

Lana Button

My 14 year old tries to sneak out of the house without her cell phone. "Mom you call me, like, 16 times a day!" she complains. Am I a helicopter mom?-one who constantly hovers, ready to swoop down at the first whiff of trouble? I swore I'd never be; because I grew up with a helicopter parent.

My Dad tracked my every move. I couldn't go to sleepovers (could be a fire) or travel to sports meets (potential car accident). I'll admit I survived my small town New Brunswick childhood without tragedy. But at 18, I was naïve and unprepared for university life in Montreal and nearly drown in my freedom.

So why do I call my daughter every 20 minutes when she's out of my sight? (And have to admit- have said no to more than one sleepover) Like many parents, I'm in a panic to keep my three daughters safe. And I've bought into the message that a good parent is fiercely attentive to every detail of her child's life.

And I'm certainly not alone. Sarah Parker admits she bought a house beside her daughter's elementary school, and dressed her in bright clothing so she could track her at recess. Sarah lived through some bad experiences and was determined to shield her daughter from similar harm. She says staying within arms-reach protected her daughter, (Alexis hardly fell- without being caught before she hit the ground) but it was exhausting.

Indeed, Alvin Rosenfeld, M.D. and Nicole Wise warn in their book "*The Over-* is rooted in our deep love for our children, constant hovering can make life more difficult and stressful for everyone and less enjoyable for the child.

But Sarah met her match in Deborah Stevenson. When Deborah's daughter, Deirdre arrived for a sleepover, Deborah brought fresh batteries for Susan's smoke detector and questioned each parent about their daughter's vaccinations. Witnessing Deborah's behavior (accompanying every school trip, inviting herself to children's parties, forcing Deirdre to play violin when she'd rather play soccer) snapped Sarah out of her desire to constantly hover over Alexis.

She watched Deirdre suffer socially and admits she, and other mothers stopped inviting Deirdre places to avoid Deborah's third degree.

Damaging Affects of Helicopter Parenting

Children raised by helicopter parents often lack self-sufficiency. Educators say these young adults enter college lacking life skills like self-reliance, sharing and conflict resolution, according to Valerie Strauss's Washington Post report, "*Putting Parents in Their Place*"

An Associate Physics Professor at St. Francis Xavier University says they also suffer academically, because they are accustomed to spoon feeding and hand holding when it comes to their studies, and can't stand on their own academic feet when asked to think critically and analytically.

This doesn't surprise Lisa Clarke who teaches grade 12 biology in Mississauga, Ontario. She's had parents boldly request more home assignments and less classroom testing and then obviously complete their child's projects and assignments for them. These parents complain to the principal if their child receives an unacceptable mark. Lisa's felt pressure from a principal to ease up on marking to appease parents, and has seen persistent parents succeed in having their child's mark changed- so obviously that child will have trouble cutting it when he goes it alone in university.

Helicopter parenting blocks a child from experiencing pride at individual accomplishments say Rosenfeld and Wise. She gets the message that without constant help she'll never be able to take care of herself.

Although it was agreed that Alexis could walk home from school in grade 5, Sarah would give in to anxiety, and meet her daughter half way. Alexis would be furious to see her mother, and would stomp off ahead of her.

Rosenfeld and Wise say sheltering our children from all discomfort, unhappiness or disappointment is humanly impossible and ultimately counterproductive, because these carefully 'shielded' children enter the real world without the tools to deal with life's ups and downs.

Are We Talking or Tracking?

Just how tight have those electronic apron strings become? Ellen Goodman's Boston Globe article, "*Big Brother meets Big Mother*", reports that today's typical cell phone greeting isn't, "How are you?" but "Where are you?" Cell phone services allow parents to track their kids with GPS, and monitor their instant messages. Email warnings alert parents if their son is late for soccer or strays outside a designated boundary.

Bladerunner sells a GPS lined children's jacket. For \$500 and \$20 a month you can monitor your child's every move.

Rosenfeld and Wise warn that constant monitoring keeps children from developing adaptability and forming any street sense.

Take the Helicopter Test You are a 'helicopter parent' if you...

-are over-involved in her social life.

When Nicole Potter's 8 year old daughter came home from school in tears because she wasn't asked to swap 'croc' sandal straps at recess, Nicole spent all evening on the phone orchestrating a plan for two girls to swap straps with Laura the next day. A helicopter parent fixes every social dilemma their child has, instead of lending a sympathetic ear and allowing their daughter to experience some social disappointments.

-are over-involved with her school work.

A parent who schedules when and how her daughter does homework, calling the teacher for each and every unacceptable grade, and intervening whenever possible to ensure that the grades are kept high interferes with their child's learning and robs him of learning about actions and consequences.

A parent who accepts only A's has lost sight of the fact that school is a place to learn, say Rosenfeld and Wise, and that can only be done by making mistakes along the way.

-are over the top in safety

Of course we parents must do what we can to keep our children safe, but we must stop just short of bubble wrapping our child or donning scrubs each time we leave the house in an attempt to keep him safe from every remote possibility. Children need to learn in a safe and loving environment that reasonable amounts of pain and unhappiness can be endured.

How to Stop Hovering

Parenting expert Barbara Colorosa says children need opportunities to be responsible and invitations to think for themselves.

-Let her practice being independent and self sufficient

Give her responsibilities, like feeding a pet. Allow her to take responsibility for her own life one tiny step at a time, like deciding when to do homework or practice an activity. Let go long enough to give her a chance and she may surprise you!

-Stop doing stuff he can do himself.

Give him ownership over things like packing his backpack and sports bag, making his bed, or his lunch, and doing his own school work.

-Be a terrific listener, be sympathetic when she experiences disappointment, and give advice when she's battling with a social dilemma, but stay off the phone!-don't solve every social issue that comes up.

-Let him see you enjoy life

Everyone in the family is entitled to a life. We sometimes martyr-manage our child's life and end up ignoring, sometimes even sacrificing, our interests, friendships even marriage. It's healthy for your child to see you taking time for yourself.

-Let go in safe and productive ways

Sarah Parker started letting go when Alexis began horse back riding. "There she was, this little girl, controlling this thousand-pound animal, and doing it well."

She still freaks when Alexis rides out of her vision, but fights the urge to pull out the binoculars.

Lisa Earle McLeod, author of *"Forget Perfect"* reminds us that our job as parents isn't to create a perfect childhood, it's to create a functioning adult. "We're supposed to supply the gas, not fly the plane."