

Highly Involved Parents of College Students:

A Literature Review

by

Julie A. Bethke

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Carol L. Johnson, Ph.D.

The Graduate School

University of Wisconsin-Stout

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**The Graduate School  
University of Wisconsin-Stout  
Menomonie, WI**

**Author:** Julie Bethke

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**Abstract**

There is some dispute about the level of involvement that parents should have in their student's education. During the K-12 years, parental involvement receives a great deal of support. In fact, research shows that for all students during the K-12 education, high levels of parental involvement make a significant positive difference in personal and academic growth. These positive differences range from higher grades, success in school, higher standardized test scores, higher self-esteem, more social competence, reduced substance use, aspirations for college, enrollment in college, and participation in out-of-school programs.

Expectations regarding parental involvement change once students head to college. College administrators expect that college students will progress through a developmental process where they learn to be emotionally independent without the need for constant parental reassurance, affection, and approval.

Learning to work with highly engaged parents is a challenge both for the college and for the students. Parental expectations impact the way students communicate with their parents as

using social media, twitter, cell phones, GPS tracking systems, and email, parents can monitor students' activities. Due to the students' maturity level, college experiences, and their ability to make difficult decisions they often depend on their parents to rescue them; therefore, contributing and supporting parents' involvement.

**The Graduate School  
University of Wisconsin Stout  
Menomonie, WI**

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## Chapter I: Introduction

It is a fine line between parents who are engaged in supporting children in school and those who sometimes cross the line into territory of interference. While educators seem to appreciate the participation of parents who volunteer in the classroom, assist with fundraising and contribute in meaningful ways to enhancing the children's education, there will always be those parents who interfere with the learning and development of the students. Parents who write the papers, do the science projects and do the work for the child are often considered helicopter parents. The name is given as they hover around the school waiting for opportunity to swoop in and help the child. Based on feedback from educators, this type of parenting may be detrimental to the growth and natural learning of the child.

It is important for children to do their own work and not be rescued at the thought of something not working to perfection or when the children give up too easily. It is often obvious when a parent designs a project, does the homework, or writes college essays for the student. It is not helpful for the student to have a parent who is overly involved in education, thus limiting opportunities for the student to learn and grow without overly engaged parental rescue missions.

Some literature indicated there has been a cultural shift that has occurred in the last twenty years that may have contributed to the change in level of parental involvement. These culture shifts have contributed to the recent phenomenon of highly involved parents or overly involved parents. The term helicopter parent emerged in 1990 and was made popular by media to describe those parents that hover over their children, guarding their every move with a watchful eye, ready to sweep in and rescue them as needed. The increase in parental involvement has been attributed to many different factors including technological advances, safety concerns, and change in child rearing styles (Randall, 2007).

There has also been a change in family dynamics as the method and frequency that families communicate with one another has increased accessibility (Carney-Hall, 2008). With easy access to family cell phone plans, wireless internet access nearly everywhere, twitter accounts, GPS monitoring of cars and kids, Skype, and social media, parents can literally stay connected with their children round-the-clock.

Administrators and educators worry that this increased involvement and dependence on parents may negatively impact students' growth as autonomous and independent individuals (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008e). There is also worry that these same students may have a hard time dealing with failure and may lack essential problem solving skills (Coburn, 2006).

Administrators have also had to learn how to meet the needs of these demanding parents. Research has mixed reviews concerning student perceptions and administrator concerns about the level of parental involvement through use of technology. Some high schools limit use of cell phone and internet access during the school day. Parents may phone the school and leave messages for students that will only be delivered at lunch and at the end of the day unless it is an emergency. Experienced educators have made suggestions about how to successfully work with parents who are highly involved and have discussed changes they have made to accommodate the parents' needs.

While parent engagement is encouraged in the early grades it seems to diminish as the children enter middle school and high school. By college most students are eager to experience a new found freedom from parents on college campuses. There is limited research regarding the impact of parental involvement but some proposed theories exist (Carney-Hall, 2008).

