Look! Up in the sky! It's a bird! It's a plane! It's... Supermom!

By Amanda Robb  
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*She phones daily, e-mails constantly, ghostwrites term papers, drives hundreds of miles to do her kids' laundry, negotiates with their prospective employers, and occasionally kneecaps their competition. She's one of the new "helicopter" parents, always hovering, on alert. Is she helping her children or crippling them?*

Three summers ago, Christine Buckles, 38, was thrilled when a young family moved into the brick-fronted ranch house next door to hers on Waterford Crystal Drive in Dardenne Prairie, Missouri. But shortly after, Christine was unsettled when the mother, Lori, began to bad-mouth her daughter's best friend, Megan, blaming her for problems between the girls. Both tweens were slightly overweight, and when they started dieting, Lori broadcast the news, saying her daughter would lose more weight than Megan, even though it was obvious to Christine that Megan was slimming down faster. Christine didn't blame Megan at all when, during the summer of 2006, she stopped wanting to spend much time with Lori's daughter.   
  
Christine's new neighbor Lori—Lori Drew—was the Missouri woman who allegedly would go on to create a fictitious 16-year-old boy named Josh Evans on myspace.com to cyber-torment Megan. As readers of mommy blogs know, for about a month "Josh" said he really, really liked Megan. Then, with little warning, on October 16, 2006, he reportedly wrote, "Everybody...knows how you are. You are a bad person and everybody hates you. Have a shitty rest of your life. The world would be a better place without you."   
  
Within hours, Megan hanged herself, and she died the next day.   
  
So far, no charges have been filed against Lori Drew. She and her husband and two children continue to live next door to the Buckles, four houses away from Megan's father (he and his wife are in the process of getting a divorce after nearly 20 years of marriage).   
  
Parental overinvolvement is nothing new: Queen Victoria's mother slept in the same room as her daughter until Victoria, at age 18, moved out in one of her first acts as England's sovereign. The mothers of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and General Douglas MacArthur moved to live near them when they went to college. (MacArthur's mother took a hotel room close enough to her son's dorm room so she could see if the lamp was lit, which made her feel certain he was doing his homework.) But such behavior was unusual in an era when most Americans worked six days a week, virtually no one had paid vacations to use for extended parent weekends, and speedy communication was limited mostly to telegrams.   
  
Today parents can go online and track their children's grades, attendance, and missed assignments in real time with software like PowerSchool, which is used in more than 10,000 schools in 49 states and serves the parents of nearly 4.7 million children. In addition, a survey of 4,800 parents across the country conducted by College Parents of America, an advocacy group of more than 100,000 parents of college students, found that 30 percent talk or e-mail with their university-age children every day. Former school principal Jim Fay and psychiatrist Foster Cline, MD, who in 1977 cofounded the Love and Logic Institute, a parent education center based in Golden, Colorado, coined the term "helicopter parents" to describe mothers and fathers who "hover over their children." Since then an entire military-based vocabulary has evolved to describe specific styles of hyperparenting. "Black Hawks" attack teachers, coaches, and even bosses who upset their children. "Stealth fighters" are constantly surveying their children.

Patricia Somers, PhD, University of Texas at Austin associate professor of higher education, is among the first academics to specifically research helicopter parents. She was stunned to discover how involved many of them are: In a study she conducted at 60 public universities and colleges, she found that 40 to 60 percent of parents engage in some type of helicoptering, such as helping with academic assignments, and as many as 10 percent actually write their children's papers for them.   
  
Neither figure surprises Jim Settle, PhD, vice president of student affairs at Shawnee State University in Portsmouth, Ohio. At a seminar on campus issues a few years ago, a young woman raised her hand and said, "My mom has a question." She held up her cell phone and explained her mother had been listening in. Then her mom asked a question about campus security on the speaker.   
  
Even after their children have graduated from college (and are, in theory, on their own), many parents continue to advocate for them. They often contact their adult children's employers. "Over the last three or four years, we've started getting all kinds of calls," says a recruiter for a Fortune 500 company. "Parents want to discuss offer letters and benefits, or information about 'work-life balance.' Or ask, 'Is Johnny going to be able to come home at Christmastime, because we take two weeks as a family at that time?' We had one call last summer because it was little Ginny's birthday and Mom wanted to know if we could have a cake delivered to her and sing 'Happy Birthday.'" The recruiter pauses. "[This is] Wall Street. We don't really do that around here."   
  
Another mother called her late one night. After brief pleasantries, the woman said, "A few years ago, you interviewed my daughter, and you loved her. She turned your company down, but I have another daughter. She's a junior and she's fantastic.... So I was thinking it would be fantastic if you could hire her for the summer."   
  
