Overparenting as a Barrier to Development, Learning, and Well-being

Research findings accumulated over ... decades ... show that ... parental encouragement, activities, and interest at home and participation in schools and classrooms affect children's achievement, attitudes, and aspirations, even after student ability and family socioeconomic status are taken into account.

Joyce Epstein

The strongest predictors that a student is likely to drop out are family characteristics such as: socioeconomic status, family structure, family stress (e.g., death, divorce, family moves), and the mother's age. Students who come from low-income families, are the children of single, young, unemployed mothers, or who have experienced high degrees of family stress are more likely than other students to drop out of school. Of those characteristics, low socioeconomic status has been shown to bear the strongest relationship to students' tendency to drop out.

National Education Association

Parental involvement is related to many positive child outcomes, but if not developmentally appropriate, it can be associated with higher levels of child anxiety and depression. Few studies have examined the effects of over-controlling parenting, or "helicopter parenting" ....

Schiffrin. Liss, Miles-McLean, et al (2014)

Research findings over the past 30 plus years consistently emphasize the value of home support for schooling. Moreover, with respect to students who are not doing well at school, efforts to enhance home involvement are a basic element of the overall approach to addressing factors interfering with school learning and performance. In the last decade, however, some concerns have emerged as more research has focused on parenting practices that are developmentally inappropriate and in conflict with a school's prevailing social and cultural standards (e.g., research on parents who are viewed as overprotective, overcontrolling, overpressuring).

With respect to home involvement and engagement, our Center has emphasized that, as with students, schools must account for individual differences among parents and other caretakers. (Note that we prefer the term *home* involvement because many students are raised primarily by grandparents, aunts, older siblings, "nannies," and in foster homes.)

Differences in caretakers' motivation and ability to participate with schooling reflect past experiences as well as current encounters and how well their youngsters are doing at school. Research has focused on natters such as economic status, work schedules, immigrant status, ethnic and racial considerations, single parent families, number of youngsters in the home, homes where English is not spoken, extended families, military families, parents with disabilities, families where a parent is in prison, developmentally inappropriate parenting, dysfunctional families, foster homes, and homeless families and youngsters.

Given the increasing interest of schools in working well with all primary caretakers, greater attention must be given to those who school staff find of particular concern. With this in mind, this brief resource is devoted to highlighting parents who are overprotective, overcontrolling, and overpressuring. We group them under the concept of *overparenting*.

What is Overparenting?

Parents and other caretakers of the young are expected to keep youngsters safe, promote socialized behavior, support success at school, and produce adults who are physically, emotionally, and socially healthy. To these ends, they are expected to use practices that are developmentally appropriate and consistent with prevailing social and cultural norms.

When parents are viewed by others as being excessively involved in their child's life, the popular literature describes them with terms such as helicopter parents, lawnmower parents, black hawk parents, and tiger moms. These terms are used to characterize parents whose over-involvement is judged as negatively affecting healthy development. For example, rather than teaching problem solving and coping skills, they intercede so the child doesn't have to deal with problems; they are determined to find ways to ensure the child succeeds and avoid failure. They are seen as "hovering willingly and tirelessly, organizing many areas of the child's life. Even in college and ... graduate school, parents stay on the job."

Increases in Helicopter Parents

Many factors are at play when it comes to understanding the increase in parents who are overly protective and involved in their child's life. As Hunt (2008) notes: Helicopter parents became a major concern when Baby Boomers produced the Millenium generation (born from 1982-2002). Among the factors seen as leading to this phenomenon are major societal changes related to birthrate, parenting practices, lifestyles, economic insecurity, and technology.

For some families the lower birth rate means that more time and money can be spent on their children. As to parenting practices, Hunt points out that "Boomers have taken the best of their parents styles (emphasizing education, independence and discipline) [Carroll,2005] and moved away from the authoritarian style to a more co-operative style of parenting. Parents see themselves as responsible for helping their children make better choices—including what colleges to go to, what jobs to take and where their lives lead." In this context, Hunt also notes that "The Millennials have grown up with cell phones and for them, constant communication is normal. College students readily admit talking to their parents three or four times a day—exchanging pleasantries and seeking advice." And, of course, various aspects of sense of self are tied up in their ability to guide and support their children around barriers and ensure success at all times.

What Negative Results May Occur?

Given there are always individual differences in parenting outcomes, psychological research on excessive parental control suggests that overparenting can have a negative impact on a student's *feelings of self-determination, competence, and relatedness to significant others*. Such impact is interpreted as resulting from parental excessive control undermining these basic psychological needs. In turn, diminished feelings of autonomy, competence, and interpersonal connections are associated with a wide range of coping and developmental problems (e.g., enhanced vulnerability to stressors, a lowering of intrinsic motivation for learning, higher levels of behavior and mental health problems, physical health problems, substance abuse, and lower ratings of life satisfaction). Similar problems are associated with excessive parental pressure for academic achievement.

Developmentally, a major concern about overparenting is that it ill-prepares youngsters for adulthood and often handicaps their future. As adults, they may lack essential critical thinking and life skills and remain dependent on their parents or some other adult. Frequent, examples cited in the literature include parents accompanying their offspring on applicant interviews and participating in ways that universities and potential employers view negatively. Not surprisingly, overprotective and excessively accommodating parenting seems to engender a sense of entitlement in some youngsters.

