

## Suffocated: An Investigation into the Roots of Over-Intense Parenting and Implications for Adolescent Well-Being

According to Julie Hiltz of the Center for Teaching Quality, “Not only is a parent a child's first teacher, but he or she is their first role model and usually their first advocate” (26). With increasingly high standards placed on students and athletes in American high schools, a new phenomenon has gained attention in the media — parents are becoming hyper-involved in the lives of adolescents. Coined “helicopter parents,” these adults keep constant surveillance over their children and go to extreme lengths to ensure their success. According to journalist Claudia Rankine, the father of tennis star Serena Williams is an apt example of this aggressive parental approach. In Serena's childhood, he would pay masses of people to scream degrading and racist comments at her while she practiced, believing it would “toughen” her to the outside world (“The Meaning”). The extent to which parents should intervene in their children's lives remains a debated topic but the growing prevalence of intensive parenting has led to concern surrounding its psychological impact on youth. Despite differing opinions regarding what constitutes suitable parenting, the importance of effective parenting is widely agreed upon among experts. The impressions left from parenting will ultimately shape the cognitive abilities and traits of growing children. Similarly, harmful parental behaviors and teachings can be responsible for a lifetime of psychological damage. This paper aims to explore the origins and developmental implications of intensive parental involvement in hopes of offering suggestions for improving familial relationships. A parenting approach that values both obedience and self-sufficiency within a child and considers his/her free will in decision-making produces optimal results in development and well-being.

A progressively more competitive atmosphere in American high schools, teamed with schools' encouragement of parent involvement may be responsible for the issue of overbearing parents. Andre S. Garbacz et al., experts in youth academics at the University of Oregon, encourage parents to share the responsibility of teaching in an effort to enrich children's education. They assert that numerous research studies show correlations between involved parents and higher academic achievement (384–406). Following the research, schools have adopted this belief that parent involvement is a cornerstone to student success and they regularly urge parents to aid in completion of their children's academic work. This trend undoubtedly has had an impact, as economists Matthias Doepke and Fabrizio Zilibotti found that since 1970, the amount of time parents spend on activities with their children has quadrupled. They note that not only has involvement increased, but the content of their time together has shifted from leisurely to achievement focused (22–27). This fixation on achievement in parent-child relationships alludes to a growing competitiveness surrounding children's success, a commonality among over-involved parents. Despite teachers' advocacy, Sui-Chu et al., of the Department of Sociology of Education at British Columbia University, found that educational differences in schools with high and low parent involvement were undetectable (126–141). Their findings suggest that schools might be over-emphasizing its importance. Since over-involved parents often pressure their children to achieve, schools may be unintentionally harming students though condoning such behavior.

Parents demonstrate equally intense behaviors surrounding their children's athletic pursuits. Stefansen, Kari et al., social scientists at Oslo and Akershus University, explored the increase of parent involvement in youth sports, asking parents to explain the incentives behind their support. The parents thematically hinted at an absence of parental support in their own

childhood, suggesting that deep parental involvement may be an overcompensation for the attention they lacked. Stefansen et al., note that although well-intentioned, “the practice of deep involvement balances a very thin line between intrusion or pressure and support” (167).

McEwin, C. Kenneth, and Thomas S. Dickinson, specialists in children's education at the University of Appalachia, discuss the consequences of misguided parenting in competitive sports. They claim that the dramatic rise in burnout, attrition, and overuse injury can be traced back to pressure and intensity from parents. arguing that, “too many adults inadvertently try to live out their own fantasies and self expectations through their child” (219). Overly-involved parents may have trouble separating their own life from their child's, resulting in an inability to discern when they are crossing boundaries and causing harm. Contrasting these examples of destructive behavior, is the letter Franklin D Roosevelt wrote to his son regarding his wish to compete in varsity level football. Roosevelt expressed concern for his son's safety and fixation on athletics, but ultimately left the decision up to him, writing: “I think that the chance of your damaging yourself in body is outweighed by the possibility of bitterness of spirit if you could not play” (“Proper Place”). Roosevelt models an effective and beneficial approach; he communicated his own concerns and reluctance for his son to compete without forcefully removing him or pressuring him to continue.

One method of conceptualizing parenting behaviors are the three basic parenting styles identified by Clinical Psychologist Diana Baumrind. The styles include *permissive*, *authoritarian*, and *authoritative* parenting and are differentiated through the power dynamics involved in each. Baumrind asserts that *permissive* parents are “non-punitive” and avoidant of power, while *authoritarian* parents contrarily use power and enforce stringent rules to regulate their children. A moderate between the two, she describes an *authoritative* parent as one who

“values both autonomous self-will and disciplined conformity” and who “enforces [their] own perspective as an adult, but recognizes the child's individual interests and special ways” (887–907). Parenting styles are significant to the issue of helicopter parents because qualities of overly-intense parents overlap with those of *authoritarian* parents. Parents that micromanage their children's lives assert a high level of control and, like *authoritarian* parents, they limit their children's autonomy. In both cases, it is important to distinguish between benevolent over-involvement and intrusive or abusive behavior in parents. *Authoritarian* parenting is a common approach and does not directly imply harm upon adolescents. In fact, overprotective parents usually have good intentions and only inadvertently negatively affect their children. Even so, such deeply involved parenting is unfavorable to the health of the youth.