The recruiter explained that all the positions had been filled. The mother responded: "That doesn't work for me." To get the mother off the phone, the recruiter said she would talk with the daughter but assumed that the young woman would be too embarrassed by her parent's behavior to call. "But at 8:30 the next morning, the phone rang," says the recruiter. "It was the daughter, saying, 'Hi; I know you talked to my mom, so I wanted to get in touch with you right away!'" The young woman, who didn't know anything about the business, did not get the job.   
  
Signs of superparenting surfaced in the 1980s, when mid to late boomers started putting the first BABY ON BOARD signs in minivan windows, says Donald Pollock, PhD, associate professor of anthropology at the State University of New York at Buffalo. That was around the time terrorism first began touching American lives—Iranian students backed by radical clerics held American hostages between 1979 and 1981; a suicide bomber blew himself up outside U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut, killing 241 servicemen in 1983. Starting in the 1990s, many Americans' fears moved from the big and the vague (Communism, the bomb, bad things happening "over there") to the specific horrors that began encroaching here, in places we can't help being: school (Columbine), home (Elizabeth Smart), and the office (9/11).

At about the same time, members of the most neglected generation in American history—Generation Xers—began to have children, says Helen Johnson, an adviser to dozens of universities on parent relations and author of *Don't Tell Me What to Do, Just Send Money: The Essential Parenting Guide to the College Years.*"They were latchkey kids, whose parents divorced in huge numbers and whose mothers often worked two full-time jobs—one outside the home and one running it. This generation tends to have children later, when they feel they have ample financial and emotional resources for parenting. Many of the mothers leave or cut back on their careers when they start families. Parenting becomes the vital enterprise of their lives."   
  
The most notorious helicopter parents are those who become overinvested in their children's athletic pursuits, such as Jeff Doyal Robertson, who in 2005 shot his son's Canton, Texas, high school football coach, allegedly because the boy had been suspended from playing, and Thomas Junta, who in 2000 beat to death the father of one of his son's hockey teammates because he didn't like the way the man had supervised a game. Even when they refrain from homicidal impulses, parents of athletes can make stupendously bad choices. Take Terrell Mackey, a Lincoln, Nebraska, mother. Last spring, when her 15-year-old daughter failed to perform to Mackey's expectations in a YWCA soccer game, she forced the girl to repeat mantras about bettering her performance in the car on the way home from the game. "Every time the child messed up a sentence, the mother would slap the daughter," says Public Information Officer Katie Flood of the Lincoln Police Department. According to the police report, the mother hit her daughter on the face or head as many as 15 times, until she stopped the car and had the child get out on Interstate 80. The girl, still in her YWCA uniform, was picked up by a teammate's family as she trudged toward an exit ramp. Mackey was charged with child neglect.   
  
A story like Mackey's sounds crazy— and it is—but parents who think they need to prepare their children for a very competitive world are responding to very real challenges, says Johnson. "It starts with the whole 'getting in' thing. You used to just sign up for preschool. Now you have to apply." And preschool is only the beginning. Public universities—such as the State University of New York at Purchase, Delta State University in Mississippi, and the University of Puerto Rico at Arecibo—all currently accept about one in three applicants. For the class of 1950, Harvard University accepted about 52 percent of those who applied; for the class of 2009, Harvard accepted 9.1 percent of applicants—a record low.   
  
Parents also know that life doesn't get easier after children finish their education: Entry-level wages for college graduates fell steadily from 2001 to 2005, and have only barely risen since then. During the past ten years, a university graduate's average student loan debt has increased about 58 percent.   
  
Those are a few of the reasons that Robin Childress Witherspoon, 44, does everything she can to help her four children get the best possible jobs. She prepares résumés and cover letters for them, advises on appropriate hairstyles for interviews, and makes them practice shaking hands. An elementary school principal in Ferguson, Missouri, Witherspoon also tries to make professional contacts for her children.

"We're not affluent," Witherspoon says. She was a stay-at-home mom when her children were young, and her husband was a fireman. When she'd talk to people who were wealthier, she says, "I found that they were always getting their name out there and meeting people so they could call on them later. I think that being a member of the African-American community, that's not something we necessarily have—an understanding of networking."   
  
Her children complain that she gets on their nerves sometimes, but Witherspoon thinks her involvement has helped their transition to independent adulthood. Her oldest daughter just graduated from Tennessee State University with a degree in electrical engineering and got a job with Boeing. "On her own," Witherspoon says.   
  
