

Mitigating the Effects of Helicopter Parenting on Student Mental Health

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Abstract

Rates of anxiety and depression in youth have been increasing, and helicopter parenting although not the only factor, is at the core of the problem. When parents overprotect children and control their lives, children do not gain the skills needed to face the world; this lack of preparedness leads to anxiety and depression. As teachers, we can help by giving students opportunities for choices about their work, and by teaching social-emotional skills and cognitive behaviour techniques. Making these changes can arm the students with the skills, confidence, and resilience they need to feel prepared for the world, which would lower levels of anxiety and depression.

For a variety of reasons, adolescents around the world are showing increasing rates of depression and anxiety (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Poor/fair perceived mental health and professionally diagnosed mood and anxiety disorders have become more prevalent in Canadian youth over the last decade, such that from 2011 to 2018, poor/fair perceived mental health increased from 4.2% to 9.9%, diagnosed mood disorders went from 4.3% to 7.8%, and diagnosed anxiety disorder rose from 6.0% to 12.9% (Wiens et al., 2020, p.3). At the same time, young people have become more emotionally fragile, and demonstrate a lack of coping abilities, which coincides with the shift toward a “helicopter parenting” society (Gray, 2015b, para. 1). Helicopter parenting is when parents protect children in a way that is not appropriate for their child’s age and abilities (Hall, 2017). Making all decisions and resolving all conflicts for children and giving them everything they need/want are inappropriate because children should be performing and managing some tasks on their own in order to develop. While helicopter parents are well-meaning, their children are likely to struggle as youth with some form of “psychological distress, low self-efficacy, narcissism, extrinsic academic motivation, poor academic adjustment or engagement, delayed or inhibited leadership emergence, and alcohol and drug use” (Segrin et al., 2020, p. 181). When children do not experience independence and difficult emotions, they do not learn to problem solve, their social and emotional development may be stunted, and they do not learn lessons from exploring their world (Gray, 2020b). This results in helplessness, a lack of self-confidence, and uncertainty, which lead to anxiety and depression. Children who are feeling anxious or depressed will not be in the mindset to learn. Adding student choice, practising cognitive behaviour techniques, and teaching social-emotional learning in our classrooms can help students to become more independent, resilient, and prepared, which can help to decrease the levels of depression and anxiety that are exacerbated by helicopter parenting.

In a helicopter parenting society, parents subscribe to the idea that the world is dangerous and their children need to be protected from any difficulties at all costs (Gray, 2019). Even if parents do not wish to parent this way, they do not have an easy alternative. For example, parents who give their children the independence to play outside alone or to come home to an empty house after school are likely to face social backlash and, depending on where they live, they may be breaking the law (Skenazy, 2019). The belief in a helicopter parenting society is that all difficulties – whether physical, emotional, academic, or social – may be traumatic and/or permanently damaging to children, and that parents should always be supervising, guiding, and intervening in order to do their job correctly (Skenazy, 2020).

A Lack of Freedom of Choice and Independence for Students in a Helicopter Society

Children who have no freedom of choice and independence develop issues with self-confidence and readiness, which leads to anxiety and depression when they see they are ill-prepared for the world (Gray, 2020b). Today, parents often make decisions for their children about what they are to do in their spare time (Gray, 2020a), and sometimes what they are learning at school. *Bill 64, The Education Modernization Act in Manitoba*, will require schools to contact parents when topics of human sexuality, substance use and abuse, and personal safety arise in Physical Education/Health, so that parents can choose to opt their child out of learning about said “sensitive content” (Manitoba, 2020). While that section of the Bill empowers parents to protect their children from discomfort, it deprives the children of the knowledge and understanding of how to protect themselves and others. In addition, when adults choose activities for children, they often focus on extrinsic motivations, rather than the child’s enjoyment of the activity (Gray, 2019). Students are feeling the same pressures in school. If they do not get perfect grades, engage in the right extracurricular activities, and get accepted into a top-rank post-secondary institution, they feel like failures (Hurley, 2018). With these pressures, students have cited school and other adult-directed activities as their number one source of anxiety (Gray, 2020a). When children do not get to choose their activities, or they are denied free play and a chance to explore their environments on their own terms, they feel a lack of control over their lives (Gray, 2020b). In English class, we teachers often prescribe texts for students, tell them what to write, and how to write it; our own external pressures make us hesitant to relinquish control. We place a heavy importance on marks and what we deem as “academic achievement,” which are not always true representations of intellectual development or meaningful education (Gray, 2020b, p. 51). We must increase the opportunities for student choice in our classrooms, so that our students can have some level of independence in school and develop skills they do not gain when adults control everything for them.

Providing Opportunities for Student Choice in the High School English Classroom

There are multiple areas in which English teachers can provide opportunities for choice. Rather than prescribing readings, we can allow students to choose what they read. This gives students independence, which results in them connecting with the literature on a personal level, making them more likely to become lifelong readers than when we place a book into their hands. We can initiate book clubs, lit circles, and independent reading time, so that students can choose a much higher percentage of their reading material (Kittle, 2020). They also must be given opportunities to choose what they write, whether that is their topic, their form, or both (Kittle, 2014). When students choose what they write, they connect more to their own ideas, and they often end up doing better work than when we make those decisions for them. Having choice in their reading and writing gives them the independence that they are missing in other areas of their life, the focus is shifted away from the competitive aspect of school because students are not all doing the same work, and students develop a better relationship with reading and writing. This increase of student independence, lessening of competition pressures, and the more positive connection with content and skills will help the students take initiative, be creative, and solve their own problems, skills they miss when they do not get the opportunity to choose for themselves (Gray, 2020b; Kittle & Gallagher, 2020). Teachers giving students choices in the classroom leads to students developing the self-confidence they need to be ready for the world, which would cause a drop in anxiety and depression levels (Gray, 2020b).

