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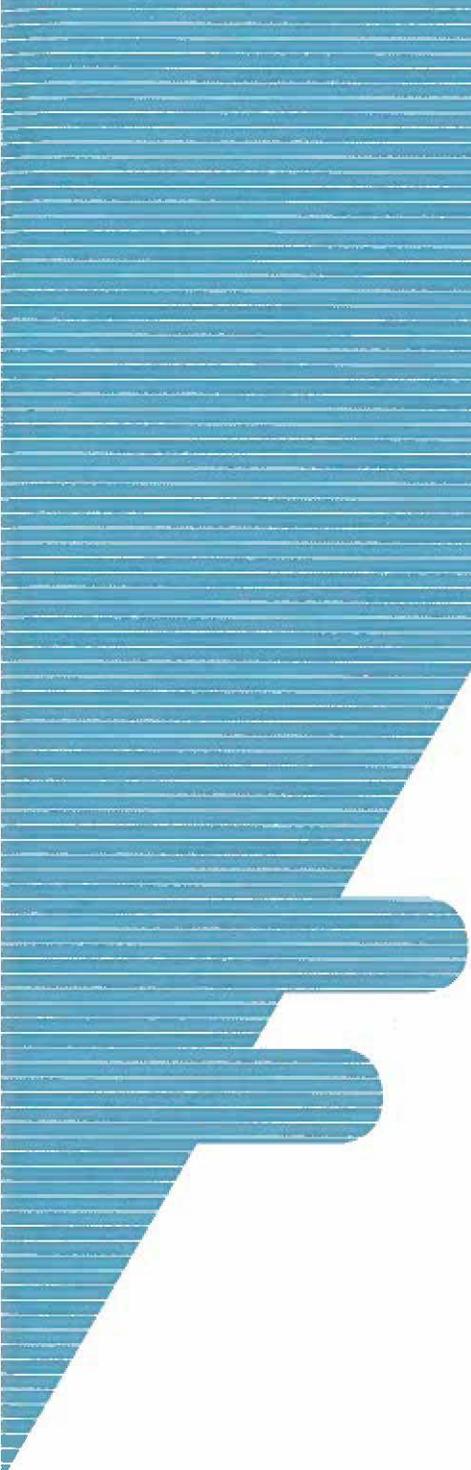
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THREE STEPS FOR DEALING WITH HELICOPTER PARENTS

Learn a three-step process for successfully collaborating with overly involved parents.

BY NEIL MCNERNEY, EMILY GOODMAN SCOTT, & JENNIFER L. SCOTT

The over-protective parent. The helicopter parent. The pushy parent. There are many terms to describe overly involved parents. These parents hover over their children, watching their every move, preventing and solving their children's problems. These parents may insist the kindergarten class replace recess for an extra math lesson, lobby that their children skip a grade because they are "gifted," make excuses for their children not completing homework assignments, request their children move to another class to be with their friends, give teachers pointers on their teaching, expect school staff to respond to e-mails within the hour. The list seems to go on.

School counselors may be tempted to see overly involved parents as their opponents. We can become burned out

trying to accommodate these parents or resentful of their constant requests. Let's take a look at three strategies to successfully collaborate with overly involved parents in your school and, ultimately, to better meet your students' needs. Consider the hypothetical case of Carson's mom.

Carson's mom is an overly involved parent of a student in your school. Carson's mom has requested a meeting with you and is worried about Carson reaching his full academic potential.

Step 1. Decrease Parental Anxiety

When meeting with Carson's mom, the first step is to decrease her anxiety. Parents want their children to be safe and successful, which are healthy aspirations. Although some parental anxiety is healthy, too much anxiety can create

LEARN

more at the authors' session,
"Just Calm Down," at the ASCA
Annual Conference in Seattle,
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overly involved parents like Carson's mom, who strive for the unreachable – being the ideal parent who raises the ideal child. These parents act out of their anxiety, fear and guilt, which can create stifled and dependent children.

LISTEN AND VALIDATE. When people feel anxious, the rational part of their brain shuts off, and they can turn into creatures of instinct who heavily rely on fight, flight or freeze responses. Thus, the first step in collaborating with overly involved parents is decreasing immediate anxiety or threats. When Carson's mom comes to you with a problem, listen to her, and let her vent. Validate her feelings, normalize those feelings, and let her know you are on her side, not fighting against her. Once her stress level decreases, she will be better able to engage in a rational, problem-solving discussion.

FOCUS ON PARENTAL STRENGTHS. Overly involved parents often are insecure. Many times these parents aim to be the Super Parent and do it all. When they fall short of perfection, they feel guilt and anxiety. Thus, Carson's mom needs to focus inward, to acknowledge her strengths. Focus on Carson's mom's strengths, and tell her what she is doing well. "You are a giving mother who believes in your son and sees his potential. Carson is lucky to have a parent who supports and encourages him."

Don't underestimate the power these words, when genuinely expressed, have on parents. Parents rarely hear they have done a good job.

INVITE INVOLVEMENT. Overly involved parents typically want to be active in their child's school community. Take advantage of this, and put their energy to good use. Ask them to help you with an upcoming program

or to sit on your advisory council. By inviting Carson's Mom to get involved, you are creating an ally and making her feel welcome.

