

Exploring the Helicopter Parenting Phenomenon and its Effect on the Development of Conflict Management Skills in Children

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Acknowledgments

"It is love and friendship, the sanctity and celebration of our relationships, that not only support a good life but create one. Through friendships, we spark and inspire one another's ambitions."

Wallace Stegner

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Abstract

Over the last few decades, considerable societal changes have created a parenting standard that calls for participation in all aspects of our children's lives. Popular culture has coined the term "helicopter parenting" to describe this type of parental control. Now, more often than not, a parent will step in to offer a solution when mediating a dispute that involves their child. It is hypothesized that resolving the problematic situation inhibits children from acquiring the skills necessary to promote positive and authentic relationships. This study examined the role teachers and parents play in conflict resolution in children five to eight years old. Subjects were surveyed, observed, and interviewed to acquire an understanding of the general approach and adeptness in reaching a negotiated agreement. My research led me to conclude that more often than not parents let their actions replace those of their children. It is of my opinion that helicopter parents have good intentions, but extreme bias flaws their interpretation of actual events. This paper discusses cognitive prejudices in regards to parenting style, and its impact on the development of conflict management skills in early childhood. It also speaks to the residual effect it has on our teachers and recommendations to enhance training for parents and teachers.

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Introduction

“Being able to resolve conflicts peacefully is one of the greatest strengths we can give our children.”

Fred Rogers

I became a mother for the first time nineteen years ago. For almost two decades I have been a proud member of this privileged group. I have learned over the years that the role of a parent is a complicated one. Left to navigate this uncertain world on our own, we do our best to nurture and provide for our children. With every experience comes a learning opportunity and our capabilities evolve as we progress through each stage of child development. That being said, recently I have noticed something radically different in the realm of parenting. Parents seem to be taking too much responsibility for their children’s experiences. Where this can be extremely beneficial for development, the changing nature of parenting has led to over-protection and over-involvement. I have observed parents complete homework assignments, settle disputes, and do whatever necessary to ensure their children’s success. Before this trend evolved, parents typically let children resolve their own differences. Now, they violate parental boundaries by solving the problem rather than supporting the means needed to foster and groom conflict management skills. Shielding children from disappointment deprives them of opportunities to develop the life skills necessary for everyday interaction.

Conflict naturally occurs in human contact and is a part of everyday life. Handled correctly, it can be a catalyst for much needed change. Shared interest and creative problem-solving are the gateways to peaceful and mutually satisfying agreements (Ury 2003). Children learn to exercise

self-control and establish boundaries through conflict. Handling opposition independently encourages objectivity, creativity, and self-confidence. Socially successful children fluently navigate their changing social environment to develop strong lifelong relationships (Densmore and Bauman 2011).

Early experience with debate and inconsistency will significantly influence the development of a child's capacity to manage conflict. A study performed in 2008 at Weill Cornell Medical College in New York, established that "one major contribution of neuroscience to understanding cognitive development has been in demonstrating that biology is not destiny-that is, demonstrating the remarkable role of experience in shaping the mind, brain, and body" (Diamond and Amso 136). We know that children learn from listening and watching.

Furthermore, they imitate behaviors they are exposed to in social environments. The approach that a parent or teacher takes to handle difficult situations has profound implications for the development of skills during early childhood. The repercussions of helicopter parenting have been shown to hurt the healthy development of necessary social skills (Padilla-Walker and Nelson 1187).

The proof that early environments matter for development combined with modern day parenting tendencies inspired the theoretical underpinning of this thesis. It is theorized that helicopter parenting hurts the growth of conflict management skills in children. The goal of this study was to acquire diverse and genuine insight into helicopter parenting and its affect on developing conflict management skills in children. I will begin with a review of the literature to deliver a background on parenting style and child development. Next, I will perform research using observation, survey, and interview to support or refute the stated hypothesis. A

discussion based on the findings of my exploratory study will follow. Upon conclusion, I will propose training and education next steps.

Literature Review

I. Helicopter Parenting

Defining Helicopter Parenting

There is something radically different happening in the world of parenting. Over sanitized children, adults completing homework assignments, and obsession with perfection. The overall application of developmentally inappropriate parenting. On a large scale, this fundamental shift in parenting is an epidemic running rampant. “Over the past decade the presentation and ill effects of overzealous parenting, particularly of adolescents and young adults, has received considerable attention in both popular media and social scientific outlets” (Segrin et al. 472). Hara Estroff Marano, a psychology expert, wrote a book titled *A Nation of Wimps: The High Cost of Invasive Parenting*, that was inspired by this trend. The research she conducted for the book reinforced the existence of the phenomenon. Initially, she was certain it was an American epidemic. However, her investigation into the issue persuaded her that it was more widespread. “I was besieged by media in Australia, Brazil, Sweden, and elsewhere. And I have traveled to parts of the world where I’ve been told stories about invasive parents that rival anything I’ve heard at home”(Marano 6).

Helicopter parenting was a term created initially by college admission personnel when they noticed a change in parent involvement in the application process. Research conducted at Brigham and Young University was among the first to study this new phenomenon. They established “behavioral control, with high levels of warmth and support as well as excessive limiting of autonomy that is not consistent with the age of the child” as a distinct form of

parenting (Padilla-Walker and Nelson 1178). This type of parenting veers away from the traditional coaching or guiding style to a controlling and over-protective approach. Segrin et al. clarify this behavior in a paper published in *The Journal of Child and Family Studies*. The study, titled “Overparenting is Associated with Child Problems and a Critical Family Environment,” describes helicopter parenting as “the use of excessive advice, problem-solving, and provision of abundant and unnecessary tangible assistance, combined with risk aversion, anxiety and parental involvement in the child’s emotional well-being to the point of enmeshment” (Segrin 472). These parenting practices violate boundaries and diminish some difficulties placed on a child. In short, helicopter parents experience the process required to enter adulthood in place of their children.

