

Working with parents

who are overprotective ('helicopter' parents)



Supporting teachers, leadership teams and professionals in primary and junior secondary schools

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Overprotective 'helicopter' parents

Parents who are overprotective are sometimes referred to as 'helicopter parents' as they relentlessly hover over their children, trying to micro-manage their affairs. These parents pay extremely close attention to their children to try to protect them from failure, rejection and injury. They want 'happy' children and believe teachers should pay attention to their children in the same overprotective way.

Parents who are overprotective want their children to have a 'good start in life' and every opportunity to succeed. They want to protect their children from life's harsh realities and ensure their children's happiness. While appearing on the surface to be reasonable aims, constant striving to achieve these types of goals can contribute to increased levels of anxiety for children and their parents.

In order to become well adjusted, children need to experience the full range of emotions. Parents who want their children to always be happy are doing their children a disservice. Children need the freedom to make mistakes and experience boredom, sadness, frustration, anger, disappointment and hurt. Children need opportunities to learn to cope with life's minor challenges. Children who 'have a go' at sorting out most of their own issues develop a strong internal locus of control, that is they believe they are able to cope with stress and solve their own problems.

The 'helicopter' parent however, rushes in to help, rather than allowing their child to have a go at managing a challenging situation themselves. This can lead to children who are unable to cope with even minor issues, as they are never given the opportunity to fail and then learn from their mistakes.

Why are some parents overprotective?

Societal changes over recent decades, such as smaller sized families, older and more affluent parents and two-income families, are linked with many parents making huge 'emotional investments' in their children and having greater and for some, unrealistic expectations of them. (See Appendix 1. Factors contributing to overprotective 'helicopter' parenting). Parents also tend to become overprotective when they are going through a difficult time themselves.

In addition, parental fear for their children's safety has increased despite the fact that fatal injury and death rates for Australian children aged 5–14 years have reduced dramatically each decade since the 1900s.¹ The increase in fear is linked to the increase in our repeated exposure to stories of violence and disasters through 24-hour news channels and the Internet. Seeing and hearing the same stories time after time, increases our perception that it is a very dangerous world. Advertisers and marketers also continue to 'frighten' parents with the need to buy products and devices to keep children 'safe'.

The impact of overprotective parenting on children

- **Poorly developed problem solving skills.** Parents who are constantly intervening to sort out their children's issues are not allowing their children to take safe risks and learn from their

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing, 1981, 1986, 1996 and 2006.



mistakes. As a result these children may not believe they can solve problems independently, reinforcing their inability to face their own issues without help.

- **Learn avoidance as a way of coping.** Parental micromanaging means that children do not get to practice solving their own problems, as a result these children are at risk of never learning to cope effectively with minor or major life challenges without parental support. This has serious implications for children as they learn from their parents that the world is a scary place that they have no control over. Furthermore their reliance on others to solve even minor issues leads to low self-esteem, anxiety and depression and other mental health problems.
- **Have difficulty dealing with friendship issues independently.** Children's opportunities to sort out their own friendship issues are greatly reduced by this parenting style. Primary-aged children, who have their friendship issues constantly 'managed' by an overprotective parent, are less likely to cope in adolescence and at risk of developing mental health issues.
- **Less chance to develop important social skills through unstructured play.** These parents are less likely to allow their children opportunities for unstructured play, preferring to involve their children in 'safer' organized play activities such as sporting groups, music lessons, and other organized activities. Unstructured play time is important in developing child's self-esteem, as well as important social skills such as turn taking, sharing, co-operation and coping with frustration. Engaging mainly in structured play activities means that adults are constantly mediating, further reducing the child's opportunity to independently practice and develop these life skills.

What does the 'helicopter' parent look like?

Some parents can have unrealistic or irrational beliefs about what the school can do for their child, and expect school staff to assist them in protecting their child against both minor and major challenges. Parents who are overprotective are likely to approach the school each time a minor incident occurs. They may seem pushy and often want an immediate solution to their problem, even when there isn't an easy answer, or they may offer a solution that is irrational, such as banning running at school due to safety concerns.

Overprotective 'helicopter' parents may display some of the following mannerisms or behaviours:

- manage or oversee most of their children's activities
- frequently initiate approaches to the school
- believe everything their child tells them without further clarification
- readily blame, find fault with a teacher, other school staff or other children
- display general disappointment in what has been decided or offered following a school meeting or conversation with the teacher
- have a stiff facial expression or body posture
- are tearful
- become defensive or use attacking language
- want an answer to what they perceive as 'the issue'
- have a limited attention span
- repeat questions or statements
- use a high-pitched voice or rapid speech



- confront another child or parent on the school grounds
- make demands or threats to the teacher or the school
- engage other parents by developing their own issues-based parent 'support' group through oral communication, email, notes or handouts to parents.

