

The curse of the meddling parent

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"Helicopter parents" who "hyperactively intervene" in the lives of their offspring could damage their children's job prospects, a careers expert says.

Parents are increasingly involved in their children's university and even career choices, Liverpool University's head of careers and employability says.



Some parents don't know when to let go

Dr Paul Redmond claims some parents even contact their sons' or daughters' employers to negotiate pay rises. This can backfire as most bosses want independent-minded workers, he added.

Dr Redmond said "helicopter parents" who "hover" over their offspring intervening in their lives far more than in any previous generation were increasingly being seen on university campuses. "They're much more involved in all aspects of their lives - they help them to get to university and even help them get jobs when they graduate."

He added: "Employers are saying to me that parents are contacting them with regard to their sons' or daughters' careers. "Some are even negotiating pay rises for them - it's like having a footballer's agent."

"We have even had the phenomena of parents attending careers fairs around the country - and doing most of the talking on behalf of their son or daughter." He even identifies five types of meddling parents with labels like the Agent, the Bodyguard and the Banker. "Helicopter parents" are so common among the middle classes that universities are now having to produce teams of family liaison officers to deal with them.

And some are now even producing parent packs, he said.

'Umbilical cord'

He said careers departments were now having to sit down with parents and tell them straight that, despite their best intentions, they could be doing more harm than good. "The problem is it could potentially harm their employment prospects as employers want graduates who are self-reliant," he said. "We are worried about the impact. It's great to have parental support but sometimes it's better to leave the parents at home."

Students were often now tied to their parents by what is "surely the longest umbilical cord in history" - the mobile phone. But perhaps surprisingly, Dr Redmond says, the offspring of helicopter parents tend to be completely unabashed about their ever-increasing involvement in their affairs.

Cash money

"It's a generational thing, Generation Y - those born from the 1980s onwards - have a completely different relationship with their parents from Generation X - those born in between the mid-1960s and the 1980s." "Generation X would have been appalled at the idea."

The extra involvement is also down to the marketisation of academia as a result of university fees, Dr Redmond said. "They pay the money; they expect to see results."

But helicopter parents are also a product of government policies encouraging increased parental involvement at school and college. In a blog for the Guardian website, Dr Redmond describes the five different types of "helicopter parents" that now characterise England's higher education system.

They are:

The Agent Having an Agent helicopter parent is like having Max Clifford working for you round the clock-for free. They operate like a footballer's agent: fixing deals, arranging contracts, smoothing out local difficulties. It's the Agent's job to represent his or her client at events which, for whatever reason, the client feels are simply too tedious to attend.

The Banker Accessible online, face-to-face or via a personal hotline, the Banker is unique in the world of financial services for charging no APR (annual percentage rate), asking few if any questions,

expecting no collateral, and being psychologically inclined to say "yes" no matter how illogical or poorly articulated the request. The Banker is also resigned to never seeing loans repaid.

The White Knight Imbued with an almost semi-mythical status, the White Knight parent appears at little to no notice to resolve awkward situations. Once resolved, the White Knight will fade anonymously into the background. Intervention is accomplished silently and with minimum fuss.

The Bodyguard The primary function of the Bodyguard is to protect the client from a range of embarrassing social situations - such as cancelling appointments and soaking up complaints on behalf of their client. Particularly skilled in constructing elaborate excuses. When not protecting life, limb and reputation, doubles up as a chauffeur and personal assistant.

The Black Hawk Named after the military helicopter, and dreaded by teachers and educational administrators, the Black Hawk is unique among helicopter parents due to their willingness to go to any lengths - legal or illegal - to give their offspring a positional advantage over any competition. Particularly lethal when elected to parent-teacher associations.