Impact of Helicopter Parenting

The heart of the study performed by Segrin et al. was to assess the effect of helicopter parenting. Their research suggested a positive correlation between over-parenting and child problems. Helicopter parenting “does not promote positive interpersonal relationships and social problem solving” (Segrin et al. 479). Children are over managed and over protected by their parents, with minimal opportunity to manage challenges on their own. Thus, they are incapable of refining their instinct and identities- “kids are unable to forge their own unique adaptations to the normal vicissitudes of life” (Marano 2). Instead, helicopter parenting amplifies low self-esteem and high-risk behaviors (Padilla-Walker and Nelson 1178). From a conflict management standpoint, helicopter parenting prevents children from experiencing disagreement. Segrin et al., Marano, and Padilla-Walker and Nelson drew the same conclusion, that is, that over-parenting often backfires in the realm of social engagement. Padilla-Walker

and Nelson summarized the effect of helicopter parenting the best, “helicopter parenting is not conducive to promoting growth by limiting opportunities for emerging adults to practice and develop important skills needed for becoming self-reliant adults” (1190).

II. Cognitive Development

Contributions of Neuroscience

An upsurge of research in neurobiology and social sciences have promoted and enhanced understanding of the conditions that influence child development. Adele Diamond and Dima Amsos investigated one of those contributions. Published in *Current Directions in Psychological Science* in 2008, the pair stated that one of the fields most significant contributions was the notion that “biology is not destiny – that is demonstrating the remarkable role of experience in shaping the mind, brain, and body” (Diamond and Amso 136). Indeed, scientist established that quality early experience was vital for shaping positive behavior. The National Research Council and Institute of Medicine spoke to the plasticity of the human brain in the book *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. “Human development is shaped by a dynamic and continuous interaction between biology and experience” (3). We now know that biology and experience shape and modify the brain. This scientific breakthrough has enormous ramifications for parenting and the neuroscience behind cognitive development speaks to the degree of impact the violation of parental boundaries has. “The influence of nature is deeply affected by these environments and, in turn, shapes how children respond to their experiences” (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 24). Both studies

support the original hypothesis of this thesis that helicopter parenting can prevent the development of conflict management skills.

How Learning Occurs

The National Research Council Institute of Medicine has done extensive, complex and multi-disciplinary research to understand the trajectories of early childhood development. One significant area of study worth mentioning, in regards to helicopter parenting, is the innate drive children have to master their environment. Indeed, “children are active participants in their own development” (National Research Council Institute of Medicine 27). This instinctive drive is accelerated by the extent to which their environments provide opportunities. A Harvard Health Publication, *Your Successful Preschooler*, contains tips, strategies, and advice that helps parents provide the best experiences for their children. The authors, Ann Densmore and Margaret Bauman, tell their readers that “children’s success depends on the adults in their environment” (31). The foundation of healthy development begins with positive human relationships. Children learn through engagement with family, friends, and teachers. Furthermore, the brain changes when we subject it too repetitive patterns or “excessive activation” (Densmore and Bauman 16). If children practice something over and over, they develop “short-term or long-term memory and problem-solving skills” (Densmore and Bauman 16). This research made a significant contribution to understanding the impact of helicopter parenting. Over controlled and over protected children are deprived of opportunities to use their innate abilities to learn and cultivate essential life skills.

Sensitive Periods

The timing of early experience matters in development. The National Research Council Institute of Medicine refers to “sensitive periods” as “unique episodes in development when specific structures or functions become especially susceptible to the influence of particular experiences” (31). Simply put, there are ideal times for learning. According to Densmore and Bauman, the period when parents have the greatest effect is during the pre-school years (3). It should be noted that The National Research Council Institute research correlates with that of Densmore and Bauman, stating, “there is more multipotentiality in early childhood period than in the later years” (32). Early adolescence is also a critical juncture in development. This is not to say that learning does not occur outside of these periods, it is just more arduous and entails more effort and time. Pre-school marks a time in a child's life when relationships become important. They are just learning how to self-regulate, empathize, and communicate skills that are imperative to handling conflict in a positive and productive manner. However, just because their brains are “open” for development, it does not mean it just happens. Experience and environment in early development are deeply intertwined with a child’s ability to relate to others.

The phenomenon of overparenting coupled with the idea that experience impacts child development inspired the theoretical foundation for this study. Research done on parental control has mainly focused on its effect at the collegiate level. I found early adolescence presented a useful opportunity to study helicopter parenting related to conflict management. We know that parents and teachers have the most significant influence on a child during this period (Densmore and Bauman 2011). Furthermore, children learn best by imitating behaviors

they are exposed to (Densmore and Bauman 15). So, what actions should be modeled for our children to emulate in regards to dispute resolution?

III. Conflict Management

What is Conflict Management?

Conflict can encourage conversation, support personal growth, and provide opportunities for difficulties to be solved. If handled correctly, disagreement has the potential to be a positive experience. Conflict management has to do with an individual's ability to negotiate a difficult situation. It is not about winning or losing, but instead correctly communicating to express interests, listening to understand the other side, and creating a mutually beneficial resolution to a dispute. As levels of helicopter parenting increase, it becomes more and more critical to understand the techniques parents and teachers are modeling for our youth.

Best Practices

When faced with a problematic situation we can not script the process to resolve the conflict. Every situation is different, making adaptability a vital part of dispute resolution skills. However, some techniques promote collaboration. Harvard University's, William Ury is one of the top negotiation experts in the world and his interest-based approach to problem-solving "generates better results for both sides" (Ury 5). It is an important method where "instead of attacking each other, you jointly attack the problem" (Ury 5). There are three core concepts of Ury's work that were used as a benchmark for this thesis:

- *Separate the people from the problem.* Often, our emotions tend to take over when we are involved in a dispute. Strong feelings towards the other person involved can lead to an impasse. Ury suggests “going to the balcony,” or taking a break to get past those emotions to get a clear view of the problem.
- *Focus on interests, not positions.* “Your interests are the tangible motivations that lead you to take a position” (Ury 17).
- *Invent options for mutual gain.* Individuals involved in conflict should never dwell on a single solution. Instead, they should brainstorm together to invent some alternatives.

