

Helicopter parenting, autonomy, mental health and wellbeing in female students (Kouros et al., 2017)

An American study has found that helicopter parenting predicts lower levels of wellbeing for female students, but not males, possibly because parents use more controlling behaviours and less autonomy-granting behaviours with their daughters compared with their sons. The study authors, who examined mental health, dysphoria, social anxiety and general wellbeing in 118 undergraduate college students, write that:

given these controlling behaviors begin early in life for adolescent females, helicopter parenting during college may represent a prolonged history of parental control that culminates in less well-being during emerging adulthood.

In contrast, parents are more likely to support their sons in developing personal autonomy (independence and self-reliance), resulting in young adult males reporting higher wellbeing than females in this study (Kouros, Pruitt, Ekas, Kiriaki & Sunderland, 2017, p. 946).

While parental involvement is linked to positive child outcomes, helicopter parenting — which Kouros et al. describe as “parental involvement that is not developmentally appropriate and intrusive” — can be problematic in childhood. It can also be “particularly harmful during emerging adulthood when young adults are working towards development goals of self-reliance and autonomy” (p. 939).

Helicopter parents are warm and supportive, but also exhibit high levels of control and are reluctant to allow their children to develop autonomy (p. 939). “Specifically,” write Kouros et al., “helicopter parents are overly involved in their child’s lives and intervene to make decisions and solve problems for their child”. While acting out of concern for their child, helicopter parents are potentially causing long-term harm (p. 940).

Current research shows that helicopter parenting is related to multiple negative outcomes including lower self-efficacy, lower internal locus of control, higher sense of entitlement, poor academic achievement, lower self-esteem and life satisfaction, poor relationships with peers, lower engagement in studies, and high rates of depression and anxiety in young adults (p. 940).

But what is it about helicopter parenting that negatively impacts the general wellbeing of daughters and not sons? Kouros et al. believe that it may be the “psychological control” aspect of helicopter parenting that is predictive of “internalizing problems” (such as depression and anxiety) in young adult females (p. 944). While there are “important differences between psychological control and helicopter parenting with regards to the levels of warmth and concern for the child’s well-being”, write Kouros et al. “both involve high levels of control”. Therefore, it is the controlling behaviours (rather than increased levels of concern) exhibited by helicopter parents which “may be responsible for the negative outcomes reported for females” (p. 945).

Helicopter parenting may result in lower wellbeing in young women “by impairing their ability to develop effective coping mechanisms for resolving conflict and dealing with everyday life stressors” (p. 945). A previous study found that higher maternal control was related to “avoidant coping strategies” in female adolescents, but not males, while another study found that girls “may interpret helicopter parenting as a covert message from parents that they believe their female child is not competent or skilled to handle problems and decisions on their own” (p. 945).

Studies also show that boys receive more autonomy support, with research showing that:

parents engage in sex-typing socialization with their children, in which independence and assertiveness is emphasized with boys whereas being expressive and compliant is emphasized for girls.

When a helicopter parents do not give their sons autonomy support, they may report social anxiety and dysphoria (a temporary psychological state of generalised unhappiness) but this study found that, unlike girls, they do not report lower overall levels of wellbeing (p. 946).

Helicopter parents who become over-involved in the lives of their young adult children by making decisions and solving problems for them may hinder or prevent them from “developing a repertoire of, and practicing [sic] using, adaptive coping strategies and regulatory skills”. It also decreases their self-efficacy and self-esteem, “both of which show robust associations with psychological distress among emerging adults” (p. 946).

Kouros et al. write that their study “complements a growing body of research highlighting the harmful impact of helicopter parenting for adult children’s outcomes” (p. 944). In particular, it is the “perceived lack of confidence” in the female children of helicopter parents which may decrease their overall wellbeing (pp. 945-946). In conclusion (p. 947):

During emerging adulthood, when independence becomes increasingly important, it is crucial to help individuals thrive and appropriately assert their independence from their parents, while still encouraging healthy interdependence within families that is culturally-sensitive, in order to prepare them for the demands and challenges of adulthood.

Reference

Kouros, C., Pruitt, M. Ekas, N. Kiriaki, R., and Sunderland, M. (2017). [Helicopter parenting, autonomy support, and college students’ mental health and well-being: The moderating role of sex and ethnicity](#)