It may be difficult to convince some overprotective parents that their child's problems do not always need to be addressed or solved by an adult. At times, it may be necessary to point out to some parents that minor childhood disagreements are simply that and 'tagging' these disagreements as something major, such as bullying or an assault requiring police follow-up, is inappropriate.

Caution regarding a genuine concern by a parent

All valid parent concerns should be addressed. Such concerns include, but are not limited to, their child's medical condition, safety, other wellbeing issues, learning difficulties, disorders, family stress or major loss, or parental diagnosis of anxiety or a medical condition.

It is reasonable for parents to expect that perceived learning difficulties and social competency issues such as bullying and other genuine concerns with the child's safety are followed up and investigated by the school. Schools that have clear discipline and student management, welfare, or special education provision and parenting resources in place are usually well placed to assist.



Strategies to reduce the impact of the overprotective 'helicopter' parent in your classroom

Overprotective parents are less anxious when they perceive that they and other trusted adults have control over a situation. Teachers can reassure and increase a parent's perception of control by using, sharing and explaining plans and structures, as well as keeping in close communication and providing information and parental education about typical issues of concern.

Set clear expectations

- **Be clear about your availability.** Write to all parents in the first week (as a team of teachers or individually) and prominently display your preferred methods and times for communication. Set 'parent teacher talk times' on specific days and times before and after school. If offering other forms of communication, such as phone calls or email, set limits. For example, emails and phone calls will be replied to on weekdays within 24 hours, or when you are not teaching, not in meetings and not on yard duty. Be clear about whether parents should email you via your personal school email or a general school email.

Develop effective communication channels

- **Create a parent notice board.** This can display classroom rules, activities, upcoming excursions, health or other information. Place the notice board outside your classroom and online, if this is permitted by your school.
- **Inform parents about typical issues that may occur.** At the beginning of the year, it may be helpful to provide parents with a list of what is expected of the child academically, along with behavioural and social competency issues children are learning about for that year level. These may include friendship issues and conflict, completing homework, not eating all of their lunch, feeling tired after school, 'telling tales' or using a diary. Use multiple avenues for communication, for example meetings, school and department newsletters, presentations by senior staff members or trusted guest speakers, and the school website. See the Psych4Schools document '*Creating a great working relationship with parents*', for a table that presents a sample of issues that may concern parents.

Get to know your parents

- **Do your research.** Talk to teachers from previous years to find out what they know about the child and family. It's important to know about any difficulties and what worked well with a particular child or parent. You can then be better prepared to deal with potential issues.
- **Hold five or ten-minute 'get-to-know-you' meetings.** Meet with at least one parent or carer for each child in your class in the first few weeks of term. If it is not possible to meet, arrange a time to speak by phone. During these meetings, ask about the child's strengths and interests, any concerns the parent may have or issues that may impact on their child's learning this year. Classroom teachers can indicate that parents are welcome to discuss very sensitive or confidential issues with the principal, deputy or assistant principal, school psychologist or other relevant senior staff members. Record the parent's preferred form of communication and when they are available to talk.
- **Keep notes on each child.** Make and date notes about both positive behaviours and concerning behaviours or incidents involving the child. This can be done in a notebook



with one or two pages for each child, within the work program or on computer. Also record the dates (showing Day/Month/Year) of meetings with parents, showing those present, outcomes and action points. Such notes may be useful in future meetings as evidence of what has been discussed and done by you or the school. It is important that notes remain confidential) in a locked filing cabinet or password-protected computer file) and do not include defamatory language.