While there are studies regarding parental involvement in K-12 school years, the literature reviewed for this study focuses on an investigation of the appropriate amount of parent involvement at the college level.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Current literature has identified a transition of parental involvement in K-12 education – where involvement is encouraged – and higher education – where individuation and autonomy is encouraged. Administrators are concerned about the impact that increased parental involvement will have on students' development. The concern is that students will not develop problem solving skills, self-initiation skills, or become independent (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008e). This literature review will examine the research regarding the impact that parental involvement has on students' development in a college setting.

### **Purpose of the Research**

The purpose of this literature review is to examine research and literature regarding parental involvement in college students' lives. The current phenomena illustrates that parents are more involved in their children's lives than ever before. This review seeks to discover the impact that this level of highly involved parenting has on the students in college. This literature review was completed using a database made accessible through University of Wisconsin – Stout and was completed in the spring of 2011.

This literature review was developed to provide awareness regarding the current trends on the parent-student relationship. The basis for this literature review is to provide school counselors and educators knowledge regarding current trends of the parent-student relationship, factors that have contributed to the change, perceptions of parties involved, and suggestions for working with overly involved parents.

## **Research Questions**

There are four main research questions that this literature review will address. They are:

1. What is the current phenomena regarding parental involvement?
2. What are the contributing factors to the increase in parental involvement?
3. What is the impact on schools and the students of the increased parental involvement?
4. What can professionals do to work effectively with students and parents who have become increasingly more involved?

## **Assumptions of the Research**

This research assumes that the participants of studies and literature being reviewed were open, honest, and aware. It also assumes that people participating in these reports are capable of identifying feelings and perceptions. This research also assumes that there are parents who continue to be overly involved in their students' education to the point where they interfere with growth and development on a school campus.

## **Limitations of the Research**

A limitation regarding this research is that there is limited research regarding the actual impact of parental involvement on college students. Many of the studies that were conducted did not take into account diversity of families, cultural differences, language barriers, or socioeconomic status. Also, some of literature assumes that parents are highly involved throughout the students' life and does not take into account the varying degrees of parental involvement.

## Definition of Terms

The following key terms are defined to clarify the content in this research paper and because they show up frequently in the research.

**Attachment** – “any type of behavior that results in a person attaining or maintaining proximity to some other clearly identified individual who is conceived as better able to cope with the world” (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008b, p. 25)

**Baby Boomers** – people born between 1946 and the early 1960s (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008b)

**Black Hawks** – the extreme examples of helicopter parents, willing to engage in unethical behavior to assure the desired outcome for their child (Randall, 2007)

**Helicopter Parents** – the baby boomer generation of parents who hover over their child of any age (Coburn, 2006)

**Parental Involvement** – “(1) parenting, which consider the values and attitudes that parents have, which in turn affect how they raise their children; (2) home-school relationships, which reflect the role of the institution in the parent-child relationship – the formal and information connections between the family and the school; and (3) responsibility for learning, that is, parents’ emphasis on activities that promote the student’s growth, both socially and academically” (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008b, p. 22)

**Millennials** – children of baby boomers, born between 1980 and 2000 (Colavecchio-Van Sickler, 2006)

**Separation-Individuation** – “the developmental process that begins with separation from parents to achieve self-definition and the ability to function autonomously” (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008b, p. 24)

## Chapter II: Literature Review

### Introduction

What type of parenting expectations does a school have for parents? How does a parent know what is appropriate and what is overly involved in school? The Association for Study of Higher Education published a report that summarizes parent participation in three distinct categories including: (1) parenting, which consider the values and attitudes that parents have, which in turn affect how they raise their children; (2) home-school relationships, which reflect the role of the institution in the parent-child relationship – the formal and information connections between the family and the school; and (3) responsibility for learning, that is, parents' emphasis on activities that promote the student's growth, both socially and academically" (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008b, p. 22). This chapter includes the current phenomena of helicopter parents, factors contributing to increased parental involvement, impact and perceptions of parental involvement, and suggests on how to work with highly involved parents.

There is some dispute about the level of involvement that parents should have in their student's education. During the K-12 years, parental involvement receives a great deal of support. It is even a main component of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008e) in fact, research shows that for all students during the K-12 education, high levels of parental involvement make a significant positive difference in personal and academic growth. These positive differences range from higher grades, success in school, higher standardized test scores, higher self-esteem, more social competence, reduced substance use, aspirations for college, enrollment in college, and participation in out-of-school programs. The general perception is that parents are eagerly involved in the early grades and as the child works through school, there is less parent involvement to enable the child to develop coping

skills, conflict resolution and self-advocacy as they pass through developmental stages.

