**Parenting Tips**

PHRASES like “tiger mom” and “helicopter parent” have made their way into everyday language. But does over parenting hurt, or help?

Parental involvement has a long and rich history of being studied. Decades of studies, many of them by Diana Baumrind, a clinical and developmental psychologist at the University of California, Berkeley, have found that the optimal parent is one who is involved and responsive, who sets high expectations but respects her child’s autonomy. These “authoritative parents” appear to hit the sweet spot of parental involvement and generally raise children who do better academically, psychologically and socially than children whose parents are either permissive and less involved, or controlling and more involved. Why is this particular parenting style so successful, and what does it tell us about over parenting?

For one thing, authoritative parents actually help cultivate motivation in their children. Carol Dweck, a social and developmental psychologist at Stanford University, has done research that indicates why authoritative parents raise more motivated, and thus more successful, children.

In a typical experiment, Dr. Dweck takes young children into a room and asks them to solve a simple puzzle. Most do so with little difficulty. But then Dr. Dweck tells some, but not all, of the kids how very bright and capable they are.

As it turns out, the children who are not told they’re smart are more motivated to tackle increasingly difficult puzzles. They also exhibit higher levels of confidence and show greater overall progress in puzzle solving.

This may seem counterintuitive, but praising children’s talents and abilities seems to rattle their confidence. Tackling more difficult puzzles carries the risk of losing one’s status as “smart” and deprives kids of the thrill of choosing to work simply for its own sake, regardless of outcomes.

Dr. Dweck’s work aligns nicely with that of Dr. Baumrind, who also found that reasonably supporting a child’s autonomy and limiting interference results in better academic and emotional outcomes. Their research confirms what I’ve seen in more than 25 years of clinical work, treating children in Marin County, anaffluent suburb of San Francisco. The happiest, most successful children have parents who do not do for them what they are capable of doing, or almost capable of doing; and their parents do not do things for them that satisfy their own needs rather than the needs of the child.

Once your child is capable of doing something, congratulate yourself on a job well done and move on. Continued, unnecessary intervention makes your child feel bad about himself (if he’s young) or angry at you (if he’s a teenager).

But isn’t it a parent’s job to help with those things that are just beyond your child’s reach? Why is it over parenting to do for your child what he or she is almost capable of?

Think back to when your toddler learned to walk. She would take a weaving step or two, collapse and immediately look to you for your reaction. You were in thrall to those early attempts and would do everything possible to encourage her to get up again. You certainly didn’t chastise her for failing or utter dire predictions about flipping burgers for the rest of her life if she fell again. You were present, alert and available to guide if necessary. But you didn’t pick her up every time.

You knew she had to get it wrong many times before she could get it right.

Hanging back and allowing children to make mistakes is one of the greatest challenges of parenting. It’s easier when they’re young — tolerating a stumbling toddler is far different from allowing a pre-teenager to meet her friends at the mall. The potential mistakes carry greater risks, and part of being a parent is minimizing risk for our children.

So if children are able to live with mistakes and even failing, why does it drive us crazy? So many parents have said to me, “I can’t stand to see my child unhappy.” If you can’t stand to see your child unhappy, you are in the wrong business.

The small challenges that start in infancy (the first whimper that doesn’t bring you running) present the opportunity for “successful failures,” that is, failures your child can live with and grow from. To rush in too quickly, to shield them, to deprive them of those challenges is to deprive them of the tools they will need to handle the inevitable, difficult, challenging and sometimes devastating demands of life. So how do parents find the courage to discard the malpractice of over parenting? It’s hard to swim upstream, to resist peer pressure. But we must remember that children thrive best in an environment that is reliable, available, consistent and non-interfering. A loving parent is warm, willing to set limits and unwilling to breach a child’s psychological boundaries by invoking shame or guilt. Parents must acknowledge their own anxiety. Your job is to know your child well enough to make a good call about whether he can manage a particular situation. Will you stay up worrying? Probably, but the child’s job is to grow, yours is to control your anxiety so it doesn’t get in the way of his reasonable moves toward autonomy.

Parents also have to be clear about their own values. Children watch us closely. If you want your children to be able to stand up for their values, you have to do the same. If you believe that a summer spent reading, taking creek walks and playing is better than a specialized camp, then stick to your guns. Parents also have to make sure their own lives are fulfilling. There is no parent more vulnerable to the excesses of over parenting than an unhappy parent. One of the most important things we do for our children is to present them with a version of adult life that is appealing and worth striving for.

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