Ury suggests that you get the most satisfying solutions and the most optimal relationships when both sides are doing their best to engage the very real problems dividing them. The integrative approach is an established method used by negotiators worldwide and is the standard to which my research was measured against. Are parents and teachers modeling Ury’s process for our children?

IV. Bias

What is bias?

The final area of noteworthy literature includes behavioral decision research. Behavioral decision research emphasizes that many of the mistakes people make are “systematic” and “predictable” (Malhotra and Bazerman 107). Scientists have found that we are all influenced by what they call “bias.” Bias affects the way we think by playing tricks on our intuition. We like to think that our decisions are reasoned, but we are all vulnerable to focusing “intently on the wrong things or failing to seek out relevant information” (Soll et al. 66). When biases get the

better of us, it is doubtful we will learn anything. Understanding why we do what we do is central to a discussion on helicopter parenting. How parents rationalize their perception of a situation, and their intrusive behavior is a predominant theme of this thesis.

Types Of Bias

Research for this thesis uncovered some common and recurring behavior. I noticed the inconsistency in responses between the parents, teachers and observation sessions. The different reports provoked exploration into the biases that could have caused these discrepancies. Malhotra and Bazerman examine the role motivational biases play in derailing our behavior. “We human beings are motivated to see ourselves as fairer, kinder, more competent, more generous, more deserving, and more likely to succeed than others”(126). Motivational biases influence individuals to behave or believe in a way that feels good. There are four motivational biases discussed by Malhotra and Bazerman relevant to this study.

- *Egocentrism*: Perceptions and expectations are biased in our favor. Individuals look for a particular belief or explanation that they would benefit from and justify their behavior based on that perception.
- *Overconfidence and Irrational Optimism*: This bias leads us to believe that our features are better than others. It is a way to protect our self-esteem.
- *Self-Serving Attributes*: We tend to evaluate things in a self-serving way. It is how we justify bad or unethical behavior.
- *Regret Aversion*: Regret causes a painful psychological state. We do not like that feeling and try to avoid situations that might cause it.

There are significant details that Malhotra and Bazerman's research on bias bring to the discussion on helicopter parenting and the development of conflict management skills. When a questionnaire is administered as a source of investigation, prejudice must be considered when analyzing the data. Participants often answer questions based on social desirability. Their answers are untruthful, sometimes unintentionally, because bias plays tricks on reasoning. That makes the legitimacy of the research questionable. The researcher, also susceptible to bias, will interpret information based on what is important to them. Preferences leave qualitative research open to subjectivity, making this discussion an important one when analyzing data.

Finally, bias makes recommendations for educating individuals on the adverse affects of helicopter parenting difficult. It is hard to convince people to change their approach when they do not see anything wrong with it in the first place.

Methodology

Subjects

Participants involved in this study consisted of thirteen children located in Western Massachusetts. The sample included four females and nine males; one eight-year-old child, one seven-year-old, nine six-year-olds, and two five-year-olds. Six children were observed in a classroom setting, mainly recess or free play. Seven were examined in a social environment, including a playdate and a birthday party. At the time of the collection, the subjects had regular interaction for a minimum of five months. Each child was involved in at least one conflict scenario.

Name	Age	Gender	Setting Observed
Makenzie	5	Female	Classroom
Cam	5	Male	Birthday Party
Megson*	6	Male	Playdate
Asher*	6	Male	Playdate
Emma*	6	Female	Classroom
Aiden*	6	Male	Classroom
Mia	6	Female	Birthday Party
Preston	7	Male	Birthday Party
Lulu	6	Female	Birthday Party
Logan	6	Male	Classroom
Owen	6	Male	Classroom
Levi	6	Male	Classroom
Parker	8	Male	Birthday Party

* Children of parents who participated in the study

Eleven parents of children five to eight years of age contributed to this study. Ten of the subjects were mothers and one father. The parents were all chosen at random except for the four parents of children who were observed.

Name of Parent	Name of Child	Gender of Child	Means of Communication	Age of Child
Kara	Molly	Female	E-mail	6
Ryan*	Megson	Male	Interview/Survey	6
Shannon*	Asher	Male	E-mail	6
Beth*	Emma	Female	E-mail	6
Gabrielle*	Aiden	Male	E-mail	6
Jessica	Luke	Male	E-mail	5
Lauren	Jayna	Female	E-mail	8
Kim	Nolan	Male	E-mail	5
Charity	Avery	Female	E-mail	7
Kara	Max	Male	E-mail	8
Kate	Otis	Male	E-mail	5

*Parents of children observed for the study

The final sample group included ten teachers and one guidance counselor. The teachers were comprised of six elementary school teachers with at least five years of experience and five high

school teachers with at least eight years of experience. The locations of the educators included Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York and Western Australia. All participants were female.

Name	Grade/Subject	Contribution to Study	Location
Kara	K-4 Reading Specialist	Survey	Enfield, CT
Kim	1 st Grade	Survey	Enfield, CT
Kate	1 st Grade	Survey	Western Australia
Mary*	Kindergarten	Survey	Longmeadow, MA
Karen	Pre-K – K	Survey	Springfield, MA
Kelly	2 nd Grade	Survey	Agawam, MA
Lauren	High School English	Interview	Walworth, NY
Chelsea*	High School Choir	Interview	Suffield, CT
Cara	High School Math	Interview	Norwich, CT
Erin	High School Guidance Counselor	Interview	West Springfield, MA
Christina	High School Math	Interview	Boxford, MA

* Indicates parochial school

Measures and Procedure

Observation sessions were set up to collect data from the children. In the school setting, I examined the children during free indoor play and recess. I was introduced to the class, and they were aware of my presence but were not told the specifics of my visit. The entire observation portion was done discretely to obtain a genuine and accurate understanding of conflict management. I observed a total of twelve scenarios.

A questionnaire (Appendix A) was administered to a random sampling of parents with five-, six-, seven- and eight-year-old children. No emphasis was placed on which parent completed the survey. The priority was to find a significant sampling of parents that fit the criteria. Ten of the questionnaires were distributed via email, and one was administered through an interview guided by the questionnaire. The survey measured to what extent parents were involved in resolving conflict for their children. A discrepancy in data prompted additional efforts to gain improved insight into the parents' perspectives. Five parents responded to three supplemental questions:

1. How do you define helicopter parenting?
2. Do you think it is effective?
3. How do you think it affects kids? Pros? Cons?