Expectations regarding parental involvement change, however, once students head to college (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008e). College administrators expect that their students will progress through a developmental process where they learn to be emotionally independent without the need for constant reassurance, affection, and approval (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008e). Although there are expectations from administrators to act as adults, are traditional age college students adults? Society views the college age student as an older adolescent and as an adult. College age students may have credit cards in their own name, drive, vote, and have their own academic records (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008d). But at the same time, they cannot drink until the age of 21, cannot rent a car until the age of 25, and must continue to report their parent's income on the FAFSA form (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008d). Overall, their status as an independent adult is unclear.

There is no clear developmental stage to put them in during this transition time so some researchers have begun to call this period "emerging adulthood" (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008d). The main features of this stage are identity exploration, instability, focus on self, and a feeling of in between (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008d). The unclear nature of this stage sets the student, parent, and institution up for different expectations. Throughout this transitioning time in development, the expectation for level of parental involvement is different and therefore, has produced the term, helicopter parent.

### **Helicopter Parent Phenomenon**

The newest phenomenon is the increased involvement by parents in their students' lives at the college level. The term "helicopter parent" coined in 1990 was used in popular literature to describe baby boomer parents who hover over their children (Randall, 2007). Administrators

worried that students would not learn how to deal with frustration, advocate for themselves in school, delay gratification, or negotiate because their parents have always done it for them (Cleaver, 2008). Administrators are also concerned that students will not develop into independent and autonomous individuals, capable of problem solving (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008e).

Popular literature uses the term helicopter parent to discuss an extreme level of parental involvement where parents hover over their children ready to help at the smallest sign of distress. Studies show that 40-60 percent of college parents qualify as helicopter parents (Randall, 2007). The Randall study (2007) also found that, to some extent, all income levels, both genders, and every race and ethnicity is represented in the helicopter parent population. The description of helicopter parent focuses most of the attention on the parents but, in reality, today's students are equal partners in this phenomenon by frequently initiating contact and reaching for their parents for assistance (Taub, 2008). Research has identified some differences regarding how mothers and fathers hover. Dr. Patricia Somers found that 60 percent of helicopter parenting was by mothers who were involved in the social, domestic, and academic lives of their sons. Fathers on the other hand, tend to hover when it comes to the big picture issues such as grades or finances. (Randall, 2007)

Shellenbarger (2007) went beyond identifying just helicopter parents and developed terms for five other types of parental hovercraft (Shellenbarger, 2007). First are the *Blackhawk* parents who are known as the parents who are willing to do unethical things to ensure the desired outcome; for example, writing their student's term paper (Colavecchio-Van Sickler, 2006). Researchers would consider Blackhawk parents the most damaging because of their level of aggression and willingness to do whatever it takes, no matter what. Blackhawk parents are those

who often threaten legal action if they don't get their way. In addition, these parents set bad problem-solving examples for their children and can hinder the development of their child's independence (Shellenbarger, 2007).

The second identified type of hovercraft parent is the *toxic parent*. These parents are intrusive because they meddle to the point that implies that their student is untrustworthy or incapable. For instance, one set of toxic parents installed a nanny-cam in their son's dorm room which he knew about; what he was not aware of, however, was they also installed an electronic transmitter in his car. When he traveled to a nearby city with his car, they withdrew him from college. When the student disappoints, they are quick to sweep in and remove them from the damaging situation before natural consequences can be discussed (Shellenbarger, 2007).