Keep lines of communication open with parents

- **Use the parent's preferred form of communication where possible.** Find out and record the parent's preferred communication method, such as email, phone, face-to-face; and preferred times, for example, before school or after 3.30 pm. This may assist in reducing the number of times that parents 'hover' in the classroom and/or wish to talk to you after the bell and during teaching time.
- **Learn basic assertive statements.** Use 'I' statements to state your position clearly without causing offence, and provide a preferred solution. For example 'I would like to talk to you more but I have to teach now as class has started. The issue is important and I would prefer if we could talk during the 'teacher talk time' posted on the door.' If the matter is urgent, suggest the parent sees the deputy or assistant principal or principal. See the Psych4Schools website document, '*Negotiation and assertive techniques with parents*'.
- **Make emotional strength deposits.** Establish and maintain strong connections between the school, the child and the parents. At least once per term, communicate positively with the parents of each child in your class about the child's learning and/or social development. For example, you may send home the child's photo demonstrating learning in the classroom, a note or phone call letting the child's parents know about a new learning outcome, or a handy hint tailored to suit the child's individual learning needs, to help build a strong working relationship between home and school.
- **Contact the parents following an issue or incident before the child does.** Take the initiative and inform parents of issues before the child does, particularly when the incident is serious or might be interpreted as serious or if the parent is overanxious or has some challenging characteristics.
- **Provide parental support.** Establish a resource kit of quality brochures or websites parents can access for common issues, with suggestions of where to go for help.
- **Refer parents to the principal or school psychologist** for further assistance, if necessary.

Meetings with overprotective parents

Step 1: Plan for the meeting

- **Where possible, contact the parents following an issue or incident before the child does.** Calmly explain what occurred and, if appropriate, detail the various interpretations a child might incorrectly make about what happened.
- **Set a meeting time and place as soon as is practical.**
- **Invite a senior staff member to the meeting.** This will help to ensure that the parent feels the school is taking their concerns seriously. If you are a young or inexperienced teacher dealing with an anxious middle-aged 'professional', you may feel more confident with a more experienced senior staff member present. In addition to the



potential support you will receive from another staff member, you will have a witness about what was discussed and planned.

- **If possible, meet with both parents and/or another adult who is involved in the child's life.** This helps to ensure messages are clearly understood and provides support to the parent away from the school, and may improve objectivity for the parent during and following the meeting. Consider whether you may feel 'out-numbered'—if so, invite an experienced senior staff member to be present.
- **If you believe the child should be involved** then you should decide when the child is to be present at the meeting. At school, the teacher usually remains verbally in charge of the child throughout the meeting.

Step 2: At the beginning and throughout the meeting

- **Be warm, friendly, open and welcoming.** Offer tea, coffee or water. Plan ahead if other staff members need to be present. Arrange for them to be available a few minutes beforehand rather than asking the parent to wait while you locate them.
- **Limit distractions.** Move to a space where you will not be distracted. If the parent has a toddler present, take a minute or two to settle the young child with appropriate toys, construction materials or pencils and paper. Before starting the meeting, try to relax those present by talking about the child's strengths and thanking everyone for taking the time to attend.
- **Establish common ground.** Indicate that you are keen to work with the parent to ensure that the best outcome for the child is implemented. Acknowledge the child's strengths and the 'big picture' before focusing on areas of concern.
- **Maintain a diary or file** of all data, written notes, statements, telephone calls and notes of interview, including dates and times of all incidents. Keep track of all communication so that actions and information are clearly noted. Also have on hand test results and current work samples.
- **Take notes during your meeting.** Note taking indicates you are taking any concerns seriously. It also establishes a record of what was discussed and agreed upon. Record the date and time on your notes and who was present.

Step 3: Clarify the issue (there may be multiple issues)

- **Clarify the issue.** Some overanxious parents will present you with the solution rather than the issue, such as, 'I want my child to stay down.' Ask parents to explain what led them to this conclusion in order to understand their reasoning and to identify the issues. If there is merit in the parent's viewpoint, don't be afraid to defer the meeting to another time when appropriate senior staff can be available and you have had more time to reflect on and consult about the issue. You might point out that grade repetition is a serious issue and a decision that would require the principal's approval.
- **Avoid being overwhelmed** by issues, concerns, various positions and statements.
 - **Deal with issues one at a time.** List each issue the parent presents. Repeat the issues and have the parent prioritise them. Work through each issue one at a time.
 - **Separate the child from the behaviour.** This can be helpful as it de-personalises the issues. For example, the child is not a 'naughty child' or a 'dyslexic child'; rather, he or she is a child who has misbehaved, or who has a diagnosis of dyslexia. Separating the child from the behaviour or diagnosis provides you with more room to suggest and



implement change, as it is more appropriate to manage the child's behaviours than to change the child.