An additional questionnaire (Appendix A) was distributed to educators via email. In a continued effort to acquire an unbiased representation of actual events, a survey was distributed to kindergarten, first-, and second- grade teachers in private and parochial schools. The function of the inquiry was to compare the parents' perspectives to that of those who were less emotionally invested.

Interviews were conducted with the four teachers and a guidance counselor via phone. This process sought to identify a narrative showing both the existence of helicopter parenting and the troubles it creates at the senior high school level. The initial question remained consistent for all five discussions: "Are you concerned with the phenomenon of helicopter parenting? If so,

can you explain how it affects your role as an educator?” Moving forward, each individual’s unique experience drove the direction of the conversation.

Objectives

This project aims to provide accurate information and a deeper understanding of helicopter parenting and its influence on children. The results were analyzed using a grounded theory approach. The identification of emerging patterns provided insight into the implications of this phenomenon. Conclusions were drawn based on the consideration of the key underlying concepts of conflict resolution, behavioral economics, and child development.

Results and Discussion

(See Appendix B for complete breakdown of research)

I. Helicopter Parenting: The Phenomenon

The primary aim of this investigation was to test the hypothesis regarding the effect of helicopter parenting on the development of conflict management skills in children. To do this efficiently, I had first to determine if over-involvement was indeed a standard approach among parents.

Two significant quantitative findings from the parent questionnaire established that helicopter parenting was not a popular style. Eighty-one percent of participants reported that they “let their child resolve his/her own conflicts.” I found this to correlate with the 100% above average rating of their children’s adeptness to handle conflict. The results contradicted the study performed by Segrin et al. and the research done by Hara Marano for her book *A Nation of Wimps* and required further investigation.

At first glance, initial research indicated disapproval of my theory. However, further analysis uncovered significant inconsistency in my findings. The same eighty-one percent that reported they let their child resolve his/her own conflicts also stated they “offer a solution to the problem” when they intervene. In turn, sixty-six percent of the teachers that participated stated their students had below average conflict management capabilities. They explained that “they were not being taught at home.” The interviews with the high school educators further supported the helicopter parenting epidemic. Lauren, a high school math teacher in New York, reported, “*if you are investigating helicopter parenting I could feed you stories all day.*” The

overall willingness to openly discuss the topic combined with the passion the teachers exhibited led me to believe it was an important topic. I heard story after story that spoke to the problematic nature of helicopter parenting. Three illustrative narratives are worth mentioning.

"I have a female student in my 10th-grade class that is probably the most outspoken student I have ever had. She is outgoing, attention seeking and overall disruptive. She does not have a problem speaking out in class. Last term I assigned an oral presentation that accounted for a large chunk of the student's grade. This girl's mom, who ironically was a special ed teacher in another district, demanded a 504 plan for her daughter. The reason, her daughter had "anxiety" and could not speak in front of the class. The 504 plan would exclude her from having to complete the assignment. At that point, my hands are tied, and I have to comply with the parameters of the plan. Stuff like this happens all the time. It is frustrating." Lauren, English, Walworth, New York

"I had a student text his mom, from my class the other day, that he was hungry. Twenty minutes later she showed up at the school with a grinder. He was hungry because he didn't eat breakfast and it was his mother's fault that she didn't wake him up early enough." Chelsea, Chorus, Suffield, Connecticut

"I had a situation recently when I had a student who was tardy to class on a regular basis, and the classroom teacher decided to give him after school detention. The boy refused to go, and the teacher sent him to me. I called the parents to explain the consequences for being tardy and that their son was going to need to stay after. The mother explained the tardiness was entirely her fault and that her son should not be punished. I questioned her and asked how it was her fault when he was late for classes in the middle of the day. She said it just was and her son would not be attending detention." Erin, Guidance, West Springfield, Massachusetts

Despite the discrepancy in findings between the parents' written responses and the teachers' written and verbal responses, an overwhelming amount of data supported the helicopter parenting epidemic. The gaps did, however, bring forth an issue that became evident in the measurement of results: motivational bias.

II. Bias

The investigation into helicopter parenting and its effect on the development of conflict management skills in children uncovered widespread bias among parents. The data showed that the parent participants had the inability or unwillingness to answer some of the questions honestly. For example, one hundred percent of the respondents claimed their child had an above average ability to solve conflict. Yet, surveillance of some of these same children told an entirely different story. The table below represents the initial response of children that were observed as part of this study. There were a total of twelve scenarios.

Initial Reaction to Conflict	
Physical Aggression	20.8%
Verbal Aggression	58.3%
Avoidance	12.5%
Subordination	8.3%

The figures show the children reacted to conflict with either physical or verbal aggression over seventy-eight percent of the time. This created a significant gap between the parents' perceived adeptness and their child's actual ability. The only reasonable explanation for the disparity is motivational bias. The facts of the research demonstrate one's natural desire to provide socially acceptable and self-serving answers. Egocentrism plays a vital role in the parental understanding of conflict resolution ability. Malhotra and Bazerman state that individuals "first decide on a certain interpretation, belief, or outcome that would benefit them- or make them feel good-and then look for ways to justify this preference on the basis of fairness" (130). Motivational bias became more and more prevalent as research analysis continued.

The fifth question on the survey asked parents if they allow their children to handle conflict on their own. Eighty-one percent of participants responded that they did. However, when asked how they would handle the playdate scenario outlined on the questionnaire only one parent mentioned letting the children resolve the conflict on their own. The remaining contributors all offered a step by step account of how they would solve the problem. The data further proved the presence of motivational bias.

