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Meddling parents ruin own health

By Sue Shellenbarger
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The fact that overinvolved parents can cause problems for their kids is well-known. Now, new research shows they can drive themselves nuts, too.

In one of the first studies of this mental-health issue among parents, researchers found that parents who base their own self-worth on their children's accomplishments - as measured by their answers to such questions as, "My daughter's failure can make me feel ashamed" - have worse mental health than those who base their self-worth on other factors. Often called "helicopter parents" (they hover), these overinvolved moms and dads reported more sadness, crying and negative beliefs about themselves and less joy, contentment and life satisfaction, says the study of 408 parents, released April 7 at a conference of the Society for Research in Child Development in Atlanta.

Worse yet, there's no upside: Parents whose children did well, as measured by their college grades, showed no improvement in well-being, says Missa Murry Eaton of Pennsylvania State University, Sharon, Pa., who co-wrote the study with fellow psychologist Eva Pomerantz of the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Instead, they continued to score lower than the other parents on measures of mental health. Apparently, Eaton says, the ever-present threat of a child's failure looms so large that it blots out any joy over the successes.

Parental overinvolvement has increased markedly in the past 20 years, says Peter N. Stearns, provost of George Mason University in Fairfax, Va., and author of a 2003 book, "Anxious Parents: A History of Modern Child-Rearing in America" (pictured above). He cites a competitive frenzy over school success; guilt over mothers working, and growing parental distrust of schools and media as an influence on kids. Although there are benefits, including parents' spending more time with their kids, Stearns says, the emotional bottom line for parents isn't pretty: Parental worry and dissatisfaction is up sharply, he says, based on his own study of parent polls, sociological research and child-rearing materials.

In Eaton's study, 20 percent of the parents were found to base their own self-worth on their children's performance. Although "all parents feel bad when their children don't do well," Eaton says, only overinvolved parents "feel bad about themselves."

Most parents keep such worries under wraps.

"You don't talk about this with people," says a New York human-resources manager and mother of two teenagers who admits to waking up in the night, stressed out over her daughter's performance in dancing. But "when your child doesn't achieve something, you sit and think, “Omigod, is this a reflection on me? Is it that I'm not smart enough, or I'm not talented enough? Am I inferior because she's not the star?'

The hazards of basing your self-worth on external factors, such as others' judgments, were documented in a 2001 study of 1,300 students, co-authored by the University of Michigan's Jennifer Crocker. The study found that looking for your self-worth in others fosters more intense and volatile emotions in general - higher highs and lower lows.

The focus is shifting now to parents, particularly at stages of kids' lives when hyper-competition surfaces, such as joining youth sports, or applying for college. For the first time, the National Association for College Admission Counseling will offer a panel discussion on "College Admissions as a Mental Health Issue" at its annual conference next fall, with a heavy emphasis on parents.

Many overinvolved parents have good intentions. Bob Nemec, who had little time as a child with his own father because his dad worked three jobs, says that to fill that void, he sometimes gets too involved with his own two sons, 13 and 8.

"When your kids hurt, you hurt twice as bad," says the Glen Ellyn, Ill., sales representative. If his older son, who plays on a traveling baseball team, gets criticized by a coach, Nemec feels sad and protective, remembering his own childhood. "When things don't go his way or he's 0 for 4 or there's a day when he's benched, I'm thinking about that quite a bit. It does get me in a little bit of a fog ... hyperfocused on his issues," Nemec says.

Some warning signs of helicopter parenting: You fall into a lasting funk when your child doesn't perform at expected levels, and enjoyment of other aspects of life slips away, says Richard Chaifetz, CEO of ComPsych, Chicago, a provider of employee-assistance services. Preoccupation with the details of a child's activities, practices, schedules and performances is another sign, says Chaifetz, a neuropsychologist.

If you hear yourself starting sentences about your child with "we," as in, "We're applying to Harvard," you're over the edge, says Scott White, a high-school college counselor in Montclair, N.J.

The remedy: Practice focusing on something else, such as hobbies or sports. And consider getting counseling to improve your own self-regard.

In the past, Beth Hauser became so distressed when one of her two sons called her at work about a problem or setback that co-workers would ask, "What's wrong with you?" she says. Anxiety "weighs on my heart and shows on my face," she says. When her older son auditioned for a magnet performing-arts school, "I made myself physically ill" with headaches and stomach pain.

Over time, the Deerfield Beach, Fla., human-resource manager saw how her overinvolvement undermined her son's self-confidence. She has learned to detach and let her children, now 13 and 18, fail and face consequences. That fosters self-reliance, and she feels better too. Detaching "is not easy, but important," she says. "After all . this is not about me."