INITIATE POSITIVE COMMUNICATION. These type of parents like to be kept in the loop. Instead of only talking to Carson's mom when there is a concern, proactively communicate with her when Carson does well or when her volunteering efforts were successful.

Step 2. Communicate to Empower Students

Language is powerful. It is crucial to communicate in a way that places responsibility on the student, not the parent.

COMMUNICATE PARENTS' RESPONSIBILITIES. Empowering language sets the expectation that students are responsible for their own actions; parents should not be blamed or held responsible for their child's schoolwork. Rather than blaming Carson's mom for Carson's incomplete homework, you can remind Carson's mom of her responsibility in the homework process: to provide the supplies, space and time needed; to offer support without taking over; and to allow natural consequences to occur. For example, if Carson leaves his textbook at school, he will not have access to his textbook that night.

COMMUNICATE STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES. Next time you are in a parent-teacher conference, model the following messages to parents:

Don't say, "Have you been checking Carson's grades via his class Web site?"

Do say, "We have found it is beneficial for students to show parents their grades online at least once a week. Is this something you could do with Carson?"

Students should be active participants in writing down their assignments and checking their class Web sites. When parents do it for them, students tend to get complacent about doing it themselves. It is appropriate for Carson to check his nightly homework assignments online, while his mom supervises. It is not appropriate for Carson's mom to check the Web site on her own and to remind Carson of his assignments.

Don't say, "Please look through Carson's agenda nightly, and remind him to complete his homework."

Do say, "Let's help Carson learn to utilize his agenda more effectively and increase his independence. I suggest it be Carson's responsibility to initiate showing you his agenda and completed homework. Once Carson has been successful for a few weeks, you can check his agenda less and less and turn that responsibility over to him as he earns it."

Students often rely on their memory, and as a result, they may not write down assignments in their agenda. Instead of micromanaging Carson on his agenda use, his mom can help Carson form good organizational habits while still giving Carson responsibility. Since it is Carson's responsibility to initiate the agenda-checking process with his mom, he maintains some independence. At the same time, Carson's mom is able to help teach him good organizational habits. It is important that as Carson becomes successful in his agenda use, his mom decreases her involvement so Carson can learn independence.

Don't say, "By working together, I'm confident we will be able to bring Carson's grades up by the end of the marking period."

Do say, "By supporting Carson in the ways discussed, I'm confident he will be able to bring his grades up by the end of the marking period."

Encourage parents and teachers to avoid using words like "we" or "our" when talking about a child's schoolwork. Gently remind Carson's mom that her child is in school, not her.

REMEMBER THE BIG PICTURE. As parents, school counselors and educators, our role is to prepare children to be successful adults who make good decisions. Remind parents of the long-term vision. "We are preparing Carson to make good choices as an adult; this starts with Carson making good choices as a child. How can we help Carson learn to make good choices now?"

Step 3. Reinforce Healthy Parent Boundaries

We recently asked a group of seventh-grade students what they would like

their parents to do differently. Typical responses included, "Don't remind me every five minutes about my homework." "Let me take care of my own schedule." "Help me only when I ask for it."

Students want to be successful on their own; they want firmer boundaries between themselves and their parents.

On the other hand, overly involved parents may think just the opposite: "Kids these days need more boundaries." As a school counselor, you can help parents think about boundaries in a new light.

Here is the idea to communicate to Carson's mom: "You can only put boundaries around one person. You."

CHOICES AND CONSEQUENCES. When we try to put boundaries around others, we often fail, especially with students who don't like to be controlled. So where does that leave us? It leaves us with a simple process. If you have ever taken computer programming classes, you might remember the if-then concept. This concept states that if one thing happens, then something else will happen. For every action, there is specific consequence.

Consider Carson's mom saying these statements: If you do your homework, then you can use your cell phone. If you show me your completed assignment, then you can watch TV.

In these examples, Carson's mom is putting a boundary around her own actions not Carson's actions. She is saying, "If you do ____, then I will do ____." Every time. No exceptions. No ifs, ands or buts. No badgering or reminding. She is giving Carson a choice and also communicating the consequences of his actions. She is giving Carson the opportunity to make successful and independent choices.

Of course this is easier said than done, especially for an overly involved, anxious parent. Our job as school counselors is to help parents like Carson's mom understand that the more her parenting is based on her worries, the more likely things will get worse. The more Carson's mom attempts to control Carson, the more he will resist. However, as Carson's mom gives

Carson choices and enforces her if-then statements, Carson will likely shift his behavior, make good choices and begin to take more responsibility for his actions.

PATIENCE AND ACCEPTANCE. As with all school counseling interventions, it will take time, patience, heart and acceptance to collaborate with the overly involved parent. Yes, it can be frustrating to work with overly involved parents. And, yes, we may think we know how overly involved parents should be parenting. But, just as we aim to teach parents to have healthy boundaries with their children, we, as school counselors, need to have healthy boundaries with the overly involved parents in our school. Even though we may offer suggestions and guidance to parents, ultimately the parents will choose their own parenting style and their own actions.

To effectively collaborate with overly involved parents, we need to accept that we can't control their parenting choices. What we can do is model positive and healthy behaviors and gently encourage them to do the same. ☐

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