

Is Hovering Smothering or Loving? An Examination of Parental Warmth as a Moderator of Relations Between Helicopter Parenting and Emerging Adults' Indices of Adjustment

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Emerging Adulthood
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DOI: 10.1177/2167696815576458
ea.sagepub.com



Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the moderating role of parental warmth in the relation between helicopter parenting and indices of child adjustment (i.e., self-worth and school engagement) and maladjustment (i.e., risk behaviors) in emerging adulthood. Participants included 438 undergraduate students from four universities in the United States ($M_{\text{age}} = 19.65$, $SD = 2.00$, range = 18–29; 320 women). Regression analyses established that increased helicopter parenting was associated with lower levels of self-worth and higher levels of risk behaviors for those emerging adults who reported low levels of maternal warmth from their parents (especially their mothers), but not for those with high levels of warmth. The discussion focuses on the moderating role of parental warmth and the importance of emerging adult perceptions of the parent–child relationship.

Keywords

helicopter parenting, emerging adulthood, warmth, parental involvement, parental control

Research shows that positive parenting during emerging adulthood has been linked to numerous indices of positive adjustment in young people (e.g., Nelson, Padilla-Walker, Christensen, Evans, & Carroll, 2011). However, parenting that includes higher levels of control is associated with indices of maladjustment (e.g., Nelson et al., 2011). One type of overinvolved, or overcontrolling, parenting that has received a growing amount of scholarly attention is helicopter parenting.

Helicopter Parenting in Emerging Adulthood

Helicopter parenting in emerging adulthood is characterized by parents' overinvolvement in the lives of their children including such behaviors as solving problems and crises for children (Cullaty, 2011) and intervening in issues with roommates, friends, professors, or employers (Kennedy, 2009; Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012). Despite the fact that helicopter parenting can be distinguished from behavioral control and psychological control (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012), emerging research has found that not all outcomes of helicopter parenting are negative (Donnelly, Renk, & McKinney, 2013; Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012). Hence, its link to indices of adjustment/maladjustment may be rather complex. For example, it has been found that helicopter parenting

is associated with negative aspects of emerging adults' development including more pessimistic views of marriage, indices of anxiety, depression, and lower life satisfaction and psychological well-being (LeMoyne & Buchanan, 2011; Schiffrin et al., 2014; Segrin, Woszidlo, Givertz, Bauer, & Murphy, 2012; Willoughby, Hersh, Padilla-Walker, & Nelson, 2013). On the other hand, helicopter parenting has been found to be related to several positive aspects of the parent–child relationship (i.e., guidance and involvement) in emerging adulthood (e.g., Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012).

One of the important factors that might determine whether helicopter parenting plays a facilitative versus debilitating role in the development of emerging adults is the role that parental warmth may play as a context for parental helicoptering. Despite media stereotypes of overly warm, caring (albeit hovering) parents, Padilla-Walker and Nelson (2012) did not find parental warmth to be associated with helicopter parenting. This suggests that helicopter parenting in the

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Between Parenting and Emerging Adults' Indices of Adjustment.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age	—							
2. Maternal helicopter	-.08	—						
3. Paternal helicopter	-.05	.81***	—					
4. Maternal warmth	.01	-.02	.01	—				
5. Paternal warmth	.01	-.03	.08	.61***	—			
6. Self-worth	.09	-.08	-.05	.39***	.42***	—		
7. Risk behaviors	.07	.06	.04	-.23***	-.20***	-.21***	—	
8. School engagement	.06	-.19***	-.17***	.17***	.13**	.22***	-.16***	—
M (SD)	19.65 (2.00)	2.01 (.81)	1.84 (.76)	6.19 (1.01)	5.93 (1.22)	3.32 (.60)	1.16 (.27)	4.29 (.63)
Range	18–29	1–5	1–5	1–7	1–7	1–4	0–5	1–5

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

context of a warm and supportive parent–child relationship may be quite different than the same approach in a relationship that lacks warmth. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the moderating role of parental warmth in the relation between helicopter parenting and indices of child adjustment (i.e., self-worth and school engagement) and maladjustment (i.e., risk behaviors) in emerging adulthood. Given that emerging adulthood is a period of development in which young people should be granted greater autonomy in an attempt to foster self-reliance and independence (e.g., Aquilino, 2006), we did not believe that helicopter parenting would be linked to indices of adjustment even in the presence of warmth. Instead, it was hypothesized that helicopter parenting in the context of low warmth would be associated with higher levels of both internalizing and externalizing problems.

