

Allow a boy to struggle while supporting him.

The term “helicopter parenting” was coined in the 1990s to describe a growing phenomenon fueled by a few notable child-abduction cases highly publicized via the rise of 24-hour cable news, the trend of parents having fewer kids per family, and a broader cultural shift toward more intensive, professionally structured approaches to child-rearing. The concept entered mainstream usage in the early 2000s when college administrators began reporting unprecedented levels of parental involvement—such as parents calling to wake their college-aged children or contacting professors to dispute grades.

Today, “helicopter parents” are typically understood as those who hover closely over their children’s lives, monitoring and micromanaging schedules, academics, and activities. In some cases, this includes insisting on rigid study routines and closely supervising schoolwork in real time.

An even more extreme form has been labeled “bulldozer” or “snowplow” parenting. In this style, parents attempt to clear obstacles in advance so that the child is never required to face failure, discomfort, or adversity. This can include directly contacting teachers or coaches to change grades, secure advantages, asking questions the student should be asking in class, or increase playing time. While these behaviors are often motivated by a desire to help children succeed, they can have the opposite effect: limiting opportunities for resilience, independence, and problem-solving. Over time, excessive intervention may leave children less prepared to navigate real-world challenges on their own.

Although examples of these parenting styles still exist, there is growing evidence of a cultural shift away from both extremes. Current trends suggest a backlash against over-involvement, influenced in part by parental burnout and increased attention to children’s mental health and long-term well-being. In response, more balanced approaches to parenting have gained traction, many of which are supported by developmental research.

One such approach is sometimes referred to as “shepherding.” Rather than attempting to engineer a child’s path or remove all obstacles, shepherding emphasizes providing a supportive environment, guidance, and resources while allowing the child to develop in accordance with their own temperament and strengths.

Similarly, the “lighthouse” model describes parents as stable, consistent figures who provide guidance from a distance. Like a lighthouse on the shore, they offer orientation and safety but do not attempt to steer the ship directly or eliminate every wave the child encounters.

In developmental psychology, parenting styles have long been grouped into three primary categories. The authoritarian style reflects a “my way or the highway” approach, where

rules are strict, obedience is expected, and the child has limited input. The permissive style takes the opposite extreme: parents prioritize warmth and approval but set few boundaries, often avoiding discipline in order to remain liked.

Research has consistently shown the third style known as “authoritative” to be the most effective approach. This style combines clear expectations and consistent boundaries with emotional responsiveness and flexibility. More recent discussions sometimes refer to an updated version of this model as “authoritative 2.0,” which emphasizes both structure and high emotional attunement, while reducing unnecessary hyper-vigilance.

Across research on child development, a consistent theme emerges: allowing children to experience age-appropriate discomfort is essential for building long-term resilience. When parents, teachers, or mentors repeatedly intervene to prevent consequences, children may miss critical opportunities to learn how their actions affect outcomes. While such interventions are often well-intentioned, they can unintentionally delay the development of responsibility and emotional maturity—sometimes until consequences become significantly more serious in adulthood.