- **Segment the issues.** Break big issues into smaller, manageable chunks. Ask the parents to use specifics, rather than sweeping generalisations. Generalisations tend to include words such as 'all' or 'every'. Ask the parent to outline their specific concerns or specific times in the past where an incident has occurred.
- **Refrain from arguing over positions.** Focus on the issues and the concerns, and the impact on the child's individual needs, welfare and learning.
- **Resist taking things personally.** An overprotective parent's dialogue may be hurtful or upsetting. Try to remind yourself that it is driven by anxiety. Not everyone in the world shares the same temperament or predispositions as you. Debrief with a colleague later if required.
- **Understand and empathise with the parent's perspective.** Put yourself in the parent's shoes in order to understand their perspective no matter how difficult this is for you. Understanding a perspective doesn't require you to condone or agree with the position. Your understanding will demonstrate your intention to collaborate to resolve the issue.
- **Identify the source of the issue.** While talking to the parent ask, 'When did you first feel or think this?' Understanding the origin of the issue may make it easier to generate suggestions that will reduce the parent's anxiety. For example, a Year 1 teacher may have mentioned the possibility of a child repeating a year, for a child who is now in Year 7 and only just below the appropriate academic standard. You can more confidently reassure that repeating a year is no longer an appropriate solution.
- **Allow parents the opportunity to ask questions and give feedback.** Break the meeting into two parts and ask for questions or feedback. It is important to let parents know that you are listening to their concerns. At the halfway point during the meeting, help to focus thinking and clarify what has been said. For example, you might say, 'We've talked about (this). Are there one or two key questions you would like to ask? Is there anything that needs to be clarified? If not, now let's complete the second part of our meeting.'

Step 4: Offer a realistic perspective

- **Respectfully ask about the role the parent has played.** Often, overprotective parents will exaggerate negative consequences and minimise their responsibility. For example, a parent might refer to their child as 'badly injured' a day or two after a soccer ball hit the child's ankle at school. After the school's first aid officer checked the ankle and decided whether to apply an ice pack, what was the follow-up by the parents? If the child was 'badly injured', did they have the child seen by a medical professional? Did a doctor order an X-ray? Is the child attending school today?
- **Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of implementing a specific intervention** to reduce the level of risk to the child. For example, if the parent wants to bring in a rule to ban running in the playground ask, 'What would be the advantages and disadvantages?' First, list all the points the parent makes. When the parent agrees the list is complete, encourage the parent to evaluate each point. Determine together whether the advantages of banning running outweigh the disadvantages.
- **It might be helpful to ask respectfully, 'What is the likelihood of that happening?'** Examine the likelihood of the worst event occurring. Discuss the answer and assist the parents to reach a realistic answer. You may also want to ask the parent, 'Let's say



that (such and such) happened. What would be the worst thing that could result from this?' Then examine the most likely event and solution.

Step 5: Educate the parent about the issue

This step builds on the previous step and can be used to help provide a realistic perspective as well as assisting the parents to move forward in a helpful way. The following are examples of some ways you can educate the parents.

- **Provide samples of the child's work, drawings and test results as evidence of the child's actual abilities.** This strategy is particularly helpful for the parents who incorrectly believe their child is under-achieving or over-achieving.
- **Bring the child into the meeting, if relevant or appropriate.** If the parents do not believe the account provided by the school, meet with the parents and decide when to bring in the child. Usually a child will not lie in front of a teacher; however, if the child doesn't tell the truth, teachers have the skills to encourage the child to reflect on the situation and 'remember what really happened'. This allows the teacher to later point out to the parents where there may have been a level of miscommunication or misinterpretation by a child who has yet to develop maturity in perspective. Children can lie for specific reasons. See the Psych4Schools ebooklet '*Children who tell lies*' as it becomes available on the website to understand more about a child's motivations for lying.
- **Educate the parent about appropriate expectations at the child's year level,** including academic expectations, as well as social, motor skills and speech capabilities. Parents may wish to access the Australian Government website, 'Raising children network' for further guidance and advice about more than 800 topics covering child development, behaviour, health, nutrition and fitness, play and learning, connecting and communicating, school and education, entertainment and technology, sleep and safety of school aged children and young adolescents. See <http://raisingchildren.net.au> It is important to convey that all students are still learning about being learners and about getting on with others.
- **Educate parents about the types of independence and the resilience that the child requires to face the challenges they will likely meet at this age.** As a department or year level, brainstorm the types of issues that parents are usually anxious or concerned about. See the Psych4Schools document '*Creating a great working relationship with parents*', for a table that presents a sample of issues that may concern parents.
- **Provide advice to parents about websites, information sheets, handouts, books or other written material on the topic of concern.** In Australia, useful websites about child development and expected behaviours can be found at <http://raisingchildren.net.au/>
- **Provide the parent with strategies to assist the child at home.** For example, if a parent is concerned about the child's spelling, provide a list of frequently used words and three or four strategies to help the child. Strategies might include the 'Look, say, cover, write, check' approach, or spell by analogy (for example, if you can spell 'came' then you can spell 'tame' and 'same'). Suggest the list is divided into groups of five or ten words for the child to practise weekly over the next three to six months.



