The Wrong Way to Parent

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Abstract

This is an argument against overprotective parenting. Those who do so are creating an environment that limits their children’s psychological and moral growth and development. Overprotective parents control two very important aspects of their children’s lives that are instrumental in their development. Parental control over the education and the social lives of their children creates children who do not have what is needed in order to make moral decisions. These children’s capabilities or lack there-of, as a result of this parenting, make them unable to make the most moral decisions possible. This argument bridges the gap between psychological and moral development of children and how parenting affects this. By taking psychological research and applying it to ethics and morals, one can come away from this argument understanding how overprotective parenting not only inhibits the psychological growth of children, but of their moral development as well.
It is morally impermissible for parents to be overprotective of their children. By being “helicopter parents” they are limiting their children’s ability to develop the psychological capabilities required to make moral decisions. They create a distorted view of reality that creates a façade over the truth for their children; those children then when faced with actual reality without their parents, lack the moral character and experiences in order to make the most morally correct actions.

Overprotective or “Helicopter” Parent

This group of people is the central focus of my argument and thus requires strict definition as to what I view them as. First off, overprotective and helicopter parents refer to the same group of people as far as my argument is concerned; whichever term is used assume the same definition. Overprotective parents are those parents that not only take control of their own lives but of their children’s as well. These people take in upon themselves to keep restraints, at time strict ones, over their child’s actions. These parents try to help their kids during times of task-oriented actions, such as school, sports, etc., to a point that it infringes on the child’s independence and own self-growth. In Does “Hovering” Matter? Helicopter parenting and its effect on well-being, LeMoyne and Buchanan describe what an overprotective or helicopter parent is: “We contend that children do not achieve independence when helicopter parents try to solve their problems during task-oriented challenges, because they are not allowing their children to engage in age-appropriate tasks, primarily as it applies to their education and preparation for the job market.” So for the sake of my argument, helicopter parents are those who infringe upon the child’s independence of engaging in age-appropriate tasks. These parents will be the ones who demand a parent teacher conference if their child fails and test, not to ask what is wrong with the child, but to ask what is wrong with the test or the teacher. This shows how these
parents cannot simply accept a common thing such as failure from their child because under their control failure is not an option. Overprotective parents are controlling for the reason of further increasing success in their children, when in reality they are causing the exact opposite.

Age Limits

The age of the children at which I refer to when talking about overprotective parents is around the age the child enters junior high school. “The switch from elementary to junior high school coincides with several major changes for young adolescents. Most are in the throes of puberty; they're becoming more self-aware and self-conscious, and their thinking is growing more critical and more complex” (APA). This research shows the dramatic shift in the life of the child. The child has reached a point in life that they are psychologically aware to such a point that they can begin rationalizing and making moral decisions. Once this point in development is met, parents who are overprotective could be seen as hindering such development.

Knowing what overprotective and helicopter parents are and what they are inhibiting in their children demonstrates why these parents are acting in an immoral way. This can be further explained in more detailed arguments in which parents are keeping their children from having moral independence. Instances of parental control over education and social life illustrate the damaging effects of overprotection and how this causes hindrance in the psychological development of their children.

Parental Professors

In today’s society competition is increasing indefinitely and parents are realizing that. Some parents though overreact and take their own child’s personal or academic success upon themselves to ensure optimal performance. Parents will do their children’s projects and papers
for them in order to control the fact that their children will get a good grade. The lack of failure, and increased amount of phony success, proves drastically harmful towards their child’s moral and psychological development. Failure is a commonplace in life, there is no way around it. Without failure though, there is no learning. One cannot learn from mistakes if one has not performed those mistakes. Failures are okay because they teach a child that they made a mistake and to learn from that mistake in order to grow and succeed in the future. In the case of overprotective parents the children are not working hard; they are simply letting their parents do all the hard work and are not learning responsibility for themselves.

This control over academics could carry over into college as well. When it comes time for a child of helicopter parents to pick a college they could possibly have no choice. The parents may tell them where to go in order for them to succeed the most academically. The school where the child fits in best and where academics will excel to the optimal level to not always coincide with each other. This fact causes some kids to be enrolled at colleges and universities that they do not even want to be at. This creates the possibility of a child that develops a low sense of self-worth due to the parental avoidance of the child’s opinions of which school they wanted to actually go to. If one cannot determine what he or she rightfully deserves, then how can one determine what the proper treatment of others is to be?