A Lack of Practical Social-Emotional Knowledge in Children of Helicopter Parents

Young adults who were “helicopter parented” have issues coping with everyday problems; they are more likely to turn to drugs and alcohol, and lack self-efficacy (Segrin et al., 2020).

These individuals are more entitled, narcissistic, and they have poor leadership skills. Academically, they may struggle with extrinsic motivation and becoming adjusted and/or engaged in the content. These individuals are less socially and emotionally resilient, and helicopter parenting is at the centre of the problem (Gray, 2015b). These difficulties and missing skills are caused by a lack of social and emotional knowledge, due to having their childhood challenges smoothed over for them by their parents while they were growing up (Segrin et al, 2020). While helicopter parents want to save their children from any pain or difficult emotions, they are setting the children up for a life of emotional fragility (Gray, 2015a). Instead of being allowed to feel, understand, and deal with difficult emotions, children are taught that these emotions are “bad” and must be avoided; they may even get the message that difficult emotions signal failure and weakness (David, 2020). This cycle causes a lack of resiliency because, when individuals are denied the opportunity to cope with everyday difficulties and emotions as children, they have emotional crises over everyday difficulties as adolescents and young adults (Gray, 2015a). Once again, we see the trend of anxiety and depression coming in when individuals do not feel prepared to handle the world around them (Gray, 2020b). Individuals must be equipped with social-emotional learning to feel like they can hold their own in society.

Adopting a Social-Emotional Learning Program in the Classroom

With the increase of depression and anxiety, and the decrease of student resiliency, educators and psychologists have identified a need for social-emotional learning at the school level, and many programs and curricula have been created to counteract the effects of helicopter parenting and other negative socio-cultural factors. The province of Alberta has created educational documents to support the instruction of social-emotional learning in schools, at all age levels. In high schools, the English teachers are responsible for planning projects that explore this learning through literature (Alberta, 2020). The key understandings are about setting and achieving goals, recognizing and managing emotions, forming and maintaining relationships, showing concern and care for others, making responsible decisions, and preparing for, handling, and recovering from challenging situations. Social-emotional learning programs, such as Alberta’s, can improve academic performance and fortify healthy relationships. They can help schools to address bullying, social isolation, and peer aggression, and they can help to enhance student mental health, while they gain protective factors. Another program that can be used in school is Let Grow (Skenazy, 2020). Let Grow has activities available for schools and parents, with a focus on building independence in children, and promoting free play. For example, teachers can send students home to perform a task of independence they had never done before, such as walking the dog alone or cooking a meal for the family, and they come back to school and report on it. Parents can also use this program at home, in order to foster independence and self-confidence in their children. Adopting such programs can help to restore student independence and teach them coping skills, which will both build resilience and self-confidence and reduce rates of depression and anxiety.

A Lack of Self-Regulation in Children of Helicopter Parents

Children of helicopter parents are not given the opportunity to feel difficult emotions, understand them, deal with them, and see them pass (David, 2020), which leads to a lack of self-regulation skills later in life (Gray, 2015a). Individuals who lack self-regulation skills feel helpless and vulnerable, become reactive (Stosny, 2020), are more likely to become anxious in the future (Schneider et al., 2020), and need more external help (Gray, 2015a). The mental health workers at the school in which I teach are overworked. They do not have enough hours in the school day to meet with everyone who needs their help. This trend is echoed by university counsellors, whose emergency calls have increased by over two times since 2010 (Gray, 2015a, para. 1). Students who cannot self-regulate rely on others to help them calm down and

work through their emotions, and many institutions do not have enough resources; the demand is too great. Students must be taught to take control of their own emotions, so that they can rely on themselves more often, and reduce the workload of school counsellors.

Teaching Cognitive Behavioural Techniques in the Classroom

Because school is where teenagers feel the most anxious (Gray, 2020a), it is fitting that teachers model and teach cognitive behavioural techniques in the classroom. Engaging in these techniques regularly, whether daily or weekly, would help students to strengthen their emotion regulation skills (Schneider et al., 2018). For relaxation techniques, for example, teachers could model abdominal breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, shorthand muscle relaxation, relaxation without tension, cue-controlled relaxation, and/or visualizing a peaceful scene (McKay et al., 2011). These techniques are scientifically studied, and serve the purpose of slowing down thoughts, and easing fear and anxiety. They reduce heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure, and muscle tension, among others, and when practised regularly they can reduce various forms of anxiety, such as general, interpersonal, and performance anxiety). Cognitive behavioural techniques can be used for more than relaxation; techniques can be found for worry control, panic, depression, problem solving, controlling anger, and mindfulness (McKay et al, 2011). Preparation for these techniques is not labour intensive or time consuming, and modelling them in class can take five minutes or less. Step-by-step instructions can be found in books (for example, see McKay et al., 2011), or by conducting a Google search. Therefore, adding cognitive behavioural techniques into class time is an easy way for teachers to help their students reduce stress, get them in the right frame of mind for learning, and help them self-regulate and reduce pressure on school counsellors.

Conclusion

Helicopter parenting plays a significant role in the increasing rates of depression and anxiety in the world's young people. Denying children independence and the opportunity to face difficult emotions, and not providing them with the tools to help them cope, are all contributing to these mental health problems. While teachers cannot change parenting styles, we can give students opportunities for choice in our classrooms. We can teach them skills to build resiliency, and cognitive behavioural techniques to reduce stress and help with self-regulation in the future. Educating the students in these areas in our classrooms will help them with their mental health issues, it will help teachers because our students will be in the position to learn, and it will help school counsellors because students will become more apt at looking to themselves to cope.

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