

Parenting: PIDD and the Helicopter Parent

It's difficult not to be overprotective of kids with chronic illness, but as many child health specialists advise, it's better to let them learn how to handle their own issues and, at some point, to let go of the reins altogether.



By Mark T. Haggard

WHEN MY PRIMARY immunodeficiency disease (PIDD) kid was in the third grade, he was faced with many issues — both medical and social. My wife and I decided to sit down with the principal of his elementary school to explain his disease and hope to settle some of the social issues that were troubling him. In a condescending tone, she explained the educational principles that guided her school, and then stated we should stop being “helicopter parents.” My response: “If it’s my son you’re talking about, I’m going to be a ‘helicopter parent.’”

Helicopter parent is a new term that has entered the lexicon of parenting in the past decade. These are overprotective parents who “hover” over their children, watching their every move and intervening when their children are faced with the slightest provocation. As parents of PIDD kids, the temptation to hover over our children is even greater. We don’t know which bruise or scrape will be the one to land our children in the ER or on long-term antibiotics. But, how much of a service are we doing to our children with continual hovering over every part of their lives?

The Problem with Overprotective Parents

“Being protective is good, but too much of a good thing always turns out to be bad. There are a lot of negative

influences and situations that children face today. It’s natural for parents to be concerned about their safety, but sometimes they go overboard and cocoon their children in fear,” states Marila Fernandes, a licensed school psychologist. “[Parents] have to understand that they will not always be there to protect their children, and soon they will be adults who will have to fend for themselves. It’s better if they teach their children how to cope with difficult situations and deal with problems positively rather than shielding them from reality.”

It is a complex task to maintain a balance between being too protective and not affecting children’s independence. And, many child psychologists have opinions about this. According to clinical psychologist Anita Karambalkar, “We need to teach [kids] self-confidence and moral values, and let them live their lives. When parents say yes to everything their children want, when the children face the real world and get their first no, it can shatter the young adult’s confidence.” Dieter Wolke, PhD, of the University of Warwick adds: “I compare it to the parent who does all their child’s homework. You wouldn’t be surprised if the child then couldn’t pass an exam.” Overprotective parents who perform tasks for their children because they hate seeing their children struggle are

sending a message to their children that they are not capable of doing an adequate job or that they don’t trust their children to make the right choices.

Why are some parents overprotective? Dr. Robyn Silverman, a child development specialist, considers a number of reasons. In some cases, parents perceive that when they do something for their child, it comes out better. Other parents feel a need for control in a world that is unpredictable and scary. Some parents have a fear of failure and hate to see their children struggle. Some parents fear that their children will succeed and no longer need them as much as they did at one time. Still others feel entitled to check in with their children at any given time. Many are living their lives vicariously through their sons and daughters who are doing things that the parents might not have been able to do when they were younger.

Pediatrician Ramon Resa agrees. He says that when children cannot explore their worlds because their overprotective parents are hovering over them, they become prisoners in their own homes. If their mom or dad is continually right there next to them, children invariably look to their parents to give them answers instead of figuring things out for themselves and learning to handle situations on their own. Also, when parents do too much

protecting in an effort to make their children's lives stress-free, it often has the opposite effect; instead, many children become depressed and suffer anxiety disorders.

The Problem with Bullies

Several issues ago, my parenting column focused on bullies. Surprise! There are sociopaths on middle school campuses across the United States and the world. These power-seeking agents tend to pick on those who are weaker or have less cachet in the school community. Unfortunately, in many cases, it is our PIDD kids who are on the outside looking in. Our children have had numerous illnesses that cause them to miss school and make it more difficult to socialize. Many become targets of middle school sociopaths. Unfortunately, the children of overprotective helicopter parents are not afforded the tools to handle bullying. A mom or dad might bring it to the attention of a school administrator and walk their kids to class, but there will come a time when an administrator or a parent cannot be there.

In a study on child abuse and neglect (published in the April 2013 issue of *Child Abuse & Neglect: The International Journal*), researchers investigated the association between parenting behavior and peer victimization between 1970 through 2012. "Overprotection" was categorized as a negative parenting behavior. Conversely, authoritative parenting, parent-child communication, parental involvement, support, supervision, and warmth and affection were classified as positive parenting behaviors. What they found was that the incidences of bullying were 26 percent more common for children of overprotec-

tive parents. The authors further noted that victims of bullying are at high risk of developing a host of physical and mental health problems such as anxiety and depression, borderline psychiatric symptoms and increased risk of self-harm, suicidal ideation, and even suicide itself.

Helicopter parent is a new term that has entered the lexicon of parenting in the past decade.

Wolke, who was one of the study's authors, noted that the results "should serve as a reminder that advising parents that being supportive and involved — though not overly involved — lowers the odds their children will be a victim of bullying. Be clear that overprotection increases this risk. Children need support, but parents should not try to buffer their children from all negative experiences." He added that parents ought to "allow children to have some conflicts with peers to learn how to solve them rather than intervene at the smallest argument."

When to Stop Hovering

Obviously, we are not going to leave our 5-year-old at the mercy of school sociopaths. My son had surgery in the third grade to remove precancerous lesions from his scalp. Unfortunately, the stitches began coming out before the incision was healed. His pain became the target of jokes by his classmates. When his teacher refused to act, we confronted the teacher and the principal, and eventually pulled him from that school.

However, we should not keep the reins as tight as our children get older. According to Fernandes, it "depends on the age of the child, but if you are in sync with children, you will be surprised by how well they will guide you to help them become confident, achieving adults." At some point, we

must let the reins go altogether.

When parents hover over their children and do everything for them, they are preventing them from maturing. One of the most important jobs we have is to prepare our children to be independent and productive adults. For parents of children with PIDD, that includes preparing them to plan and follow through with their infusions for a time when we are not there. Today, as a high school freshman, my son is free to succeed or fail on his own; I promise to pick him up if the result is bad. As for his infusions, I am making it more and more his responsibility. He will be changing over to subcutaneous infusions soon, and he will be in charge of preparing his injections and placing his own line. I will not always be around for him. The best that I can do is prepare him for a long, healthy and independent life. ■

MARK T. HAGGARD is a high school teacher and football coach, and has three children, two of whom have CVID. He and his wife, Cheryl, also operate Under the Hood Ministries at www.underthehoodministries.org.