Once the child is out of school and into the workforce the effects of parental “hovering” can be seen quite clearly. Once in the workforce the child is finally out of the reach of their parents grasp over how they perform at their educationally driven tasks. This causes disillusion in the child, for they do not know what it is like to do something for themselves. This causes poor work performance and creates a child who lacks the basic qualities of self-determination that is needed to succeed on your own in the workforce. This causes them to become very
cynical and unpleasant people, who lack a solid moral base to stand on. In one study, the research conducted describes the effects of those parents who limit the responsibility of their children. “Specifically, studies of enabling behaviors among parents have shown that parents who limit their children's exposure to responsibilities and opportunities to experience challenge raise children with a more external locus of control who are more likely to be at-risk as learners” (Lynch, Hurford, & Cole, 2002). External locus of control, as mentioned above, refers to the belief that events in one’s life are caused by factors out of that person’s control. At-risk learners describe those children who struggle with comprehension in school and do not have the exposure to responsibility that is needed to perform well in school. This research demonstrates how parents who do everything for their children, and limit their child’s exposure to responsibility, will have raised children who have a lower intellect. This grows into the child not having the knowledge that is required to make sound moral decisions. Without the idea of doing things for themselves evident in their way of life, these overprotected children will become workers in terrible jobs in helpless situations. These qualities are established because of their lack of a strong moral character that stems from an absent sense of self-determination.

Social Slaves

Overprotective parents also keep great restraints on one of the most important factors that influence a child’s growth and development into a moral person: social life. Children of overprotective parents have very sheltered lives outside of their family due to their helicopter parents. One main proponent of modern day society that accentuates this constant regulation is technology. “Today’s parents use the cell phone, often called the electronic umbilical cord, coupled with e-mail, instant messaging, and social networking sites to constantly check on the whereabouts of their children” (Kantrowitz and Tyre 2006; Randall 2007; Schweitzer 2005).
This shows how with the use of modern day technology parents are infringing upon their child’s right to be independent. A child’s social life is his or hers time to understand who they are. Through experiences and mistakes they obtain knowledge that will help them with future moral decisions and situations. By the parents being overprotective, they are inhibiting this growth from occurring. A huge part of reality that overprotective parents shelter or put in disillusion for their children, are drugs and alcohol, and the full knowledge of those substances. It is this lack of knowledge that causes children to act irresponsibly when put in a situation involving drugs and alcohol when they out from under their parents grasp. This disillusion can cause lasting psychological issues, as described in the following research: “Extant research suggests adolescents and young adults raised in less functional families have a higher probability of depression, anxiety, problems with alcohol, and psychosocial immaturity.” (LeMoyne/Buchanan) By the parents being overprotective, they are creating a less functional family unit; this family unit being depicted as a family that does not promote psychological maturity when dealing with difficult situations such as alcohol. The children of these families, according to the research previously mentioned, have a higher chance of abusing alcohol. I am not arguing the ethics of abstinence or use of drugs and alcohol, merely the ethics of the abuse of both to the extent of significant damage to the user and to others around the user. Because of the sheltering from their parents, those children lack the knowledge to approach a drug or alcohol situation with the right basis on how to behave responsibly. They instead go, for lack of a better term, crazy when around the substances and end up acting in such a way that is morally reprehensible and is very detrimental to the safety of themselves and others. As previously mentioned in the research conducted by LeMoyne/Buchanan, children from overprotective parents also have depression and anxiety issues and are psychologically immature. This is because they are not allowed to
have a life outside of the home and it is that life that would help them grow and develop from a child into an adult. The social life of a child, for example simply hanging out with friends, encourages self growth and actualization into a more mature person through life and social experiences. All of those experiences are taken away when the child is under the restraint of helicopter parents. By the child having depression and anxiety the child will at times think irrationally. The purpose of childhood and of parenting is to raise a mature child. The mature child will thus have the mental faculties needed to make sound moral decisions. Once this is taken away, the chance of the child being a strong moral actor is greatly reduced. Without a mature mind, one cannot make mature decisions and choices. Instead one will make choices based on the limited growth they have had and will make a decision that is not as moral as it could have been if the child was raised under parents who were not overprotective and sheltering.

Where does morality come in?

All the previous examples of parental control over their children lives demonstrate and explain the capabilities or lack there-of that create morally undeveloped children. Parental control over education creates children who lack self-responsibility and determination. This lack of personal development causes those children to not be fully developed morally either. By having an external locus of control, these children do not see anything as their responsibility. Being a moral character means that you can take charge of your actions and realize the consequences. By lacking this internal locus of control, overprotected children do not have the means to make the moral decisions in which they need to anticipate the consequences of the decisions. Also, in certain cases the children do not have any self-worth due to their parents not listening to their children’s opinion over their education. By having no self-worth the children
will have an underestimated understanding of their capabilities to make moral decisions that can help others. They feel that they have no worth, and that no one helps them, so why should they do anything to help others. This causes them to be morally underdeveloped and to not take moral actions to help others. These children also have the chance of becoming at-risk learners. By not being able to understand or comprehend properly, these children will have trouble learning the knowledge needed in order to make moral decisions. Moral decision making comes from having the ability to understand actions and reactions in a situations. Without this understanding, the children of overprotective parents will not be able to make the most moral decisions for themselves and others.