Additionally, the response to the supplemental questions illustrated a different mindset on helicopter parenting than initially reported. Eighty-one percent of respondents said they offer a solution when they intervene in their child's conflict. When asked "why," responses ranged from "at his age, I feel like it is my job" to "I try to model problem-solving techniques" to "I usually react and take control of the situation." In this case, the respondents justified their involvement with positive illusions (Malhotra and Bazerman 133). However, when asked if they thought helicopter parenting was effective one hundred percent of respondents answered "no." Their rationalization was that "kids do not learn to be emotionally and physically independent" and "it prevents kids from learning to solve their own problems." Again, safe and socially acceptable replies.

We know that bias affects our reasoning and narrows our thinking. Predisposition blinds us from recognizing other perspectives and makes us resistant to change. "We tend to assume we act rationally. All too often, however, we make irrational choices, even when we have all the necessary information" (Baucells and Weber 29). The evidence collected for this study suggests that parents are vulnerable to bias when probed about helicopter parenting in relation to conflict management. The data retrieved not only speaks to the actual behaviors of the

participants but it offers valuable insight into “the systematic ways that the human mind deviates from rationality”(Malhotra and Bazerman 107).

III. What behaviors are modeled for children?

Parents

One hundred percent of parent participants answered that they had above average ability to solve conflict. The median answer on a scale of 1-10 was 7.72 with a standard deviation of .904. The initial data pointed to a population of parents who could effectively and efficiently problem-solve. However, the scenario examples posted in the questionnaire delivered less than ideal responses. For example, let’s consider the playdate scenario. Six of the respondents said the kids should play both games to be fair and one parent would “toss a coin” to determine which game they played. These alternatives, do in fact, sound like they could be mutually beneficial. However, offering this particular alternative upfront is a mistake. The parents are solving the disagreement for the children. A better approach would be to guide the children through William Ury’s style of joint problem-solving. The first step would be to figure out the interests of each child. Start with questions like “why is it important to you to play soccer?” or “is there something about playing basketball that bothers you?” Uncovering the “why” behind a particular position opens the creative door to problem-solving. To use Ury’s words the purpose of identifying each side’s interest is “not to just divvy up a fixed pie. They first explore how to expand the pie” (Ury 19). From there, parents should guide the conversation so that each child understands the other’s point of view. A leading question might be something like, “Johnny, Mike feels that every time you play basketball, he loses. This makes him feel bad. Can you

understand how he is feeling?” This line of questioning allows each child to separate the person from the problem and truly understand the other’s perspective. The purpose of this is to direct the children to solve the problem together. The behavior that should be modeled for children turns a “face-to-face” confrontation into “side-by-side” problem solving, turning your opponent into a problem-solving partner (Ury 28).

The overconfident friend scenario was another example that verified poor conflict management skills in parents. Three parents talked about “avoiding” the child altogether, and two left the question blank. Five parents did mention talking to their children about how “special” they were and that everyone was “different.” Again, valid attempts but the parents still did not model ideal conflict management technique. Not one respondent mentioned bringing the two children together to communicate feelings, explore underlying interests, and encourage each child to view the situation from the other’s perspective.

The data collected from the parent participants showed ineffective conflict management skills. However, overall the parents had good intentions, and their approach came from a place of warmth and love. The conclusions drawn from this study coincide with the work reviewed previously by Padilla-Walker and Nelson. When discussing helicopter parenting, they reported it was a type of behavioral control, “but with high levels of warmth and support” (1178).

Teachers

The teachers were offered the same two problematic scenarios as the parents. Four of the six teachers handled the recess situation by modeling efficient and effective conflict management skills. They discussed asking the children what “they saw as the problem.” Next, they proposed

guiding the students through the steps of joint problem solving as outlined by Ury. They would only offer a solution “as a last resort.” An additional reassuring and worthwhile comment was, “try to understand the cause [of the behavior]. All behavior comes from somewhere.” An admirable attempt to separate the “people from the problem” (Ury).

Over sixty-six percent of the teachers confirmed training in conflict management. Two training programs were mentioned multiple times, *Second Step* and *Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports*. In turn, the vast majority of respondents acknowledged the use of literature from these two programs to teach conflict management. Overall, the teachers displayed useful and appropriate conflict management ability.

IV. Are children capable problem solvers?

The children observed as part of this study were between the ages of six and eight years old. It is essential to keep in mind that conflict strategies vary due to age, environment, and cultural upbringing. However, the overall goal of the study was to gain an understanding of general interaction and approach. Dramatic play presents an ideal opportunity for intellectual exploration, creativity, curiosity, and general learning (Densmore & Bauman 21). Evaluating children in an environment that was safe and allowed for self-direction and exploration proved valuable.

This study exposed the use of four responses: physical aggression (20.8%), verbal aggression (58.3%), avoidance (12.5%), and subordination (8.3%). A noteworthy observation was that children tend to tailor their reaction to that of their opponents. For example, Aiden was involved in an argument with Preston over a video game. Preston’s immediate response was

physical aggression. He lunged at Aiden, pushed him, and grabbed the game. Aiden responded by tackling him in an attempt to win the game back. Conversely, Aiden was involved in another argument later in the day with Makenzie. They both wanted the same seat at the birthday party. Makenzie ended up stepping aside to allow Aiden to have the seat and almost immediately, Aiden offered the seat to Makenzie. Aiden had opposite reactions to similar disputes. This type of response occurred in a number of scenarios with a variety of children. This finding revealed that conflict resolution, for children in this age group, tended to be dependent on the strategy of the opponent.

Relationships in children five to eight years' old are significant. The children who have the most success at making and keeping friends can bargain and negotiate disputes. Learning this life skill is critical to the child's emotional and social development (Densmore and Bauman 145). The study revealed that the situations in which conflict was successfully terminated included either avoidance or subordination. Neither approach generated a mutually satisfying agreement. The children who used physical and verbal aggression required adult intervention. Twenty-five percent of the conflicts in which adults intervened ended with an equally favorable outcome. The remaining scenarios seemed to benefit one child over the other. The investigation into the adeptness of conflict resolution in children proved useful in understanding the effect of helicopter parenting. The study confirmed children have a less than ideal aptitude for resolving conflict.