The next type of parent is the *consumer advocate*. These parents tend to regard higher education as a consumer transaction and hound college officials for special requests, scholarships or family discounts. Since parents are contributing more to the rising cost of higher education, they consider themselves co-purchasers, and feel entitled to all the same information as their children. Often challenging every detail on the student bill, they can hassle the financial aid office so much they cannot get work done to advocate for others. These types of parents are far from the worst and can actually be a valuable model of effective consumerism for their children when appropriate. (Shellenbarger, 2007)

The fourth type of hovercraft parent identified is the *safety expert*. These parents want to know about security plans and lockdown times. Since an increase in school shootings, hostage situations and other safety concerns is front and center in the minds of this population of parents, it adds to the stress and anxiety of the student enrolled. School administrators acknowledge that parents should want to know about emergency plans but many take it too far by requesting

copies of the fire-inspection records and confidential emergency-operations manuals. While some take it to the extreme, the less extreme parent can teach their students valuable lessons regarding safety. (Shellenbarger, 2007)

The last identified type of hovercraft parent is the *traffic and rescue helicopters*. Terms coined by an official at Saint Joseph's University, they refer to benign parenting types. The traffic helicopter provides their student with advice and guidance but lets the student make the decision. The rescue helicopter is known for rushing in to help with supplies and support during a crisis (Shellenbarger, 2007). These parents often send care packages during exam times or help with the campus move in and getting settled in the dorms. Not all parents fit into these descriptions of the types of hovercraft parents but these are the most common types.

Randall (2007) also identifies five similar categories of helicopter parents. These five categories are the consumer advocate, the "only want what's best for my child," the helopat, the entitlement advocate, and the vicarious college student. According to Dr. Patricia Somers, an associate professor at The University of Texas at Austin, most helicopter parents fit neatly into at least one of the five categories. (Randall, 2007)

The consumer advocate is known as the parent who pushes to get the most for their money as they typically view the college experience as a business transaction. These parents expect that if their child gets a degree in X, then a job in Y, their salary will be Z. They also like to keep a close eye on their investment so it is not uncommon for them to expect administration and staff members to violate the Family Rights and Privacy Act by sharing information not typically given to parents. In addition, if their needs are not met, they do not hesitate to voice their concerns. (Randall, 2007)

The second identified category is the parent that “only wants what is best” for their child. In other words, they require that their children get the best classes, the best professors, the newest dorm, the best internships, and therefore the best job. This type of parent is typically seen in families with few children and the quest for the best follows throughout college and often into the job search.

The next category is called the *helopat* which includes those parents who fight for fairness. Typically, they feel that universities are not making all services and opportunities equally accessible to all students. They argue that if their student got extra time he could have earned an A as well. They typically make excuses for the student with why there were so many absences or why papers were turned in after deadlines. Students learn to blame others for poor grades, loss of points on assignments or inability to find jobs (Randall, 2007). Another similar category of parenting styles ties in closely with this one too and is referred to as the *entitlement advocates*. These parents believe that no child should be left behind and that not all state and federal requirements apply to their child. Even though a class section is full, they demand their child be added or it isn't fair!

And the last category is referred to as the vicarious college student. Usually these parents feel like they missed out on something when they were in college and want a second chance. It is typically over-involvement in socializing, extracurricular activities, and cultural resources (Randall, 2007). Parents who accompany the group on spring break, host the tail-gate party for homecoming, and offer to side-line coach in order to hang out with the team are examples of these parents who may be trying to relive their former years on campus.

## **Contributing Factors to Increased Parental Involvement**

Current researchers have speculated why there has been an increase in parental involvement on college campuses. Baby boomer parents are known for taking a hands-on approach early in their children's education from preschool all the way through college, and even into the job search process (Coburn, 2006). It is not uncommon to see parents accompany their adult children to job interviews. Researchers have considered why these trends have occurred and how the results may have contributed to the recent increase in parental involvement.

It is important to keep in mind that parent programming and involvement on college campuses is not a new phenomena (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008a). Rather, it is the label of helicopter parent that has created a change of intrusiveness that creates a change in both the attitude and response toward college-parent relationships (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008a). Research suggests that there have been many relatively recent cultural shifts that have contributed to the change. These shifts include things like technological advances, safety concerns, poor economy, and change in family dynamics (Randall, 2007). There are several explanations why the cultural shifts may have contributed to the increase in too much parental involvement.