Method

Participants and Procedures

The participants for the current study ($M_{\text{age}} = 19.65$, $SD = 2.00$, $\text{range} = 18\text{--}29$) consisted of 438 undergraduate students (320 women). We refer the reader to Padilla-Walker and Nelson (2012) for a detailed description of the participants, procedures, and instruments. We measured the following variables: (1) *helicopter parenting* (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012; “My parent makes important decisions for me, e.g., where I live, where I work, what classes I take,” $\alpha = .87$ for maternal and $\alpha = .84$ for paternal helicopter parenting), (2) *parental warmth* (Grolnick, Ryan, & Deci, 1991; Robbins, 1994; e.g., “My parent finds time to talk with me,” $\alpha = .86$ for maternal warmth and $\alpha = .89$ for paternal warmth), (3) *school engagement* (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2005; e.g., “I complete my homework/assignments on time,” $\alpha = .83$), (4) *self-worth* (Neeman & Harter, 1986; e.g., “I am happy being the way I am,” $\alpha = .84$), and (5) *risk behaviors* (adapted from Add Health, e.g., marijuana use, use of prescription drugs without permission, and shoplifting, $\alpha = .66$).

Table 2. Regression Analyses for Child-Reported Helicopter Parenting and Parental Warmth.

	Self-Worth	School Engagement	Risk Behaviors
Step 1:			
Gender ^a	.04	.11*	-.19***
Age	.09	.07	.06
Step 2:			
Maternal helicopter (A)	-.01	-.15	.06
Maternal warmth (B)	.21***	.13*	-.15**
Paternal helicopter (C)	-.07	-.04	-.01
Paternal warmth (D)	.30***	.05	-.10
Step 3:			
A × B	.11*	.04	-.14*
C × D	.10	-.06	-.11
R ²	.25***	.08***	.14***

Note. All values represent standardized beta weights.

^aFemales have the higher coded value.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Results

Regression Analyses With Child-Reported Helicopter Parenting and Warmth

Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations for all study variables are presented in Table 1. Hierarchical regression analyses were conducted for each of the three dependent variables (self-worth, school engagement, and risk behaviors, see Table 2), with standard procedures used to avoid collinearity and plot and test simple regression slopes for interactions (Aiken & West, 1991).

Self-worth. Both maternal and paternal warmth were positively associated with self-worth, $F\Delta(4, 429) = 28.69$, $p < .001$. There was also a significant two-way interaction between maternal helicopter parenting and warmth, $F\Delta(2, 427) = 8.81$, $p < .001$. Simple slope follow-up analyses suggested that maternal helicopter parenting was negatively associated with self-worth at -1 SD of maternal warmth ($\beta = -.22$, $t = -3.84$, $p < .001$).

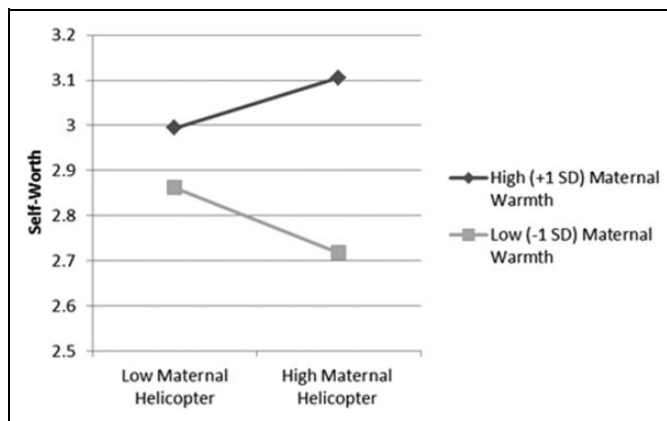


Figure 1. Two-way interaction predicting self-worth. Note. Simple slope follow-up analyses were significant at -1 SD of maternal warmth and marginally significant at $+1$ SD of maternal warmth.