A major way in which over-involvement does a disservice to children's development is through weakening their motivation and self-efficacy. Golda S. Ginsburg and Phyllis Bronstein of the Department of Psychiatry at UConn Health, published a study exploring the developmental and academic effects of over and under-involved parenting on adolescents. The study surveyed 93 adolescent participants and their parents to determine parenting styles, academic performance, and intrinsic/extrinsic motivational orientations. The results significantly indicated that adolescents with neglectful *or* over-controlling parents had poorer academic performance than those with moderately involved parents and often lacked intrinsic motivation (1461–1474). The intrinsic and extrinsic motivation orientations are part of Ryan and Deci Self-Determination theory. According to Kimberly A. Noels et al., Department of Intercultural Learning at University of Alberta, intrinsically motivated activities are voluntary and self-determined, while extrinsically motivated activities “are performed not because of inherent interest in the activity, but in order to arrive at some instrumental end” (24). It can be inferred

logically that children of intensely-involved parents are often extrinsically motivated since authoritarian styles focus on punishment and reward (extrinsic factors) and do not attempt to foster free will within the child. They also point out that neglectful parenting has similar detrimental effects, suggesting that the middle ground between intrusive and over-lenient parental control is the most beneficial approach. Additionally, overinvolvement can create negative psychological traits in children. Morgen E. Peck, journalist for *Scientific American Magazine*, shares his knowledge on intense parenting and anxiety in adolescents. He posits that controlling and critical parents can create anxiety behaviors and perfectionist tendencies in children (16–17). Overbearing parenting leaves children without room to make mistakes, resulting in irrational fear of failure. Peck further attributes this anxiety reflex to families in which parents resort to harsh punishment for their children's misdoings. This evidence is consistent with Ginsberg's theory that poor self-efficacy in children is correlated with over-involved parents. The deleterious influences of over-parenting are concerning and deserve attention.

On the other hand, some psychologists argue that having parental support is vital in the development of adolescents. They stress that the implications of absent or negligent parents are far more alarming than those of overinvolvement. A study by Karen L. Fingerman et al., professors of Human Development and Family Sciences, found that contrary to mainstream negative depictions of “helicopter parenting,” intense parental support resulted in a higher degree of well-being in both parents and children compared to those with less involvement (887–896). They argue that high support does not necessarily have harmful effects on young adults in the long-term. However, this source examines only parental support and not controlling or over-intensive behavior and therefore does not cover all the possible negative implications of

excessive parenting. Even so, Fingerman et al.'s study does have merit, considering the clear consequences of even one absent parent in adolescence. Marloes De Lange, and Jaap Dronkers, Department of Sociology of Consumption and Households, conducted a study to determine the relationship between single parent households and academic achievement. The results significantly showed that adolescents from single parent households lagged behind coupled parent homes in academic skills (125–144). This evidence suggests that inadequate parental support is harmful since adolescents with a single parent likely receive less attention on average. However, Keven Lang and Jay L. Zagorsky, Ph.D. holders at Boston University argue that, “children from nontraditional households might do worse [in academics] because they are reared in a disadvantaged environment and not because they lived without both parents” (267–273). Single family households often face economic and racial disadvantages that could potentially contribute to reasons for poor academic achievement, but it is likely that the lacking presence of a parent is also a significant factor. While it is true that absent parents produce lasting detrimental effects in adolescents, the opposite extreme can similarly cause lasting damage. The magnitude of the overparenting issue is not as understood as negligent parenting and deserves further attention.

*Authoritative* parenting is the optimal parenting style because it encourages ideal balances of control, trust, and nurture between parent and child. Studies have found that children reared in *authoritative* homes possess superior social and academic proficiency and are cooperative and respectful in their relationships. Children of *authoritarian* and *permissive* parents more frequently behave impulsively and struggle with academics and socializing (Baumrind). Anne C. Fletcher et al., agree with this finding claiming that, “children of all ages whose parents engage in authoritative parenting perform better in school, engage in less

misconduct, and are better adjusted psychologically than their peers raised in nonauthoritative households.” Their study examining psychological implications of interparental consistency found that just one *authoritative* parent within a household considerably boosted the well-being of their child compared with families of non-authoritative parents (599–610). This shows the immense positive impact that *authoritative* parents have on children and adolescents; the importance of parents adopting this approach cannot be understated. Furthermore, Martin Pinquart, Faculty of Psychology, compared adolescent academic achievement with parenting styles and found that *authoritative* parents are strongly associated with higher academic achievement. He states that “authoritative parenting style has been linked with adaptive achievement strategies characterized by low levels of failure expectations, task irrelevant behavior and passivity coupled with high levels of independent problem solving and critical thinking”(477). A primary incentive of *authoritarian* parents is the success of their children which they attempt to achieve through high control. However, Pinquart proves that this behavior is counterproductive since *authoritative* parenting better develops the skills required for academic prosperity. If authoritarian parents were simply aware of the benefits of *authoritative* parenting, they might be willing to adopt this approach.

Overly-involved parenting is a contemporary issue that has emerged amidst the competitive environments in American schools and youth athletics. Although this behavior has gained attention, the reality of its implications for children's well-being and development requires further consideration. Overly-involved parents demonstrate extreme control and management over their children, mirroring the obedience-centered approach of the *authoritarian* parenting style. Although well intentioned, this method is detrimental to children as it is correlated with anxiety symptoms, burnout in athletes, poorer academic performance, and

motivational dependency. As previously mentioned, Theodore Roosevelt exemplifies an *authoritative* parenting style that creates healthy boundaries and fosters self-autonomy in his relationship with his son. Through offering encouragement but simultaneously allowing his son power over his choices, he avoids negative implications of overparenting and provides maximum benefit to his son's health ("The Proper Place"). Following Roosevelt's example, parents that demonstrate overbearing behavior should work to self-correct and align their methods with *authoritative* parenting for the sake of their children. Parents might achieve this through attending therapy, improving communication with their children, or investing in education about the needs of their children. In the end, parents possess tremendous power over the outcome of their children's lives. Addressing the issue of overparenting has the potential to vastly improve the health of adolescents, making for a stronger, more inspired future generation.

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