Historically, some academic institutions can track parent involvement programs back to the 1920's. Parent relations with the institutions were valued and seen as an honored tradition. It was not until the late 1960s and 1970s that parent involvement dropped off. This drop off was seen because students were exerting their independence during the Vietnam War years. Institutions reintroduced programming for parents again in the 1980s and 1990s. Some administrators say it was because many parents were needed to help financially which made

them a new emerging co-consumer in higher education. (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008a)

Since the 1980s, parent programs have progressively been growing and have not slowed down into the turn of the century (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008a). In 1999, over 40% of institutions provided at least one or more parent services (e.g. family day/weekend, parent orientation, newsletter, parent advisory board, fundraising, welcome week/move-in, or handbook). In 2007, 96% of college campus parent-relations offices indicated they provide five or more parent services (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008a).

In the last 20 years many cultural shifts have occurred that have contributed to increase parental involvement. The most obvious change is advances and accessibility in technology use. These advances allow people to stay connected all the time no matter where they are. People stay connected by using their cell phones, instant messaging, twitter accounts, GPS, social media, email, Skype, and even nanny cams. These advances make the line between being involved and over-involved in a child's life blurry (Randall, 2007).

The literature suggests that another reason for parental involvement is the increased escalation for safety concerns. Events such as the Columbine school shooting, the Virginia Tech shooting incident, and the September 11 terrorist attack, parents worry more about their children being far from home and their ability to protect them (Randall, 2007). These events have changed how people look at the world and that includes college campuses. Now that many individuals' perceptions of a dangerous and unsettled world have come true, this has increased parental anxiety. Parents now feel an increased need to be in contact with their children more frequently. Parents' safety concerns go beyond that immediate danger of attacks. The number of alcohol related deaths, sexual assaults and theft on campus are all reported in media with public

access. Parents also worry about the condition of the economy (Cleaver, 2008). By checking email, phoning students daily, and monitoring social status, parents keep a watchful eye on the events on campus.

Since the economy has taken a downward spiral, parents are concerned that their children will not be able to make ends meet. A few decades ago, students were able to progress through school, find a job, and remain in their job, in a comfortable lifestyle until retirement. That situation is no longer the norm. Research reports that 50 percent of Americans think their children will grow up to be worse off than they were previously at that age (Cleaver, 2008). If that turns out to be the case, it will make these students the first generation to fall behind their parents economically. Parents worry that their child will be left behind globally due to the fact that they have no idea what the world will look like in ten years (Cleaver, 2008).

Another cultural shift that researchers believe have contributed to the increase in parental involvement is the change in family dynamics. The parents who have earned the name of helicopter parent are generally the children of baby boomers (Coburn, 2006). Many of them were raised in large families with less than attentive child-rearing practices, meaning they were latchkey children who felt their parents were largely removed from their lives. This change in family dynamics happened in an era of working overtime, mothers working full-time away from home, and having both parents working multiple jobs. Rather than replicate this style of child rearing, they are becoming more and more involved in their children's lives (Randall, 2007).

Family dynamics have also changed because parents are having fewer children and therefore investing more time and resources for each one. Parents are investing more time connecting with the child, spending more money on internet and phone accessibility, and investing energy making sure their child has many different opportunities. Some of these parents

may even be overcompensating for what went wrong in their own childhood (Cleaver, 2008). If they themselves were a latch-key child, they make sure they are home now and heavily involved in school and extracurricular activities to make up for time lost with their own parents. This may cause them to be more of their child's friend rather than parent. Some parents over identify with their child by entwining their child's experiences with their own. This often results in the parents becoming more upset and very involved in their own child's experience (Cleaver, 2008).

Because parents are so involved in their students' academic lives during their K-12 education, many students continue to turn to their parents as a resource in college. It isn't all one-sided though however, as many parents like to have dependent children as it makes them feel wanted and included. Many school administrators worry about the level of involvement that parents have in their student's lives at the college level (Coburn, 2006). Some researchers found that students turn to parents when faced with the many difficult decisions and challenges without trying to resolve issues first on their own.

