Donald Pollock
It’s aggressive, demanding interference

The latest report of the National Survey of Student Engagement found that the roughly one-third of students who had had some level of intervention from parents in their college experience were more likely than other students to report satisfaction with college. No problem there; we expect and hope for parental involvement in dealing with student difficulties, whether financial or academic. Parental intervention is sometimes essential.

What is problematic are the intrusive forms of intervention that some parents engage in more and more often, if anecdotal reports are to be believed. Too often parental intervention escalates into aggressive and demanding interference.

It’s hard to find a faculty member who isn’t familiar with the kind of incident that happened to me recently: a nasty letter from a mother, complaining that we had deceived her daughter about the requirements of our program. We hadn’t, but she didn’t want to hear that. What kind of lesson did this student learn about problem solving and self-reliance, especially over a relatively trivial issue? One of my colleagues had a visit from the father of another student taking her intro course; he berated this distinguished professor for failing to appreciate his son’s many talents, and was even mildly threatening. We’re pretty certain that the father (a retired faculty member!) wrote the term paper that the kid later submitted with a taunting challenge to prove that he had not written it. Frankly, in such cases I struggle to be concerned about whether these students have enjoyed their college experience.

Naturally, parents want to help their children when problems arise. But some ways to help are better than others. “Helicoptering” too often denies students the opportunity for emotional growth and development of independence that this transitional period has traditionally provided. And parental interference denies college faculty and officials the prerogative of managing the process and content of education; it’s a challenge to the authority of educators on a par with home schooling, No Child Left Behind, and the prerogative of managing the process and content of education; it’s a challenge to the authority of educators on a par with home schooling, No Child Left Behind, and the American Council of Trustees and Alumni.

We could see it coming. Twenty years ago those “Baby on Board” signs started announcing just a little too great a sense of satisfaction in being a parent. A few years later Little League dads redefined “slugger,” and high school cheerleader moms were turning up in crime reports. Now that their kids are in college, they’ve become the helicopter parents. Can this possibly be a good thing? Certainly not if you’re a college instructor or official; probably not if you’re a student. And did I mention that those happy one-third of students in the NSSE report got significantly lower grades than their more independent peers?

George D. Kuh
Their children study and interact more

For students right out of high school, college historically was considered a “breaking away” experience, an opportunity to manage one’s own affairs independent of one’s family. Whereas 20 years ago a weekly phone call home may have been the norm, the 2007 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) findings show that seven of 10 students today communicate very often with a parent or guardian. Most of this contact is via an electronic medium—phone, e-mail or text messaging. In addition, three-quarters of the students surveyed said they frequently followed their parent or guardian’s advice.

Is so much contact problematic? So-called helicopter parents are said to hover over and insinuate themselves into certain aspects of their student’s college life. More than 9,000 students at 24 colleges and universities answered questions on the NSSE about their parent’s involvement. Of this group, 10 percent of first-year college students and 7 percent of seniors had, by our definition, a helicopter parent or guardian, meaning that they were very often in contact with the student and often intervened on his or her behalf.

Surprisingly, students with helicopter parents engaged more often in educationally purposeful activities; that is, they studied more and interacted more in substantive ways with faculty and peers. Although many had lower grades than their counterparts, they reported gaining more on a host of desired college outcomes and were more satisfied overall with the college experience. Another mild surprise was that educational level did not differentiate helicopter parents from other parents; that is, those without college degrees were just as likely to intervene as those who had been to college themselves.

Does this mean more parents should approach college officials on their student’s behalf? No. While helicopter parents on average do not seem to disadvantage their student, there are many students with highly involved family members who score much lower on the measures we used. And other important questions remain unanswered. What types of interventions are problematic? Do some students with hovering parents receive undeserved special treatment? Is there a tipping point—a level of contact and family involvement in their student’s college life that negatively affects development and learning?

Students today are more closely connected to their families than their predecessors. This high level of interaction is a pattern that started long before the students entered college. The key challenge is for faculty and staff to figure out how to work productively with both students and families in order to maximize the desired effects of college while allowing family members to support and encourage their student to perform at the highest possible level.

Donald Pollock is a professor of anthropology at the State University of New York at Buffalo and a member of the United University Professions/AFT.