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Putting Parents In Their Place: Outside Class

Too Much Involvement Can Hinder Students' Independence, Experts Say

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They are needy, overanxious and sometimes plain pesky -- and schools at every level are trying to find ways to deal with them.

No, not students. Parents -- specifically parents of today's "millennial generation" who, many educators are discovering, can't let their kids go.

They text message their children in middle school, use the cellphone like an umbilical cord to Harvard Yard and have no compunction about marching into kindergarten class and screaming at a teacher about a grade.

To handle the modern breed of micromanaging parent, educators are devising programs to help them separate from their kids -- and they are taking a harder line on especially intrusive parents.

At seminars, such as one in Phoenix last year titled "Managing Millennial Parents," they swap strategies on how to handle the "hovercrafts" or "helicopter parents," so dubbed because of a propensity to swoop in at the slightest crisis.

Educators worry not only about how their school climates are affected by intrusive parents trying to set their own agendas but also about the ability of young people to become independent.

"As a child gets older, it is a real problem for a parent to work against their child's independent thought and action, and it is happening more often," said Ron Goldblatt, executive director of the Association of Independent Maryland Schools.

"Many young adults entering college have the academic skills they will need to succeed but are somewhat lacking in life skills like self-reliance, sharing and conflict resolution," said Linda Walter, an administrator at Seton Hall University in New Jersey and co-chairman of the family portion of new-student orientation.

Educators say the shift in parental engagement coincides with the rise of the millennial generation, kids born after 1982.

"They have been the most protected and programmed children ever -- car seats and safety helmets, play groups and soccer leagues, cellphones and e-mail," said Mark McCarthy, assistant vice president and dean of student development at Marquette University in Milwaukee. "The parents of this generation are used to close and constant contact with their children and vice versa."

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Academics say many baby boomer parents have become hyperinvolved in their children's lives for numerous reasons. There is the desire to protect youngsters from a tougher and more competitive culture. And there is the symbolic value of children.

"It was just about 20 years ago that we started seeing those yellow 'Baby on Board' signs in cars, which arguably had little to do with safety and a lot to do with publicly announcing one's new status as a parent," said Donald Pollock, chairman of the Department of Anthropology at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

"I imagine that parents who displayed those 'Baby on Board' signs are the ones who are now intruding themselves into the college experience of those poor babies 18 years later," he said.

"There are a lot of things I can't control," said one Bethesda mother who asked not to be identified because, she said, her daughter would be mortified. "Terrorists, the environment. But I can control how my daughter spends her day."

Teachers and principals in the early grades began noticing changes in parents in the 1990s. Parents began spending more time in classrooms. Then they began calling teachers frequently. Then came e-mails, text messages -- sometimes both at once. Today schools are trying to figure out how to take back a measure of control.

Some parents who once had unlimited access to classrooms or school hallways are being kicked out, principals say. Teachers are refusing to meet with parents they consider abusive, some say. A number of private schools have added language in their enrollment contracts and handbooks warning that a student can be asked to leave as a result of a parent's behavior. Some have tossed out children because their parents became too difficult to work with.

College officials say they, too, are trying to find ways to handle ubiquitous parents. Freshmen orientations incorporate lessons for parents on how to separate and let their children make their own hair appointments.

At Colgate University in Hamilton, N.Y., for example, administrators issue parents the university's philosophy on self-reliance when they drop off their children, spokeswoman Caroline Jenkins said.

Colgate administrators also send out a memo to department heads at the beginning of each semester reiterating that "we will not solve problems for students because it robs students of an opportunity to learn."

The Parent Program at Alma College in Michigan takes a comprehensive approach at orientation, complete with scripts that allow parents to role-play. A problem is presented and parents are asked, "Tell me what you've done already to solve this problem," said Patricia Chase, director of student development.

The answer often should be nothing, but inevitably parents offer lots of somethings.

"Our aim is not to tell parents to let go completely because, of course, parents want to be an integral part of their children's entire lives," said Walter of Seton Hall, where orientation includes sessions for parents and students -- both separately and together. "Rather, it is to discuss how to be involved in their children's lives, while allowing their children to learn the life skills they will need to succeed in college and beyond."

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