Students today are faced with more diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, parent's marital status, and special needs. With blended families and non-traditional family settings, students come to college campuses with many more ideas of how family roles are defined. In addition, they have many more choices, whether it is their living arrangements, financing their education or choosing their college major. With all of these choices and changes, students feel pressure and want to make the right decisions. Since most of their lives have been structured by their parents, they turn to them with for support, financial assistance and a solution. (Coburn, 2006)

Parents have increased their involvement in their student's lives starting from when they are in kindergarten all the way through college graduation and the job search. Some suggest that

this increased involvement is due to cultural shifts including technological advances, safety concerns, poor economy, and change in family dynamics. These shifts have then impacted the way that students communicate with their parents. Due to the change in students' experiences, their reaction in a time of difficult decisions or challenge is to turn to their parents; therefore contributing and supporting parents' involvement. (Randall, 2007)

### **Attachment Theory**

In the literature regarding parental involvement, there is a paradigm that exists. During a child's K-12 education parental involvement is encouraged, which is not the always the case in the field of higher education where individuation and autonomy are valued. Many administrators at the college level worry that the high level of parental involvement prevents students from becoming individuals and developing as previous generations learned (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008e)

According to ASHE Higher Education Report (2008), there has been significantly more research on the impact of parental involvement on K-12 education than found for higher education. Elementary age students' needs for parental involvement differ from high school age needs for parental involvement. The research indicates that for all students, high levels of parental involvement does make a significant positive difference in personal and academic growth. Parental involvement in K-12 education has been correlated to positive outcomes such as higher grades, success in school, higher standardized test scores, higher self-esteem, more social competence, reduced substance use, aspirations for college, enrollment in college, and participation in out-of-school programs (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008e).

In fact, parental involvement is a key component in student success and graduation rates. This act has impacted the education of traditional age students. Parents are encouraged to attend

parent-teacher meetings, help their student develop study skills for homework, keep lines of communication open, check completed homework, and volunteer in the classroom. Researchers have found that there are three main factors that cause parents to become involved in their child's education: the parent's role in the child's life, the parent's sense of efficacy for helping, and the institutional role and opportunities presented. (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008e)

There has been little research regarding the impact on parental involvement on traditional college age students. There are two theories that have been used to guide perceptions of the impact that the involvement has on students. The existing theory about college students' development is separation-individuation. This theory suggests that acquiring autonomy and individuation are required parts of the emotional adjustment to college. The logic behind the idea was that if students' had a strong sense of self, they would be better at new tasks they would need to perform in college (e.g. waking up on time, coping with roommate issues and attending classes). According to the ASHE Higher Education Report (2008e), "separation-individuation is most frequently described as a developmental process that begins with separation from parents to achieve self-definition and the ability to function autonomously" (p. 24). It is believed by some that learning to function with emotional dependence and without the need for reassurance, affection, or approval is developmentally necessary (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008e).

Attachment theory has recently emerged in the context of higher education and parental involvement. Attachment theory differs from separation-individuation theory because it suggests that having parents as a secure base supports development of competence and autonomy proposes that students turn to parents or family to discuss a concern may be examples of healthy behavior rather than concerning behavior (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008e). This suggests that the attachment to parents may aid them in their development of autonomy (Taub,

2008). And therefore the frequent contact between students and parents is not a source of concern in regards to student development (Taub, 2008). A problem arises when students are unable or unwilling to attempt to solve problems on their own that there may be a concern for their development (Taub, 2008).

The origins of attachment theory were to explain the distress that babies went through when separated from their parents. The original theory explains that the infant's ability to explore their world is based on the idea that they have a secure base. Theorists propose that people who are emotionally stable and self-reliant typically have supportive parents. The attachment relationship is most evident in time of distress, sickness, or exhaustion; then the subject is calmed through comfort and care giving. These behaviors can be observed throughout the life cycle but are most evident in early childhood (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008e).

Attachment theory is also supported by human development theorists to describe the relationship between traditional college age students and their parents (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008e). College is a stressful time for most students because of all the changes occurring in their lives. A secure attachment offers students support during stressful times. The secure base allows them to confidently explore their environment and adjust to living independently as an ongoing process. In the situation where the college student leaves home, the availability of parents supports the development of competence and autonomy rather than threaten it (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008e).

Theorists suggest that separation and attachment are not mutually exclusive but rather exist on an equilibrium, meaning that emotional connection and contact between traditional college age students and parents is healthy but some conflict is too (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008e). So in the end, both separation-individuation and attachment lead to positive

emotional adjustment. Researchers tested the combined theory to see which variables would best represent parent-child connectedness. Their results displayed that the combination of separation-individuations and attachment were a predictor of college student development in women and of college student adjustment for men (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008e). In fact, the definition of separation-individuation includes aspects of the attachment theory (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008e). Parental involvement is not necessarily harmful to students' development and does in fact support development in some areas. The key to successful student development is balance of challenge and support (Taub, 2008).

