

LEAVE THOSE KIDS ALONE: 'HELICOPTER PARENTING' LINKED TO BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS

🕒 11 hours ago 📁 Family

Children whose parents are over-controlling “helicopter parents” when they are toddlers, are less able to control their emotions and impulses as they get older apparently leading to more problems with school, new research suggests.

The study looked at to what degree mothers of toddlers dominated playtime and showed their child what to do, and then studied how their children behaved over the following eight years, revealing 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 Twin Cities, 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 practice and try managing these emotions independently and then guide and assist children when [or] if the task becomes too great.”

Writing in the journal *Developmental Psychology*, Perry and colleagues in the US and Switzerland describe how they examined the parenting and behaviour of 422 children at the age of two by inviting mother and child into the laboratory and asking them to play with an array of toys for four minutes, then put them away over the next two minutes. The sessions were recorded and researchers rated to what degree 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 think carefully about 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 their views of the children’s social skills. At 10 years the children were quizzed on their attitudes to school and teachers as well as emotional issues.

The team found that once factors including the child’s age, behaviour as a toddler and socioeconomic status were taken into account, more controlling behaviour by mothers was linked both to their children having less control over their own emotions and less control over their impulses by the age of five.

What’s more, five-year olds with poorer control over 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, even after taking into account such behaviours at the age of five. They were also linked to more emotional problems and a poorer attitude to school, as reported by the children at age 10.

However, the study only looked at the mothers' behaviour at one point in time, and 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**, noted the team did not look at whether the mothers had an anxiety disorder, but said that 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, like [when] you go to school or you go to university? In a way it is a form of abusiveness – taking this opportunity away from children," he said, although he noted over-controlling parenting was usually done with the best of intentions.

But Dr Janet Goodall from the University of Bath urged caution, noting that it is difficult to say how much parental control is "too much", and that cultural factors such how dangerous a child's environment is should be considered when looking at parental behaviour.

"While the study shows a connection between what they call over-controlling parenting and later issues, it doesn't say that this is the cause of later issues, it says it goes along with it – and they only observed parents for six minutes," she said.

Goodall added parents should not be made to feel guilty or judged: "What is really important is that [parents] care about their children, and what their children are doing and what their children are learning."

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