Lynn Yale, 55, works as a special ed teacher with high school students in Santa Clarita, California. She acknowledges she might be spoiling her sons by traveling an hour and a half to do their laundry, but she feels college has become such a pressure cooker that "everything needs to be done in a certain amount of time at a certain level." So doing their wash is a small way she can help her two sons, who both take 15 to 18 credits a semester. Her efforts aren't entirely for the boys, she admits. "I really enjoy their company," she says. "I miss them." She's agreed to pay her youngest son's cell phone bills—if he uses it to call her once a day.   
  
Robyn Lewis, 56, who raised her two sons after divorcing their father 19 years ago, takes full advantage of the ability to cyber-attach. The Fort Lauderdale, Florida, college recruiter often starts her mornings by turning on her computer and logging on to the linking bank accounts she shares with each of her sons, Ethan, 24, and Brendan, 22. "My significant other says he can tell when Brendan has spent too much money," Lewis says. "He'll say, 'You go, *Sh-damn,* and switch to e-mail mode, and I hear the keys clicking, *What's this $60 at Café Bola?*'"   
  
After checking what her adult sons have been spending, Lewis e-mails each a to-do list for the day. "I have access to their college e-mail passwords, so I know what grades they're getting and if a teacher has e-mailed them because they missed a class. I can say, 'Hey, what happened? You didn't meet with your adviser yesterday.' Or 'I notice you're missing a quiz in psych.' I know almost every minute detail of their lives." Once a month, Lewis drives two and a half hours each way to clean Ethan's dorm kitchen, buy his groceries—eggs, orange juice, etc.—and take care of his laundry. (Brendan is in school 3,000 miles away, or she'd do the same for him.) Lewis says she does it so Ethan can get extra sleep, but she acknowledges that she helicopters at least in part for herself. "I get a sense of control—of *something.* You can't change politics. You can't change the environment. But you can create something really terrific with your own children."

As terrific as Lewis believes they both are, she's having a hard time accepting that Ethan will not call home as often as she'd like. So she's started checking on him via his new girlfriend. "I e-mailed her yesterday: *Amanda, is Ethan all right? I haven't heard from him in a couple of days. Did he meet with his adviser?*"   
  
The young woman wrote back that Ethan had a headache but was otherwise fine.   
  
Perhaps the most shocking thing about Lewis's story is that her sons do not appear to feel smothered. For the most part, they seem to be as attached to her as she is to them. In April 2008, 24-year-old Ethan sent his mother an e-mail. He typed in the subject line, "Urgent you call... Where are you?" The e-mail continued with a request: *Hey, merm, Here's the stuff.... I didn't have an appointment, but I could register for classes at 3:00 P.M. Sign me up for all the classes except Japanese right now.... Ethan.*   
  
Lewis did register him for his next semester classes. That same day, 22-year-old Brendan e-mailed her the following note:   
  
*Hey...I need some motherly advice.... The girl you met at Goodwill...I took her to the best French pastry joint in town. I was drinking wine on Tommy's tab but I overplayed my hand and bought a bottle of wine for the two of us to share.... I'm sorry, I was a little buzzed when I thought I could play "Big Man" and impress her and now I feel stupid and tremendously guilty....*   
  
*Anyway, the problem is that she is AMAZING.... She's honors college, Fulbright, wealthy family, polyglot, down-to-earth, outdoorsy, nonreligious, cute, inhibited but sexy. The two problems are that she's nowhere close to on-par aesthetically with other girls I've been used to dating.... The other problem is that I'm leaving.... I think she was made for me.... Can you reflect on all this and get back to me? Love, Bren.*   
  
The e-mails suggest a closeness that most people over 30 never had with their mothers and raise questions about 21st-century parenting: How much should you do for your grown children? How do you know if you're doing it to help them—or to make yourself feel better? Just how close should you be?   
  
Helicopter parents tend to have a particularly hard time when their children go away to college. To help alleviate parental separation anxiety (and one assumes to cut down on calls to administration), colleges from New York to Minnesota have recently installed what are best described as grown-up mommy-cams on their campuses. Students can stand or sit in front of "Hi, Mom!" Webcams located in common areas while calling home on a cell phone—a makeshift videophone. The University of Rochester actually has three sites, the "Hi, Mom! Balcony," the "Hi, Mom! Bridge," and the "Hi, Mom! Close-up." Cornell University's "Hi, Mom!" Webcam page gets as many as 60,000 visits a month, making it one of the most popular pages on the school's Web site.   
  
After being flooded with phone calls from concerned parents, the Universities of California at Davis and Santa Barbara created special handbooks available on their Web sites to help with issues about campus living—for mothers and fathers. "We had a family who rented a house here for two weeks," says Emily Galindo, interim director of student housing at UC Davis. "Their daughter was coming and they wanted to help her settle in."