In a study by Schiffrin and colleagues (2014), "college students (N = 297) completed measures of helicopter parenting, autonomy supportive parenting, depression, anxiety, satisfaction with life, and basic psychological needs satisfaction. Students who reported having over-controlling parents reported significantly higher levels of depression and less satisfaction with life. Furthermore, the negative effects of helicopter parenting on college students' well-being were largely explained by the perceived violation of students' basic psychological needs for autonomy and competence.''

On another level, we note that overparenting can affect not only the well-being of students but of parents and school personnel. For example, researchers report that parents with overparenting beliefs placed more responsibility on themselves and school officials for their student's success and failures. Research suggests that this can be detrimental to parents' health (e.g., findings indicate that mothers who felt higher levels of responsibility and tried to control their children's lives had poorer health and were at risk for higher levels of exhaustion, stress, anxiety, and guilt). Furthermore, some parents continue to have negative self-thoughts about their impact even when their child is doing fine. Additionally, because the parents attribute aspects of their children's success and failure to teachers and school officials, they are prone to blame and pressure school staff when problems arise.

Implications for Improving How Schools Approach Home Involvement/Engagement

Given the differences found among those rearing children, our Center has framed an approach for schools to enhance home involvement and engagement that is mutually beneficial and equitable. The framework outlines a continuum of potential interventions that reflect the differences in primary caretakers needs and interests and the needs of the school (see Exhibit on next page).

At one end of the continuum, the focus is on helping those in the home address their own basic needs so that they are able to meet basic obligations to their children. At the other end, the emphasis is on increasing home involvement in improving what goes on at schools and supporting public education. In between, there are interventions to enhance communication between school and home (especially with reference to matters related to the student), participation in making essential decisions about the student, support at home related to the student's *basic* learning and development, and involvement in solving problems and providing support at home and at school with respect to a student's *special* needs.
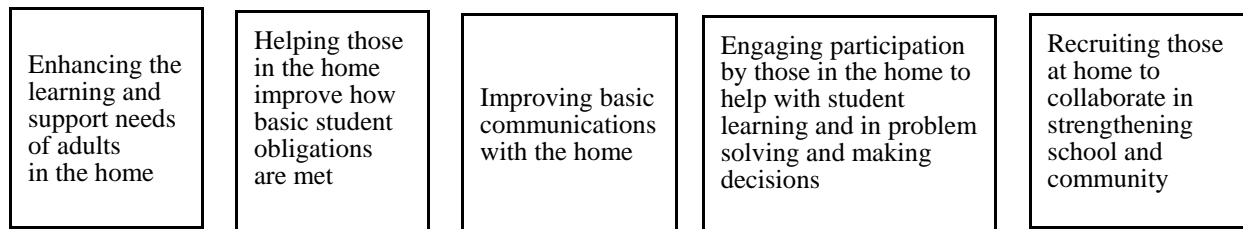
Here are some overlapping examples related to each of the agenda items exhibited:

(a) *addressing the specific learning and support needs of adults in the home* (e.g., support services to assist in addressing basic survival needs and obligations to the children; adult education classes to enhance literacy, job skills, English-as-a-second language, citizenship preparation; enrichment and recreational opportunities; mutual support groups)

(b) *helping those in the home improve how basic student obligations are met* (e.g., enhancing caretaker literacy skills; providing guidance related to parenting and how to help with schoolwork; teaching family members how to support and enrich student learning)

(c) *improving forms of basic communication that promote the well-being of student, family, and school* (e.g., facilitating home-school connections and sense of community through family networking and mutual support; facilitating child care and transportation to reduce barriers to coming to school; language translation; phone calls and/or e-mail from teacher

and other staff with good news; frequent and balanced conferences – student-led when feasible; outreach to attract and facilitate participation of hard-to-reach families – including student dropouts)

(d) *enhancing home support for student learning and development and for problem solving and decision making essential to a student's well-being* (e.g., preparing and engaging families for participation in supporting growth and in planning and problem-solving)

(e) *recruiting those at home to support, collaborate, and partner in strengthening school and community by meeting classroom, school, and community needs* (e.g., volunteering to welcome and support new families; participating in school governance)

Whatever the agenda, all interventions related to home involvement and engagement must address differences in motivation and capability. In particular, outreach strategies must account for differences ranging from individuals who are motivationally ready and able to those whose attitudes and/or capabilities make them reluctant, avoidant, and even aggressive.

Note: The other five arenas of the learning supports system overlap home involvement and engagement in a variety of ways. For example: Supports for transitions emphasizes providing welcoming and ongoing social supports for newcomer families. Student and family special assistance is concerned with addressing individual family factors that interfere with family involvement. Community engagement strategies include a focus on ways for the community to increasingly support students and their families.

Concluding Comments

The example of overprotective parents is a reminder that interventions for home involvement and engagement require (a) greater attention to the full range of caretakers and (b) a comprehensive intervention approach. "Parents" differ. Addressing individual differences in motivation and capability is never easy, but it is essential if schools really mean to enhance equity of opportunity for every student to succeed at school and beyond.

For more specific examples of ways to enhance *Home Involvement and Engagement,* see the Center's self-study survey at
> http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/toolsforpractice/homeinvolvementsurvey.pdf

Relevant free online resources can be readily accessed though the Center's Quick Finds. See *Home Involvement in Schooling* at
> http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/homeinv_tt/homeinvolvfull.pdf

For related topics, see the Quick Find menu at
> http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/quicksearch.htm

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