Conclusion

Parental control appears to be a risk factor in the development of inadequate conflict management skills in children. Over-involvement limits opportunities in which children can develop social competency. This parenting approach can be particularly detrimental in early adolescence. Quality of experience during this developmentally impressionable period has demonstrated a significant effect on young children's social skills (National Research Council Institute of Medicine 260). This study illustrated the lack of ability to solve conflict by the subjects chosen for this project. It is not surprising that children approaching adulthood still relied on their parents to solve even the simplest of problems. The absence of significant research on the effect of helicopter parenting in relation to the development of conflict management skills in early adolescence establishes the need for further work. Additionally, a study with larger and more diverse sample sizes may be able to predict future behaviors of children raised by helicopter parents.

It was clear that the majority of educators are adequately trained to handle conflict. However, parents continuously model unsuitable conflict management technique. Bias affects parents' social competency, influencing the development of their child's behavior. Out of love and with good intentions, parents monitor their kids' encounters, intervene with their peers, and avoid situations that involve failure or defeat. The persistent intervention followed by poor examples significantly limits experience relevant to the development of a wide range of social skills. The consequences of helicopter parenting are remarkable and present new challenges for educators. Experimental evidence suggests training and coaching parents to appreciate bias

and recognize the influence their behavior has on a developing child would allow for improved conditions that will produce children with effective and efficient conflict management skills.

Recommendations

Even though the findings presented by this study are qualitative and opinion based, the research can serve as a foundation for work dealing with helicopter parenting and for establishing conflict resolution programs. The following is a list of suggestions established by the evidence presented in this investigation.

- Studies have shown that it can be dangerous to rely too heavily on intuition. Even the most intelligent individuals are susceptible to prejudice. The good news? There are strategies to debias our decision making and opinions. Taking an outside view is one of the most practical and useful methods. William Ury describes this as “going to the balcony.” Going to the balcony involves stepping back, collecting your thoughts, and looking at the situation objectively. There are a number of benefits to this approach. Relative to outsmarting bias, “going to the balcony” means distancing yourself from emotions and impulses and looking at the problem or situation from a different perspective (Ury 38). All parents, regardless of preferred approach, could benefit from challenging their thoughts and methods by engaging in strategies to outsmart their partialities. In addition to *Outsmart Your Own Biases* by Jack Soll et al. and *Mind Your Mind Traps* by Manel Baucells and Martin Weber, I highly suggest an article by Kevin Miller titled “How to Fight Your Own Implicit Biases.” The three reports provide valuable insight and advise into bias and how to manage mental shortcuts.
- Fifty-four percent of parent participants reported that their child did not receive conflict management training in school. This is a concerning amount considering children spend more than half of their day in a school environment. The amount of time spent at school

coupled with less than ideal conflict management skills creates an opportunity for education. Eighty-one percent of parent respondents reported that they would be very likely to use children's literature to improve their child's ability to resolve conflict. Those figures illustrate a demand for the material. Based on the information presented, I recommend authors solicit work on this subject for parents and teachers of young children.

- Two teachers from the same district (Enfield, CT) reported that they did not receive formal training in conflict management. I believe this piece of data requires further investigation into the potential opportunity to implement a conflict training program in the district.
- Parents who master the art of negotiation are highly successful in transferring these skills to their children (Densmore and Bauman 145). According to William Ury, successful negotiation has a distinct approach that includes separating the people from the problem, focusing on interests not positions, and joint problem-solving. Positive and appropriate adult intervention to conflict is considered to be an essential piece of a child's development. Children whose parents facilitate and guide them through negotiation are more likely to be socially successful than those that do not (Densmore and Bauman 156). I see a need to create opportunities for education and intervention that promote a healthy approach to conflict resolution.

Limitations and Future Study

Despite the insight, this study did not come without constraints. The limitations of this investigation restrict the conclusions that can be drawn. First, all of the participants lacked cultural and socio-economic diversity. The sample for this study consisted of white, upper to middle class, Christian families. Little is known about the variances between this group and families that fall into different categories.

Second, additional research is needed in examining “why” individuals engage in helicopter parenting. I am inclined to speculate that parents’ behavior is shaped by experience. What drives an individual to hover and overly control their child? Is there a correlation between over-parenting and a critical family environment? This type of questioning presents opportunities to explore this subject from a number of perspectives.

Last, much of the research conducted on helicopter parenting is qualitative and subject to the interpretation of the individual performing the investigation. An exploratory study is open to some variables including, but not limited to, quality of data, training or experience of the researcher, lack of depth, and insufficient samples. Future investigation is needed to authenticate research conducted on this subject.

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Appendix A

Parent Questionnaire

Teacher Questionnaire

Conflict Resolution Questionnaire

Parents

1. On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate your ability to manage conflict in your everyday life?

2. On a scale of 1-10 how well equipped is your child to handle conflict?

3. How do you feel when your child is involved in a conflict with another child?

- Do you think your feelings affect the way you approach the conflict your child is involved in? If yes, briefly explain how.

4. When your child is involved in a conflict with another child how important is it to you to solve the problem quickly?

- ☐ Not important at all
- ☐ Somewhat important
- ☐ Very important

Briefly describe the reason for your answer.

5. I let my child resolve his/her conflicts on their own.

- ☐ True
- ☐ False

If true, could you describe how he/she approaches conflict. If false, is there a reason why?

6. When I intervene, I offer a solution to the problem?

- ☐ True
- ☐ False

Why or why not?

7. Imagine your child is having a playdate and they cannot agree on a game to play. Your child wants to play soccer, and the friend wants to play basketball. Can you briefly explain how you would handle this scenario?

8. You have noticed that your son or daughters best friend is constantly putting him/her down. The friend will do whatever it takes to come out on top regardless of the situation. He/she has to be first, the fastest or the smartest. Your child is suddenly showing signs of self-doubt and lack of confidence. How would you handle this scenario?

9. Does your child receive conflict management training in school? If so, could you describe how?

10. How likely would you be to use children's literature to improve your child's ability to resolve conflict?

- ☐ Not likely at all
- ☐ Very likely

Why or why not?

Child: Male or Female

Age:

Parent completing survey:

Thank you for your participation in this survey. I am extremely grateful for your valuable time and thoughtful responses.