Parents like these want to make sure their children get the most out of college from day one, but few parents understand what "the most" means. George Kuh, PhD, however, has been thinking about that topic nonstop for almost a decade. Since 2000 he has conducted the annual National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which measures what conditions make for the most beneficial college experience.   
  
In 2007, for the first time, Kuh, an Indiana University professor of higher education, had his team ask undergraduate students (about 9,000 on 24 campuses) how often they were in touch with their parents, as well as the effect of that contact. The findings surprised members of the team: "The bottom line," Kuh says, "was that, contrary to popular opinion, students with involved parents tend to study more, have more frequent contacts with faculty, report greater gains in critical thinking during college, write more clearly, and talk to their peers more often about substantive issues than students with less involved parents."   
  
Kuh finds it extremely interesting that the students benefited from contact with parents whether their parents were college educated or not. "That's counterintuitive," he says, "because kids of highly educated people usually have advantages. Not just money but social capital."   
  
Although his findings indicate that parental involvement offers across-the-board advantages, Kuh believes there has to be "a tipping point between beneficial contact and the kind that stunts personal growth." Where exactly that point is, his survey can't measure. In their 1990 book, *Parenting with Love and Logic,* Fay and Cline argued that helicopter parenting actually failed to prepare children for the pitfalls of adult life, but it will take years to determine if their suspicions were correct.   
  
In the meantime, university-parent relationship consultant Helen Johnson says you can recognize a child whose parents have been too enmeshed in his or her life. "Some become 'hothouse' children," she says. "They feel they can't do anything on their own, because they simply never have." Others can't take criticism because they think everyone should love them unconditionally, as their parents always have. By far the most commonly reported problem facing helicoptered children is an inability to cope with the normal, inevitable frustrations of early adulthood.   
  
"[This generation is] incredibly capable," says the Fortune 500 recruiter. "They're very technologically savvy, very aspirational, and they are very efficient because they've grown up with three things attached to them at all times—a BlackBerry, a cell phone, and a computer. But they want to be on a fast track very quickly. They want to know: What are the five things I need to do to get from point A to point B? And, if I do those five things, will point B come a little bit sooner for me?" These young adults expect an express lane to the top.   
  
Last summer a young intern, four weeks into his job at a multinational bank, e-mailed the CEO to say he was disappointed because he had been in on very few client meetings. He asked the CEO to contact him directly to resolve the issue, says the still shocked recruiter.   
  
This sense of entitlement poses huge problems for both young workers and American business, says Dan Nagy, an associate dean of the Fuqua School of Business at Duke University. "A generation ago college graduates stayed in their first job an average of four years. Today they stay an average of two years. And that two years becomes one year if the environment isn't rewarding enough." As Nagy explains, that high rate of turnover isn't good for the company or an individual's career.

Given that the NSSE survey found that about 75 percent of college students frequently follow their parents' advice, the newest catchphrase in corporate HR departments and at universities is "parents as partners." The accounting firm Ernst & Young—which hires about 5,500 college graduates a year—now offers students a flash drive with information about the company, its employee policies, benefits, and possible bonuses to give to their parents. The company hopes that being parent-friendly will make it more appealing to top candidates.   
  
Betty Smith, university recruiting manager for Hewlett-Packard, has even found herself negotiating a benefits package in a conference call with a new employee and her mother. Some Enterprise Rent-A-Car locations reportedly send letters to parents of prospective employees, explaining positions and offers.   
  
At least one college administrator thinks corporations are going to have to do a lot more than send letters and make phone calls to help today's twenty-somethings transition to adulthood. As assistant dean of students at Florida State University, Patrick Heaton hires college students to give campus tours. He had to ask several guides to stop chatting with one another and focus on the task of helping new students during orientation. They didn't like the way he corrected them. Heaton was baffled. He had not yelled or been harshly critical. Heaton asked the students how they thought he should have done it. They said they liked the "sandwich" method. "You have to say something nice, then give the criticism, then say something nice again," he explains.  
  
Heaton doesn't think corporate America currently has time for the sandwich method. So he feels that part of his job is to encourage parents to prepare their children for a world that might feel a little tougher than home. Recently he received a call from a mother inquiring how laundry is done at the school. She thought she'd missed that part of the campus tour.   
  
There are washers and dryers in the dorms, Heaton told her.   
  
"But how is it done?" the mother persisted. "Who picks it up and delivers it? Or do students have to drop it off somewhere? What is the service?"   
  
"There is no service," Heaton explained. "The students do their own laundry."   
  
The mother was horrified. She said that her son didn't know how to wash clothes.   
  
Heaton told the woman it was a good thing she called when she did—six weeks before school started. She had time to teach her son something really important: how to do laundry.