Step 6: Concluding the meeting

- **Reinforce the parent's helpful actions.** While the parent is talking, make a note of all the positive behaviours they are displaying that will assist with the child's issue. Repeat these positive behaviours to the parent, specifically reinforcing with the parents the importance of their child 'having a go' and taking safe risks, and assisting the child to develop positive coping skills.
- **Develop and record an action plan with the parents.** Give a draft copy of the plan to the parents at the end of the meeting. The draft plan may outline the realistic steps you are going to take to assist the child, and the realistic steps the parent has agreed to implement. You may want to set a date for a future meeting to review the child's progress and to ensure both parties are following the plan once it is fully drawn up.
- **Maintain communication with parents. Parents who feel informed, who have the opportunity to share their concerns** and who believe there is a plan to assist their child will experience reduced anxiety. This can be done through:
 - **regular meetings.** Offer the parent regular meetings with appropriate limits on the time, frequency and duration of meeting. For example, schedule a meeting for 10 or 15 minutes before class once every month until the end of term or twice a term to track the child's progress.
 - **communication books.** These can be used for daily communication between parents and the school for students who have special or additional needs. It may be necessary to develop guidelines as expectations can become unrealistic. Sometimes, use of dot points or tick boxes on a checklist may be useful in reducing misinterpretation that can occur in long-winded communication
 - **formal written communication.** Provide information to parents in various modes, for example, notes on a parent noticeboard, emails or newsletters.

While it is important not to stereotype parents as 'helicopter parents', a rise in anxiety among a large proportion of parents is likely to be related to one or more of the following in Appendix 1 on the following page.



Appendix 1. Factors contributing to overprotective 'helicopter' parenting

- **A decrease in the size of Australian families.** Since the mid-1980s, families have become smaller. It is easier to focus attention and concerns on one or two children than four, five or six children².
- **Increased number of families having both parents in paid work,** with the associated stress, lack of time and guilt this can bring to parents.
- **Parental separation and divorce.** Approximately 33 per cent of all Australian marriages end in divorce³. In addition, a significant number of other family relationships involve separations. Parental separation and divorce are stressful and upsetting for all family members.
- **Increased use of communication technology.** This can blur boundaries between work time and home time, creating less time to focus on the family's need to have 'fun'.
- **Problems experienced conceiving the child or during pregnancy** (e.g. history of miscarriage, IVF, illness during pregnancy, premature baby, child requiring special care nursery or ICU). With children born to women in their mid-30s, about one in five pregnancies will end in miscarriage.⁴
- **People who become parents when they are older** are typically more 'serious' about issues, events, achievement and 'success'.
- **Limited availability of support from extended family,** with more grandparents working or less available for care and/or little 'perceived' community support.
- **Poor understanding of child development** and good parenting strategies.
- **Portrayal by the media and politicians** that schools are not teaching children adequately and hence need to be 'monitored' at a local, state and national level.
- **Portrayal by some sections of the media that bullying is rife** and uncontrolled in schools.
- **Perceptions held by many parents** that crime, fatal injury and death rates in children have increased, despite consistent dramatic falls over the past century.⁵
- **Increase in societal expectations** and competition between parents.
- **'Instant' messaging using communication devices between children and their parents** blurs school-home boundaries and takes away personal reflection time, reducing the child's opportunities to independently 'right a wrong' over the remainder of the school day.
- **Increase in access and exposure to worrying news stories** via 24-hour news channels and digital media.
- **Higher levels of anxiety related to parenting** than in previous generations because of media bombardment with criticisms of parenting and a plethora of often contradictory advice.

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² Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing 1981, 1986, 1996 and 2006.

³ Australian Social Trends, 2007 Australian Bureau of Statistics (2007). Accessed 14 January 2010 at

<http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/ABS@.nsf/0/26D94B4C9A4769E6CA25732C00207644?opendocument#DIVORCE>

⁴ <http://infertility.about.com/od/causesofinfertility/a/pregnantafter35.htm>

⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Year Book Australia*, 2006.