Helicopter Parents: Examining the Impact of Highly Involved Parents on Student Engagement and Educational Outcomes

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Helicopter Parents

- Perception by student affairs, promoted in popular media, that some highly-involved parents hover over their student in ways that could interfere with learning and development.

Characteristics
- In constant contact with student
- Closely monitor educational experience
- “Swoop” in to solve problems

Parental Involvement Research

K-12 Research
- PI is widely accepted as critical to a student’s intellectual and emotional development, and academic success
- Partnerships, overlapping spheres of influence among schools, parents, and community
- Mixed findings on academic achievement
- PI promotes persistence in school, and student attitudes and behaviors about their learning (i.e., engagement)
- PI declines as children get older, but is particularly emphasized during college preparation and choice processes

Postsecondary Research
- PI has positive impact on alcohol decision-making, health issues, and career development
- PI positively associated with persistence
- Retention models
- Student development theory

Several trends contribute to observed increases in parental involvement, including:
- Demise of in loco parentis
- Consumerism
- Accountability
- Technology
- Millennials

Emphasizing Partnerships
Research Questions

What is the frequency and nature of college students’ communication with their parents?

What effect do interventions by highly involved parents have on student engagement, learning and development during college?

Data Source

- National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)
- 2007 administration
- Annual survey of college students at four-year institutions that measures students’ participation in educational experiences that prior research has connected to valued outcomes
- In 2007, NSSE tested 71 items that addressed the support students receive from friends and family

Sample

- 4,532 first-year and 4,652 seniors from 24 selected institutions
  - Female (65% First-year, 65% Senior)
  - White (81% First-year, 83% Senior)
  - Full-time (98% First-year, 91% Senior)
  - First-generation (45% First-year, 46% Senior)
  - On-campus (82% First-year, 53% Senior)

- Questions administered as part of the online version of survey

Measures: Parental Involvement

- Component 1 – Did Student report they are “very often” in contact in-person or electronically with a father, mother or guardian?
- Component 2 – Did student report their parents or guardians “very often” or “often” contact college officials to help solve problems they are having at the college?

Comparison Groups

- High Parental Involvement (8%) – Yes to both 1 and 2
- Moderate Parental Involvement (64%) – Yes to 1 or 2
- Low Parental Involvement (28%) – No to both 1 and 2

Measures: Student Engagement

- Student-Faculty Interaction (6 items; $\alpha = 0.75$)
- Supportive Campus Environment (6 items; $\alpha = 0.77$)
- Higher-order Learning (4 items; $\alpha = 0.83$)
- Integrative Learning (5 items; $\alpha = 0.71$)
- Reflective Learning (3 items; $\alpha = 0.80$)

Measures: Educational Outcomes

- Gains in Practical Competence (5 items; $\alpha = 0.81$)
- Gains in Personal and Social Develop. (7 items; $\alpha = 0.86$)
- Gains in General Education (4 items; $\alpha = 0.84$)
- Self-Reported Grades
- Satisfaction (2 items; $\alpha = 0.77$)
Impact of Helicopter Parents
Bob Gonyea & Rick Shoup

Analyses

- Descriptive
  - Overall frequencies on type, nature, and quality of contact
  - Mean comparisons on the frequency, nature and quality of contact by level of parental involvement
  - Mean comparisons on student engagement and self-reported educational outcomes
- Regression
  - Effect sizes with and without controls, with high parental involvement group as comparison
- Separate analyses were conducted for First-year and Senior samples

Controls

- Gender
- Age
- Ethnicity
- Parent’s Education Level
- International Status
- Transfer Status
- Enrollment Status
- Live on Campus
- Fraternity or Sorority Membership
- Student Athlete
- Major
- Private vs. Public Institution

Results - Frequency of Contact

- Most college students reported regular contact with their parents, with 7 of 10 communicating “very often”.
- Students were in contact with mothers more often than fathers.
- All topics more frequently discussed with mothers, with personal issues, academic performance and family matters most common. Academic performance most common topic discussed with fathers.
- Relatively few students reported parents were unsupportive, with an average rating of 6 on 7-point scale.
- About three-quarters of all students reported frequently following the advice of their parents and guardians.
- Understandably, students of highly involved parents reported more frequent contact on all topics. They also reported higher levels of support quality and were more likely to follow the parental advice.

Results – Engagement and Outcomes

Students with highly-involved parents reported:

- Significantly higher levels of student engagement on all five measures
- Significantly greater gains in personal competence, personal and social development and in general education
- Significantly greater satisfaction with their educational experience
- Significantly lower self-reported grades

Effect Sizes – First-Year Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Student-Faculty Involvement</th>
<th>Supportive Campus Environment</th>
<th>Higher-Order Learning</th>
<th>Integrative Learning</th>
<th>Reflective Learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moderate Inv.</td>
<td>-0.56</td>
<td>-0.43</td>
<td>-0.47</td>
<td>-0.46</td>
<td>-0.39</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low Inv.</td>
<td>-0.30</td>
<td>-0.20</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Effect Sizes – Senior Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Student-Faculty Involvement</th>
<th>Supportive Campus Environment</th>
<th>Higher-Order Learning</th>
<th>Integrative Learning</th>
<th>Reflective Learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moderate Inv.</td>
<td>-0.32</td>
<td>-0.32</td>
<td>-0.22</td>
<td>-0.20</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low Inv.</td>
<td>-0.52</td>
<td>-0.52</td>
<td>-0.46</td>
<td>-0.31</td>
<td>-0.26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Effect Sizes – First-Year Outcomes**

- Practical Competence Gains
  - Low Inv.: 0.17
  - Moderate Inv.: 0.12
- Personal & Social Gains
  - Low Inv.: -0.16
  - Moderate Inv.: -0.22
- General Education Gains
  - Low Inv.: -0.18
  - Moderate Inv.: -0.16
- Satisfaction
  - Low Inv.: -0.08
  - Moderate Inv.: -0.05
- Grades
  - Low Inv.: -0.28
  - Moderate Inv.: -0.12

**Effect Sizes – Senior Outcomes**

- Practical Competence Gains
  - Low Inv.: 0.17
  - Moderate Inv.: 0.16
- Personal & Social Gains
  - Low Inv.: -0.30
  - Moderate Inv.: -0.07
- General Education Gains
  - Low Inv.: -0.11
  - Moderate Inv.: -0.11
- Satisfaction
  - Low Inv.: -0.56
  - Moderate Inv.: -0.57
- Grades
  - Low Inv.: -0.28
  - Moderate Inv.: -0.28

**Discussion**

- **Frequency and nature of PI**
  - Student interaction with parents while in college is frequent.
  - Topics discussed with parents were diverse.
  - Parents and families continue to be an important support network for students.

**Discussion**

- **Effects of high involvement**
  - Parental involvement is associated with higher levels of engagement and self-reported gains in college.
  - High parental involvement is associated with lower grades.
  - Results show no evidence that high parental involvement is problematic for students.

**Implications**

- Though the positive effects on engagement are observed, more research is needed to test whether PI is associated directly with achievement outcomes.
- Sweeping generalizations about students (e.g., “Millennials”) and parents (e.g., “Helicopters”) may not be useful for promoting student learning and development.
- Partnerships: Colleges and universities should explore creative ways to leverage the involvement of parents for the enhanced learning and development of their students.

**For More Information**

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Copies of the paper available on our website at: nsse.iub.edu