



They hover, monitoring  
their kids' every move

# Helicopter Parents

BY LOUISE WATERSON

**S**OON AFTER the London bombings in July 2005, a 15-year-old girl arrived with her parents at the Melbourne clinic of psychologist and family therapist Andrew Fuller. They had been referred by the girl's school counsellor who was concerned she had stopped attending school.

"So," Fuller began, addressing the teenager, "what's led to this?"

"I don't feel safe there any more," she replied. "Mum and Dad have warned me about the dangers of making friends with some of the kids at school. I can't tell who's friendly and who isn't. It's easier if I just stay at home."

The girl's father was quick to ex-

plain: "She's our only daughter and we're worried about who she mixes with. There are so many dangerous types out there." Both parents mentioned terrorism and drink spiking as examples of how frightening the world can be. "We worry about her safety but she doesn't like us following her everywhere," added the girl's father. "She's developed nightmares."

After talking it through with Fuller, the parents came to see that their protectiveness wasn't preparing their daughter for life. It then took six weeks of exercises in learning how to identify trustworthiness in others before the teenager felt reassured enough to return to school. Gradually she has been able to find a small group of

ILLUSTRATION BY MARK ULRIKSEN

friends she feels she can trust again.

Parents have always worried about their children. It's part of the job description. But today we worry more. Many see the world as a frightening, competitive place in which their kids' very survival, let alone success, depends on their constant vigilance. "There's no disputing it – today's parents monitor their own children much more than their own parents ever monitored them," says Michael Grose, one of Australia's leading parenting educators and author of seven books on the subject. "Parents have developed an aversion to letting their kids learn through exploring, for fear of the child making choices, and a wish to make life easy and keep them happy," he explains.

When parents experience such anxiety it can distort their notion of success and wipe out common sense, says Andrew Fuller, also the author of *Raising Real People*. "I see parents who

hover over scenes of disaster, such as parents hover over their children, fearing disaster at every turn. They arm their six-year-old children with mobile phones in case disaster strikes in the school yard, use webcams to assure themselves of their preteens' comfort at overnight camps, pack their free time with more lessons and line up academic coaching sessions to supplement school courses.

Why is this happening? Grose points at least one finger at the media. "The daily bombardment of bad news portrays the world as a dangerous place and parents' natural reaction is to closet their kids," he says.

Sweeping changes in family and community structure may also play a role. The demise of the multigenerational family isolates children from other adults. It also means grandparents and neighbours no longer keep watch over our kids as they walk to the corner shop or ride their bike to a

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friend's house. It's all up to the parents. In all families, parents have hopes and dreams for their children. In smaller families these aspirations are carried by only one or two children. "Parents with three or more children tend to relax about their behaviour and have more perspective," Grose explains. "When there's only one or two

are on an endless quest to maximise their child's potential," he says. "If their child is ranked second in their class, they immediately ask, 'What can I do to make them top of the class?' It's an attitude that's toxic to good childhood."

The hypervigilance noted by Grose and Fuller has spawned the term "helicopter parent." Just as helicopters

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children the focus remains with the parents." The result is that parenting becomes a performance sport, a measure of prowess. If Johnny turns out well, Johnny's mother gets an A. If Johnny does poorly . . . It's no wonder today's parents work so hard to guarantee their children's safety, success and self-esteem.

## The Fear Factor

MORE THAN ANYTHING else, today's parents fear for their kids' physical safety. In parents' minds, the proverbial monster – in the shape of a rusty nail or a child molester – lurks at every corner. Such fears assailed Leah Macpherson when she learned her five-year-old daughter's kindergarten class was scheduled to go on a field trip to see a film in a local cinema. "Parents weren't invited because there was no room on the bus," she says, "and I thought the adult-to-child ratio was too low. I didn't allow my daughter to go. But then I regretted that she missed out."

Even as their children gain in years and maturity, many parents keep constant tabs on their whereabouts. Alison Bjurstrom, a mother of two girls, says she allows her ten-year-old to ride her bike only "three quarters of a block in either direction from our house." As for her 16-year-old, Bjurstrom lets her go to the shopping centre "with much hesitation – and it has to be in a group." And she's not allowed to travel into the city by train. Why? "Because she's

not street-smart." How then will she become street-smart? "Good question," Bjurstrom says sheepishly.

Contrast this child-rearing style with Bjurstrom's own experience as a child. "I was a wild child," she says. "I was always riding my bike, and I started catching buses at seven or eight. The rule was, 'When the street lights come on, it's time to come home.' There wasn't this worry about abductions."

But is the world really a riskier place? The statistics say not so. Between 1985 and 2001, death rates from traffic accidents in Australia fell by just over 50 per cent – despite an increase in vehicles. Childhood deaths from any type of injury have fallen even more dramatically. Over the past 20 years, deaths among Australian boys aged 5-9 years have dropped by 33 per cent, by 53 per cent among boys in the 10-14 age group and 43 per cent among girls aged 1-9 years. The overall crime rate in Australia has fallen steadily since 2000. While certainly not free of risk, the world today poses fewer physical dangers to our children than it did ten or 20 years ago. But many parents clearly think otherwise.

## Bringing Up Einstein

ALONG WITH SAFETY, today's parents worry about their children's futures in what they perceive as an intensely competitive world. Facing this pressure, they often see it as their job to

oversee Johnny's homework, sometimes sacrificing their limited free time to the cause.

Take Sydney caterer and mother of three school-aged kids Amanda Lockyer, who every night spends at least an hour helping them with homework. "My 13-year-old son, Harry, is in Year 8 at a private school. His homework can take up to two hours a night," says Lockyer. "I tend to monitor how he's going - in case he needs any help or his attention wanders."

