

# 'Helicopter parenting' can cause problems later, research suggests

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Children who have over-controlling "helicopter parents" when they are toddlers are less able to deal with their emotions and impulses as they get older, leading to more problems with school, research suggests.

The study examined to what degree mothers of toddlers dominated playtime and showed their child what to do, and then studied how their children behaved over the next eight years. It revealed that controlling parenting is linked to a number of problems as a child grows up.

"Parents who are over-controlling are most often very well-intentioned and are trying to support and be there for their children," said Dr Nicole Perry, of the University of Minnesota, who co-authored the research. "However, to foster emotional and behavioural skills, parents should allow children to experience a range of emotions and give them space to practise and try managing these emotions independently and then guide and assist children if the task becomes too great."

Writing in the journal *Developmental Psychology*, Perry and colleagues in the US and Switzerland describe how they examined 422 children aged two by inviting mother and child into the laboratory and asking them to play with toys for four minutes, then put them away over the next two minutes. Researchers rated the degree to which the mother tried to take over the task.

At the age of five, the team looked at the children's response to an unfair share of sweets, and their ability to tackle a puzzle under time pressure.

When the children were aged five and 10, the researchers asked teachers to rate problems such as depression, anxiety or loneliness in the children, the children's academic performance

and social skills.

The team found that more controlling behaviour by parents was linked both to children having less control over their own emotions and less control over impulses by the age of five.

Also, five-year-olds with poorer control over their emotions were linked to worse social skills at the age of 10, while lower levels of control over emotions and behaviour were both linked to poorer academic performance. They were also linked to more emotional problems and a poorer attitude to school at the age of 10.

However, the study did not take into account changes in parenting or the child's physical health.

Dieter Wolke, professor of developmental psychology and individual differences at the [University of Warwick](#), said the study was supported by previous research showing lack of self-regulation in early childhood is related to later problems.

"The problem here really is that if you don't learn skills to self-regulate, how can you self-regulate when you leave the home, when you go to school or university? In a way it is a form of abusiveness - taking this opportunity away from children," he said.

But he noted that over-controlling parenting was usually done with the best of intentions.

Dr Janet Goodall, from Bath University, urged caution and said parents should not be made to feel guilty or judged: "What is really important is that they care about their children and what their children are doing and what their children are learning."