Conflict Resolution Questionnaire

Teachers

1. On a scale of 1-10 how well equipt are your students to handle conflict on their own?

If your answer is below 5, why do you think that is?

2. Imagine two students are arguing over a ball at recess. One wants to play basketball and the other four squares. If the students approached you seeking assistance briefly describe how you would handle this scenario.

3. There is a student in your classroom who will do whatever it takes to come out on top. He constantly has to be first, the fastest or the smartest. You notice that this behavior is having a negative impact on the other students in your room. How would you handle this scenario?

4. When two students are involved in an everyday conflict, like the two described above, how important is it to you to solve the problem quickly? Why or why not?

5. Have you ever been trained to handle conflict?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If you answered yes, please describe your training.

6. Are there specific resources you use to teach conflict management in your classroom? (i.e., books or movies) Please list the resources.

Thank you for your participation in this survey. I am extremely grateful for your valuable time and thoughtful responses.

Appendix B

Summary of Parent Questionnaires

Summary of Teacher Questionnaires

Summary of Teacher Interviews

Summary of Supplemental Parent Questions

Parent Questionnaire: Summary of Data

On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate your ability to manage conflict in your everyday life?	100% of the respondents <u>answered</u> above average - Mean 7.72 - Standard Deviation .904
On a scale of 1-10, how well equipped is your child to handle conflict?	100% of the respondents answered above average - Mean 7 - Standard Deviation 1.18
How do you feel when your child is involved in a conflict with another child?	72.72% answered "protective" 18.18% answered "sad" 9.09% welcomed "conflict"
Do you think your feelings affect the way you approach the conflict your child is involved in?	63.63% answered NO 36.36% answered YES
When your child is involved in a conflict with another child, how important is it to you to solve the problem quickly?	63.63% answered VERY important 9.09% answered NOT important 27.27% answered SOMEWHAT
Briefly describe the reason for your answer.	A sampling of responses from those who answered VERY IMPORTANT: "To avoid stress for my child." "So, it doesn't negatively impact the dynamic." "Solving it quickly makes everyone feel better." Response from those who answered SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT: "It depends on the situation." Response from the parent who answered NOT IMPORTANT: "I am a laid-back parent, no need to rush things."
I let my child resolve his/her conflicts on their own?	81.81% answered TRUE 18.18% answered FALSE
Briefly describe how he/she approaches conflict.	A sampling of responses from those who answered TRUE: - Three answered that their child is an "avoider." - Two answered that their child "gives in." - One parent says her daughter was taught to "kill them with kindness." - Three parents said their child would "talk about feelings." The two parents who replied FALSE: "My child isn't ready to handle conflict on his own, so I implement the gradual release of responsibility model." "I automatically jump in."
When I intervene, I offer a solution to the problem?	81.82% answered TRUE 9.09 answered FALSE 9.09 answered SOMETIMES

Why or Why not?	A sampling of responses from those who answered TRUE: • “I try to model problem-solving techniques.” • “At his age, I feel like it is my job.” • “I usually react and take control of the situation.” The response from the parent who answered FALSE: • “I let him do that on his own.” The response from the parent who answered SOMETIMES: • “It depends on the situation.”
Playdate scenario	• Two parents answered that they would tell them “to find something to do that they could both agree on.” • “Toss a coin.” • Four answered “play both to be fair” but “let the guest choose first.” • “If they can not resolve it on their own tell them the playdate is over.” • “It depends on the other child.” • The remaining four participants did not answer the question directly.
Overconfident friend scenario	• Five parents answered they would talk about how “everyone is different” and that their child was “special” in his/her own way. • Three parents talked about “avoiding” that particular child. • “Explain the concept of insecurity.” • “Help the other child choose kinder words.” • The remaining two participants did not answer the question.
Does your child receive conflict management training in school?	• 54.54% answered NO • 18.18% answered I DON’T KNOW • 18.18% answered YES • The first parent that answered yes mentioned an “acronym” but could not remember it. The other parent talked about a program called the “Bounce Back Bear.”
How likely would you be to use children’s literature to improve your child’s ability to resolve conflict?	• 81.81% answered VERY LIKELY • 18.18% answered NOT LIKELY • The two subjects who reported not likely felt they were capable of teaching their kids conflict management skills without the help of books.

Teacher Questionnaire: Summary of Data

On a scale of 1-10, how well equipped are your students to handle conflict on their own?	• 66.66 % of the respondents answered 5 or below • Mean 5 • Standard Deviation 1.26
If you answered below a 5, why do you think that is?	• "They have a difficult time communicating with their peers." • "Strategies have not been taught or modeled for them." • "They need reminders to use the steps presented by the program." • "I do not feel conflict resolution is taught much at home."
Recess scenario	• "I would do paper, scissors, rocks to see who gets to choose first. Then I would time each game, so they had an even amount of time." • Four of the six teachers surveyed discussed asking the children what "they saw as the problem." From there they would guide them through the steps of joint problem-solving. They would only offer a solution as a last resort. • One teacher suggested she would "split the time in half so they could play both."
Overconfident student scenario	• Two teachers answered that this student most likely lacked "self-confidence" and needed some "self-esteem boosting." • "Try to understand the cause. All behavior comes from somewhere." • "I would look for a book to read to the class. Then I would ask the class how the character made other people feel. After that, I might have a private conversation with the student to discuss his/her behaviors." • Two teachers said they would talk to the student about how he/she makes others feel. The classroom environment must be a place of "respect" and "positive reinforcement."
When two students are involved in an everyday conflict, like the two described above, how important is it to you to solve the problem quickly?	• 83.3% answered IMPORTANT • 16.66% answered SOMEWHAT
Why or why not?	• The teacher that answered somewhat said, "she does not like to jump in too quickly." • The remaining five mentioned that conflict escalates "quickly" and they want to resolve it before it becomes a "bigger issue."
Have you ever been trained to handle conflict?	• 66.66% answered YES • 33.33% answered NO (Both were in the Enfield, CT school district)
If you answered yes, please describe your training.	• Second Step Program www.secondstep.org • Tom McCabe www.paintboxtheater.com • Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports www.PBIS.org • Registered Behavior Technician Training www.BABC.org
Are there specific resources you use to teach conflict management in your classroom?	• Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports www.PBIS.org • Big Day Curriculum https://auth.tgds.hmhco.com/login/bdport/login.php?bffb=N