Parents may need to step back and ask "is this the right time" to get involved or is it permissible for my child to experience a set-back, frustration or unfairness to better learn how to cope with the people in the world around them. By allowing students to deal with conflict, making decisions and accepting consequences, it might benefit all involved and result in an enriching all-around school experience.

The concept of holding students accountable for their actions comes from the Love and Logic literature. Love and Logic is an approach to raising kids that provides loving support while at the same time expecting kids to be respectful and responsible (Love and Logic Institute, 2011). This program is designed for students of all ages and has been designed to assist parents and educators in teaching children to own their decisions and be accountable to the outcome while using empathy (Love and Logic Institute, 2011). The Love and Logic program is just one program that educators and parents can use when considering when to get involved and when to let their student solve the situation. It often takes a balance of both logic and love to let go and let the emerging adolescent develop the skills necessary to advance to higher stages of adulthood.

## **Chapter III: Summary, Discussion, and Recommendations**

### **Introduction**

In the past decade there has been a shift in the level of involvement that parents take in their children's lives. Due to an increase in technological advances, an increase in safety concerns, change in family dynamics, and a poor economy, parents have taken a more hands-on role in the children's education early on. Often, the pattern of being highly involved in their child's education K-12 has not changed as their child progresses into higher education. This has caused college and university administrators to be concerned that students will not develop independence or autonomy. These concerns are a direct reflection of the popular theory regarding parental involvement often referred to as helicopter parents, but there is another proposed theory that may change opinions regarding parental over-involvement. This chapter includes a summary of key points regarding parental involvement, a discussion of the research, and recommendations for further research.

### **Summary**

Current literature includes administrators' concern regarding the level of involvement that parents now have in their children's lives. Administrators have even coined the term helicopter parents to describe those parents that hover over their child of any age (Randall, 2007). In fact, there are five identified types of parental hovercraft: the blackhawk parents, the toxic parents, the consumer advocate, the safety expert, and the traffic and rescue helicopters (Shellenbarger, 2007). These types of parenting range in level of control but all include high levels of parental involvement. Blackhawk parents have been identified as the most damaging type of hovercraft parent because they are often willing to behave unethically to ensure desire

outcomes for their children (Randall, 2007). Helicopter parent is the most commonly used term to describe highly involved parents.

The literature has also identified five additional categories of helicopter parents that encompasses most parenting styles. The consumer advocate tends to view their child's college experience as a business transaction and is concerned about getting the most bang for their buck. Another identified category is the parent who only wants what is best for their child so they hound universities to make sure their children get the best everything. University experts estimate that 40-60 percent of parents they deal with are helopats. Helopats are parents who fight for fairness and feel that universities are not working hard enough to see that all students have equal opportunities. Another category is the entitlement advocate, these parents believe that their child should be left out yet not all rules or requirements should be applied to their child. The last identified category is the vicarious college parent who is living out their missed college experience through their student (Randall, 2007).

## **Discussion**

There has been speculation regarding why this change in the level of parental involvement occurred. Researchers suggest that cultural shifts have contributed to the change. The most commonly identified cultural shifts are technological advances, safety concerns, poor economy, and change in family dynamics. Parents and student communicate at the press of a button any time of the day through instant messaging, cell phones, email, social media, GPS and even cameras. These advances have made communication easier which tends to blend the line between involved and over-involved in their child's life. After traumatic events parents naturally worry more about their children's safety and their ability to protect them. It is the over use of this media that engages the over-involved parent (Randall, 2007).

