more problematic for males, but didn't affect the well-being of females. Conversely, helicopter parenting—parents who are overinvolved—proved problematic for girls, but not boys."

The study is unique in measuring the well-being of college students, said Kouros, director of the Family Health and Development Lab at SMU. The tendency in research on parenting has been to focus on the mental

health of younger children.

"When researchers do focus on [college students](#) they tend to ask about academic performance, and whether students are engaged in school. But there haven't been as many studies that look at mental health or well-being in relation to helicopter parenting," she said.

Unlike children subjected to psychological control, in which parents try to instill guilt in their [child](#), children of helicopter parents report a very close bond with their parents. Helicopter parents "hover" out of concern for their child, not from malicious intent, she said.

What helicopter parents don't realize is that despite their good intentions to help their child, it actually does harm, said Naomi Ekas, a co-author on the study and assistant professor of psychology at Texas Christian University, Fort Worth.

"They're not allowing their child to become independent or learn problem-solving on their own, nor to test out and develop effective coping strategies," Ekas said.

Young men that reported more autonomy support, measured stronger well-being in the form of less social anxiety and fewer depressive symptoms.

For young women, helicopter parenting predicted lower psychological well-being. They were less optimistic, felt less satisfaction with accomplishments, and were not looking forward to things with enjoyment, nor feeling hopeful. In contrast, lacking autonomy support wasn't related to negative outcomes in females.

"The take-away is we have to adjust our parenting as our kids get older," said Kouros. "Being involved with our child is really important. But we

have to adapt how we are involved as they are growing up, particularly going off to college."

The findings were reported in the article "Helicopter Parenting, Autonomy Support, and College Students' Mental Health and Well-being: The Moderating Role of Sex and Ethnicity," in the Journal of Child and Family Studies.

Other co-authors were: Romilyn Kiriaki and Megan Sunderland, SMU Department of Psychology, and Megan M. Pruitt, Texas Christian University. The study was funded by the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health at the University of Texas at Austin.

Parental involvement can go too far

Research on child development has consistently found that children are more successful when they have [parental involvement](#) and support.

Now, however, research is finding that parental involvement can go too far. Call it over-parenting, over-controlling parenting or helicopter parenting, but the characteristics are the same: parents offer their child a lot of warmth and support, but in combination with high levels of control and low levels of autonomy and independence.

For example a parent may dispute their college student's low grade with a professor or negotiate their young adult's job offer and salary.

Previous research in the field has linked helicopter parenting to a student's poor academic achievement, lower self-esteem and life satisfaction, poor peer relationships, and greater interpersonal dependency.

"With helicopter parenting you're impeding children from meeting the

developmental goals of being independent and autonomous," Kouros said. "That lowers their confidence in being able to solve problems on their own. They lose the opportunity to learn how to deal with stressors. Someone who's used to figuring out daily hassles, however, learns strategies, gets practice and knows problems aren't the end of the world."

In contrast, research in the field links positive outcomes when parents support autonomy and independence by encouraging their young adults to make decisions and solve problems. Autonomy support is related to higher self-esteem and less depression.

Minimal research into sex differences of young adults

For the current study, the researchers wanted to see if helicopter parenting and low autonomy support equally affected male and female students.

Researching potential differences was especially important, the researchers concluded, since studies have found that females are twice as prone as males to develop depression and anxiety.

Very little research of sex differences has been conducted in emerging adulthood in relation to parenting. What limited research there is suggests that over-controlling or lax parenting increases the risk for maladjustment, particularly for young women.

The researchers surveyed 118 undergraduate students recruited from two mid-sized private universities in the southwest United States. The majority of students were female, between 18 and 25 years old, primarily white and Hispanic and living on campus.

Students completed widely accepted measures of helicopter parenting and autonomy support. The questionnaires asked students to rank their

agreements or disagreement on a scale for items such as "If I were to receive a low grade that I felt was unfair, my parents would call the professor," or "My parents encourage me to make my own decisions and take responsibility for the choices I make."

To assess [mental health](#) and well-being, the students completed an accepted inventory for depression and anxiety symptoms that asked questions about their feelings the past two weeks. Examples include, "I felt depressed," "I felt self-conscious knowing that others were watching me," and "I felt hopeful about the future."

The study complements a growing body of research about the harmful effects of helicopter parenting for adult children. It also adds to research indicating females are more vulnerable to the negative effects than males.

"You should love and care for your child, but the way you show it and manifest it has to be developmentally appropriate. Your parenting has to follow where your child is developmentally," Kouros said. "Being over-involved while your child is in college, that may not be appropriate anymore. That doesn't mean you disengage. So if a college student wants to call their parent and talk through an issue and problem solve, I think that's appropriate. But it's their problem and they should be able to confidently handle it on their own."

More information: Chrystyna D. Kouros et al. Helicopter Parenting, Autonomy Support, and College Students' Mental Health and Well-being: The Moderating Role of Sex and Ethnicity, *Journal of Child and Family Studies* (2016). [DOI: 10.1007/s10826-016-0614-3](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-016-0614-3)

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