	• Second Step Program www.secondstep.org • Resources from the Center on Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/ • Literature Examples: <i>Henry and the Bully</i>, <i>Franklin Plays the Game</i>, <i>Franklin is Bossy</i>, <i>Howard B. Wigglebottom Learns to Listen</i>, <i>Have You Filled Your Bucket Today?</i>
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Teacher Interviews: Summary

Lauren High School English Walworth, NY	Excerpt from 1/18/18 interview <i>"I have been a teacher for sixteen years, and I can say without hesitation, regarding the ability to solve conflict, on a scale of one to ten I have more students that are one's than ever before."</i> <i>"If you are investigating helicopter parenting I could feed you stories all day."</i> <i>"I would say about 35% of my students each year are equipped to succeed in society. The rest are not because they continue to be babied by their parents."</i> <i>"I have a female student in my 10th-grade class that is probably the most outspoken student I have ever had. She is outgoing, attention seeking and overall disruptive. She does not have a problem speaking out in class. Last term I assigned an oral presentation that accounted for a large chunk of the student's grade. This girls Mom, who ironically was a special ed teacher in another district, demanded a 504 plan for her daughter. The reason, her daughter had "anxiety" and could not speak in front of the class. The 504 plan would exclude her from having to complete the assignment. At that point, my hands are tied, and I have to comply with the parameters of the plan. Stuff like this happens all the time. It is frustrating."</i>
Chelsea High School Chorus Suffield, CT	Excerpt from 1/18/18 interview <i>"It is amazing, some of the things we see. Kids today are doomed."</i> <i>"I had a student text his Mom from my class the other day that he was hungry. Twenty minutes later she showed up at the school with a grinder. He was hungry because he didn't eat breakfast and it was his mother's fault that she didn't wake him up early enough."</i> <i>"There are two resources that I would recommend the movie Freedom Writers and the book Speak."</i>
Cara High School Math Norwich, CT	Excerpt from 12/26/17 interview <i>"If students have a conflict with other students I rarely know about it. I wonder if they solve it via social media? Maybe they go to the guidance counselor? This brings up another issue that there is very little communication between guidance and the teaching staff."</i> <i>"When students complain about grades if they do not like my explanation I am sure to get a phone call from a parent."</i> <i>"I do notice students gain a tremendous amount of confidence and maturity from freshman to sophomore year."</i>
Erin High School Guidance Counselor	Excerpt from 1/22/18 interview

West Springfield, MA	<i>"You can not even begin to imagine the amount of parent involvement at the High School level. Being in the guidance department, I take the majority of the phone calls."</i> <i>"I had a situation recently when I had a student who was tardy to class on a regular basis, and the classroom teacher decided to give him after school detention. The boy refused to go, and the teacher sent him to me. I called the parents to explain the consequences for being tardy and that their son was going to need to stay after. The mother explained the tardiness was entirely her fault and that her son should not be punished. I questioned her and asked how it was her fault when he was late for classes in the middle of the day. She said it just was and her son would not be attending detention."</i> <i>"The other area where I see a ton of parents overstep is with grades. If a parent does not like the grade, their child received they will call and insist the grade be changed. I would rather see the child advocate for themselves if they questioned a grade."</i> <i>"The other problem I see is parents insisting on testing. I feel like parents are always looking for some excuse if their child does not meet the high standards they have set. Its like instead of owning the fact that maybe a kid didn't work hard enough they immediately take the approach of let's test him, something must be wrong."</i>
Christina High School Math Boxford, MA	Excerpt from 1/25/18 interview <i>"I am a class advisor, and I mediate student-run meetings about things like the prom and other social events. I try to stay out of the discussion and do not get involved unless I have to. I would say their time together is productive. Some students are much more aggressive than others, and they are the ones who tend to get their way."</i> <i>"I have had parents complete homework assignments. That happens almost daily."</i> <i>"If I am honest, I try to avoid parents. Kids in high school are old enough to communicate feelings on their own. Unless the situation is a serious one I deal with the child."</i>

Parental Responses to Supplemental Questions

	How do you define helicopter parenting?	Do you think it is effective?	How do you think it effects kids? Pros? Cons?
Jessica	"Helicopter parents are always hovering within arms reach of a child. Always giving advice and jumping in to solve a problem."	"No"	"I think it prevents kids from learning to solve their own problems and gives them an inflated sense of importance."
Kara	"Helicopter parents do not allow their children to have independence at home, school and social events. They hover."	"No, because the children do not learn how to problem solve."	"It effects them negatively because they are too dependent on their parents."
Shannon	"Helicopter parents do not allow kids to make decisions on their own. They protect them from physical and emotional situations."	"Absolutely not!"	"Negatively, kids do not learn how to be emotionally and physically independent."
Beth	"Helicopter parents pay close attention to the child whether it be at school, the playground or home. Being on top of them constantly monitoring what they do."	"I do not think it is effective. Sometimes you need to let kids be kids."	"I think it can force kids to act up. They may feel smothered and may become defiant. I could force them to place blame on the parents for their actions."
Kate	"Helicopter parenting is when a parent feels that they must do everything they can to protect their child from being harmed. They hover around the child as they play and explore so that they are continually within arm's reach."	"I believe that helicopter parenting may be effective in preventing a child from being harmed in the short term and making the parent feel like they are in control of the situation."	"Helicopter parenting can effect a child's self-confidence. The parent is sending the message that the world is not a safe place and therefore the child may unnecessarily have fears about the world they live in. This kind of parenting may also encourage a child to question their decisions. Children might also rebel from this type of parenting."

Appendix C

Completed Parent Questionnaires

Completed Teacher Questionnaires

Parent Questionnaires

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Teacher Questionnaires

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