The lack of capabilities that come from parental control over their children’s social lives proves very detrimental to their children’s ability to make moral decisions. Most significantly is the child’s lack of proper responsibility when approached with extraneous circumstances such as alcohol and drugs. The abuse of alcohol is indeed an immoral action due to its ability to harm the user and others. In order to deal with alcohol the most moral way, a way of responsible use, one must have the parenting that promoted awareness of knowledge of said use. Since overprotected children never had this, they never developed those capabilities that promoted that most moral decision making. Also as stated previously in examples, children who are a product of this environment tend to develop psychological immaturity. Moral decision making require a maturity in knowledge of actions and consequences, and the absence of these capabilities is evident in children who are products of overprotective parents. Also depression is a quality that can stem from overprotective parenting. Research conducted by Blumberg and Izard describe the following in reference towards children with depression: “These are dysphoric mood plus four of the following: appetite or weight disturbance, sleep difficulties, fatigue – difficulty in
thinking or concentrating”. The capabilities do not equate with those needed to make the most moral decisions. Children who are dealing with depression are very unstable, as research shows. This instability does not allow the grounded mindset that is required to think rationally. Rationality is needed in making moral decisions because one has to step back from a situation and look at all the components of a situation and observes and predict all consequences that will equate to the most good.

*Opposing Argument 1*

An opposing stance to my argument is that the reason that parents are overprotective towards their children is because of the world we live in today. Parenting styles that were once seen as normative are no longer applicable. The world we live in today is far more dangerous than the past and thus requires a stronger parental influence over children.

*Response to Opposition 1*

The way to counter this opposition is by knowledge. To inform these parents of the ill effects they are having on their children. The reasons these parents are overprotective are in no way justified. Past insecurities coupled with a hyperbolic news media leads parents to believe that the world is far more dangerous than it actually is. By informing the parents of these misconceptions then they will realize that their previous beliefs were built on illusion and not on fact.

*Opposing Argument 2*

Another opposing argument against my thesis would be to state the question of; why should society judge the way parents raise their children? Parents have the right to raise their
children in a way that they deem correct and no one should judge the morality of it. Each child is different and thus you cannot generalize a parenting style to fit the needs of every single child. Parents have the right and the free will to parent children their own way and for society to degrade them and to have a call to action to fix their parenting styles is infringing upon said rights and free will.

Response to Opposition 2

Isn’t the goal of parenting to raise children who are ready to make the best decisions and be the most ready for society? I believe that the answer of that is a universal yes, based on the idea that people generally want people in society who make decisions that equally benefit the person and others in society. But regardless if this is true the idea that this is true still applies to the parallel I am trying to draw. Shouldn’t society then have a say in what type of people are going to be affecting it? If children are being raised to not become strong moral actors then society, those who are affected by said children, should have a chance to show the parents of those children they are parenting in a morally reprehensible way. Those overprotective parents are not performing their duty to society to raise children who will have the capacity to make moral decisions that will benefit not only others in society, but themselves as well. If a parent’s goal is to raise moral children then shouldn’t they accept the knowledge needed to do so?

Concluding Thoughts

Parents who shelter and overprotect their children create a false sense of reality for their children. This false sense of reality inhibits the moral growth of the child in that one cannot have a true understanding of what is right or wrong if one does not understand reality. Through their control over education, parents create children who have an external locus of control and could
possibly become at-risk learners. This lack of self-responsibility and comprehension makes moral decision making difficult for these children. They lack the knowledge needed to understand possible repercussions of their actions, and thus cannot properly make moral decisions. Parental control over their child’s social life greatly inhibits the psychological growth of the child. This psychological immaturity creates a child who could abuse alcohol and could have depression and anxiety. This creates a child who is very unstable psychologically and is not able to make the most moral decisions for themselves and for others. Parents are responsible for raising their children to be most suited for society and for reality. By overprotecting and sheltering their children these parents are doing the exact opposite. The child has a dysfunctional sense of society that blinds them from reality and thus makes them incapable of being what they should have become if under the correct parental guidance.

Contribution

This argument is connecting psychology to morality. The combination of psychological research and moral decision making, speaks well to how the child functions as a whole. The brain’s behavior and development correlates directly to the development of morality in an individual and this paper complements that. By identifying psychological capabilities of those children that are the products of overprotective parents, and describing how those qualities effect moral growth is where most psychological studies are lacking. I advocate for the combination of different fields of study. The child is not a one dimensional being and thus should not be studied as such. To fully understand why those children who they are and how overprotective parenting affects them, a combination of psychology and philosophy is needed to obtain well-rounded conclusions.


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