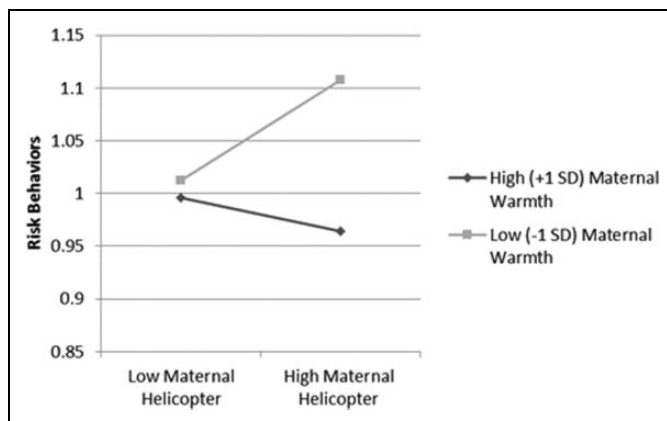


Figure 2. Two-way interaction predicting risk behaviors. Note. Simple slope follow-up analyses significant at both -1 SD and $+1$ SD of maternal warmth.

and marginally associated with self-worth at $+1$ SD of maternal warmth ($\beta = .12$, $t = 1.92$, $p = .056$; see Figure 1).

School engagement. Maternal warmth was negatively associated with school engagement, $F(4, 429) = 6.99$, $p < .001$.

Risk behaviors. Maternal warmth was negatively associated with risk behaviors, $F(4, 429) = 6.22$, $p < .001$. There was also a significant two-way interaction between maternal helicopter parenting and warmth, $F(2, 427) = 10.09$, $p < .001$. Simple slope follow-up analyses suggested that maternal helicopter parenting was positively associated with risk behaviors at -1 SD of maternal warmth ($\beta = .21$, $t = 3.51$, $p < .001$) and negatively associated with risk behaviors at $+1$ SD of maternal warmth ($\beta = -.14$, $t = -2.12$, $p < .05$; see Figure 2).

Discussion

Results of this study revealed that increased helicopter parenting was associated with lower levels of self-worth and

higher levels of risk behaviors for those emerging adults who reported low levels of maternal warmth from their parents. Furthermore, increased helicopter parenting was associated with lower levels of risk behaviors for those who reported that their mothers exhibit higher levels of warmth. These findings, although few in number, help make a significant contribution to our growing conceptual and empirical understanding of the role that helicopter parenting plays in the lives of emerging adults by demonstrating that helicopter parenting appears to be especially harmful when used in the context of low warmth.

In previous work we suggested that helicopter parenting might be “inappropriately intrusive and managing” but done out of “strong parental concern for the well-being and success of the child” (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012, p. 1186). We recognize now that such a description may be inaccurate. With the contribution of this study, it is becoming increasingly clear that helicopter parenting (a) in and of itself is not inherently warm, (b) is not facilitative of emerging adults’ development, and (c) represents another form of control (besides behavioral and psychological control) that is linked to indices of maladjustment in emerging adulthood. This is not meant to suggest though that warmth does not play a role in the ways in which helicopter parenting may be linked to young people’s adjustment/maladjustment but rather suggests that warmth (or the lack thereof) might serve as the context in which helicoptering occurs. Our results show that helicopter parenting is associated with a number of indices of maladjustment, especially when it occurs outside the context of parental warmth, providing evidence that the absence of parental warmth might be a key determinant in whether or not helicopter parenting becomes predictive of maladjustment in emerging adulthood.

Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study was not without limitations. First, although our discussion was framed in a way that suggested parenting was the driving force in children’s outcomes, the cross-sectional nature of the data precluded us from drawing any definitive conclusions in that regard. It may be that characteristics of some emerging adult children elicit more overly controlling behaviors from their parents. Another limitation is that the findings might not be generalizable to a nonstudent population, to all cultures around the world, or to all ethnic groups within the United States. Next, the fact that all of the variables were measured via self-report might lead to inflated relations due to shared method variance. Finally, although the items we used to measure helicopter parenting tended to focus on parents making decisions for their children in important life domains, other aspects of helicopter parenting might include invading their emerging adults’ privacy, giving excessive and underserving praise, or otherwise infantilizing their emerging adult children. Future work should give a more careful consideration of other indices of what might makeup the construct of helicopter parenting and examine the role of warmth in conjunction with them.

Acknowledgment

We are grateful for the grant support of the Family Studies Center at Brigham Young University.

Authors' Note

The authors express appreciation to the instructors and students at all Project R.E.A.D.Y. data collection sites for their assistance and to Stephanie Luster for her administrative assistance on the project.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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