Since the recent downward spiral in the economy, parents worry that their children will be worse off. If that concern turns out to be the truth, that would make this generation the first to be economically worse off than previous generations. In addition to all of these changes, there has also been a change in family dynamics. Parents are having fewer children which has led to them investing more time and energy with the children that they have. The style of parenting has also changed. Many highly involved parents grew up in homes where the parents were less-attentive; in response to that, they are overcompensating and becoming highly involved in their children's lives. (Randall, 2007)

There is a paradigm between literature regarding parental involvement in K-12 education and higher education. Parents are encouraged to get involved in their student's K-12 education; in fact, the No Child Left Behind Act has parental involvement as a key component. When students get into higher education they are expected to be independent and autonomous. The literature regarding K-12 education shows that for all students, high levels of parental involvement make significant positive differences in personal and academic growth. These differences include things like higher grades, success in school, higher standardized test scores, higher self-esteem, more social competence, reduced substance use, aspiration for college, enrollment in college, and participation in out-of-school programs (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008e).

The higher education studies on parental involvement largely differ because they describe a relationship between parent and child that is less involved. The most widely accepted theory about college student's development is separation-individuation. This theory states that normal development includes acquiring autonomy and individuation. This theory is based on the idea that students will then have a better sense of themselves as individuals and therefore will be able

to perform tasks better. Administrators concerns regarding the level of parental involvement and the development of individuation and autonomy is a reflection of this theory. (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008e)

The secure attachment theory is the competing theory. This theory is based on the idea that having parents as a secure base supports rather than threatens their development as autonomous, independent individuals (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008e). Theorists suggest that with a secure base, students will be more likely to confidently explore their environment (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008e). In stressful times, the attachment relationship is more evident as the transition to college can be a very stressful time for students. Under this theory, students may benefit more from regular contact and support with their parent. Concluding research shows that these theories share similar characteristics (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008e). This means that contact and support between parents and their students is important but so is some conflict. The separation-individuation and attachment leads to positive emotional adjustment (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008e).

Developmentally, college age students do not fit into the category of adolescent or adult; but in different circumstances are expected to play roles of each stage (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008d). This confusion may be avoided if students were not expected to make a sudden transition into adulthood (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008d). Rather if this period of transition would be viewed more fluidly, and as a process that takes time which usually includes steps forwards and back. Colleges may also need to take on the role of informing parents about what an appropriate intervention would be but also why colleges and universities want the student to handle their own responsibilities (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008a). Colleges

and universities tend to have the most success working with parents when they define, explain, and support an appropriate role for parents (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008c).

It is also important to note that although the media has grouped parents into the broad category of helicopter parents, in reality this image only represents an extreme group (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008c). Parents and the individual relationship with their student can be as varied as students themselves. Parents can be and are becoming valuable partners in reinforcing college and university messages to students and creating change to benefit all at the institution (Lum, 2006). It is working in partnership that the families and the colleges can develop the best plan for education, personal growth and a safe learning environment for all.

### **Recommendations**

The research suggests that there has been a change in the level of involvement that parents take in their children's lives. Administrators are concerned about the students who have highly involved parents; they worry that they will not develop individuation and autonomy like other traditional students had. Because the concern is wide-spread across universities and colleges, the term helicopter parents is now used. There are a variety of variations of the term but helicopter parent is the most widely used and encompasses the general idea.

Administrators are concerned about the development of the students that they are releasing to society. They worry that these students will not be prepared to handle the reality of the outside world. Administrators and other university and college staff have developed strategies and suggestions on how to successfully work with highly involved parents. In response to the demand, they have created parents weekend, parent orientations, and newsletters and websites for parents, updating them on campus events. Since the level of involvement of parents does not seem to be decreasing, universities and colleges are adapting their program to

meet the new and demanding needs of their students and their families. In addition, colleges encourage parents to let their students to handle situations on their own and offer support rather than solve the problems for them (Coburn, 2006).

In large part, it is recommended that colleges keep involving parents in the process of their student's education. Research shows that students benefit from support and contact with their parents, no matter what the age. According to the attachment theory, the student will explore their environment more confidently with a secure base (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2008e). Despite the theoretical findings, there is limited research on the impact of highly involved parents on students. More research regarding the short term and long term impacts on the students and families would be beneficial.

Current literature reports perceptions of parents, students, and administrators which is useful regarding this current topic in education. Understanding current perceptions is beneficial because it contributes to the development of strategies and suggestions on how to work with the highly involved parents. In addition, more research could further explore the parenting styles to determine the impact on the success of college students. As college campuses are becoming more diverse, further research may offer insight in to different parenting styles from different world culture with findings that may be more representative of all populations.

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