But it's exam time that Lockyer finds the most stressful. "Other parents we know cancelled everything over the weekends leading up to the exams so their boys could concentrate on revising," says Lockyer. In response, Lockyer drew up a study timetable for Harry. Each night in the month prior to the exams she added 30 minutes' revision to his usual homework. "I'm hoping this will teach him to manage his time better in later years," she says. "I know it's only going to get harder."

Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, a psychology professor and co-author of the book *Einstein Never Used Flash Cards*, takes issue with the current tendency of parents to "take over."

"Research has shown that a perfectionistic environment makes kids nervous and anxious," she says. Not only that, but insisting on perfectly completed homework "deprives kids of the essential experience of making mistakes and learning from them."

Hirsh-Pasek also questions the notions that we need to "fill up" our

kids. "Kids are not just vessels, they're explorers," she says. "We would do well to remember that kids learn through play."

As teachers know all too well, however, many of today's parents find it hard to give up control. Angela Rossmanith, writer, ex-educator and author of the bestselling *When Will the Children Play?* acknowledges that parental involvement and support helps with a child's schooling - up to a point. All too often, Rossmanith says, "teachers are frustrated that parents don't trust them to get on with the job." And as for the children, "they can feel suffocated." When parents are constantly hovering around school, children "can feel anxious about being watched and can feel pressured by the expectation that this interest creates."

## Don't Worry, Be Happy

MOST PARENTS want their kids to be happy with themselves - to have high self-esteem. Nothing wrong with that, of course. A problem arises when parents can't tolerate their kids' sadness even temporarily and feel compelled to step in and make it go away.

Stephanie Maestri,\* a mother of two young girls, pleads guilty in this regard. On one occasion, her eight-year-old daughter, Amber,\* was looking forward to a play date that got cancelled at the last minute.

"She was crying," says Maestri, "so

\* Some names have been changed.

I went around the playground, desperately trying to find a pal to come over and play with her. I found another girl and got her into the car, but Amber was still upset and didn't

kids a disservice by "wrapping them in cotton wool." The best way to prevent kids from being bullied is to give them the space to develop self-reliance. Rossmanith agrees. "Being overpro-

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even want this girl over. I could tell the play date wasn't going to work, so I ended up driving the girl home and apologising to her mother."

Maestri says the experience taught her a valuable lesson. "Rushing in prematurely doesn't make the hurt go away - it just makes it worse."

Fran Kammermayer, a certified family educator, understands the temptation to step in when our children get hurt. "We feel their hurt, too," she says simply. But we need to remember that "always stepping in prevents our kids from developing the skills to get over their sadness." When we allow kids to sit with their sad feelings, "they learn the valuable lesson that life is full of grey areas. Kids tend to see things in black and white: 'If my friend Sarah snaps at me, she must be a bad person.' The reality is that she may be snappy because she has a stomachache or a sick pet."

Our insistence that our kids be happy at all times may lead us to cry "bully" every time they get their feelings hurt. While applauding today's heightened awareness of bullying, Kammermayer says parents do their

protective can make some children more vulnerable to bullying," she says. "They lose the opportunity to develop their own initiative if their parents are always stepping in and fighting their battles."

Compulsively protecting children from their own sadness may also hamper their resilience as adults. "A university professor I met recently told me she has students bursting into tears and asking for extensions on term paper deadlines because their boyfriend broke up with them," says Kammermayer. In some cases, "it's the parents who are sending the notes [requesting extensions]. These parents are teaching their children that they're not strong enough to function when they're unhappy."

## Recipe for Sanity

STUFF HAPPENS. It's rare, but kids sometimes do get seriously hurt or traumatised. So where do we draw the line between protecting and overprotecting our kids? "There's a simple rule,"

RD | FEBRUARY 2006

says Fuller. "Try not to do things for your child that they could do for themselves."

To make an informed decision, Grose suggests you arm yourself with the facts. "When you don't know anything you fear it – so find out the real risks of your child surfing the internet and help them identify the dangers," he says.

Along with the facts and figures, you need also to consider your own child's temperament and maturity. Karen Jones, a Hobart travel agent and mother of two school-aged children and a toddler, lets her nine-year-old son, Oliver, walk the ten minutes to school and sports practice as well as run errands for her to the local shops. "He started asking for more independence last year," explains Jones. "He has to cross a busy road, but we walked him through it once and he knows to use the pedestrian lights." Jones also pointed out the safety houses along the way – should he ever need help. "Oliver is reliable," she says, "and has a good sense of direction."

Not all nine-year-olds are like Oliver, of course, and no family is quite like your own. But if parenting has become more stressful than joyful for you, if you suspect your anxious hovering is clipping your kids' wings, Fuller suggests you consider the price you – and your kids – may be paying. "Placing pressure on your kids to achieve what you want for them can only backfire."

The bond between you and your spouse may also suffer, warns Grose. "It's a couple's role to raise kids but lack of confidence and pressure to get it right can create tension and conflict in a marriage. I believe a lot of parents today have their priorities all wrong. You're a person, partner and parent last."

Finally, Grose exhorts us to revisit some of our notions of success. "Too much value is placed on productive activities that have measurable outcomes. Perhaps parents need to remember that having a happy and contented child is the greatest achievement of all."

#### SET UP

Convalescing at home after surgery, I answered the phone to hear an old lady with a quavering voice say that she had heard I'd been in hospital and that she hoped I was feeling better.

She said her name was Mrs McGillicuddy, and that she knew me many years ago. "But you wouldn't remember me," she added. "Has your husband been helping you?"

"He's wonderful," I replied. "He's been doing the washing and cleaning. He's a darling." There was a chuckle on the phone – and only then did I realise that my husband had been imitating that little old lady.

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