

# Parents, quit the hovering

By Debra Bruno

It's graduation season, and all our 24/7 helicopter parenting has come to fruition, right? Wrong. Many of our kids still have no idea what they want to do, and it's all the parents' fault.

It's the season of college graduation, and we helicopter parents are starting to reap the benefits of all that hovering.

Think of it: the SAT prep classes we've paid for, the early-morning crew practices we've carpooled to, the excruciating cello recitals we've sat through. Finally, we think, we'll see the results of years of being on call 24/7, reading aloud the flash cards for French conjugation and showing up in the middle of a Thursday for parent-teacher conferences.

And then when the kids made it to a decent college, many of us remained fixed in hover position. I still remember a few rounds of a paper on *Othello* from one kid, and another on the divine command theory from another.

The result: Little Susie has made it through four years at her respected university. Phew.

She's ready to launch, right? Not so fast. Many of these helicopter young'uns have absolutely no blooming idea what they should do next. They've been so busy with their internships and tests and labs that they've missed the essential purpose of all that frantic activity — figuring out their passion, following a stream as it flows into a larger river and then jumping on a boat and seeing where it takes them.

And they've also been so focused on achievement that they miss the larger point, says Madeline Levine, a San Francisco psychologist and author of *The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage Are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids*. "Authentic success involves character, engagement, well-being, emotional intelligence and achievement," she says. "We've got all our eggs in the achievement basket."

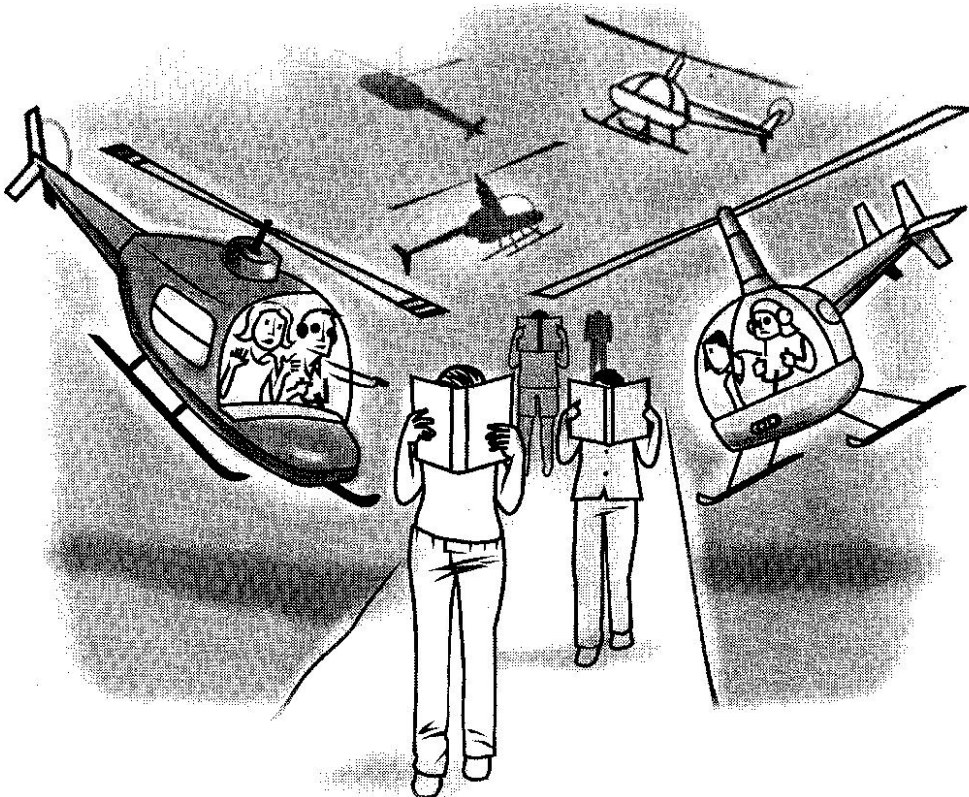
## 'Sink or swim'

This is our fault. Our generation of helicopter parents, high-achieving baby boomer professionals who have a five-year plan for everything, has failed in one crucial endeavor: letting our kids chase down their dreams and maybe even fall flat on their faces a few times.

"We encourage parents in the second half of 10th grade to start pulling out. You've got to let them sink or swim," says Britt Rathbone, a clinical social worker based in Bethesda, Md., who specializes in adolescence.

Many recent college grads I know — in the grand tradition of aimless youth everywhere — are taking part-time jobs in bookstores and gift shops, treading water until the next big thing comes along. Some are living in parent-subsidized apartments, while others — many others — have returned home to commandeer the TV remote, pile laundry on the floor of their bedrooms, and complain when the pantry is out of butterscotch pudding. They're not alone. According to a 2006 survey by the career search company Experience Inc., 58% of students moved home after graduation — and 32% of them remained there more than a year.

MonsterTRAK's survey on the entry-level job outlook found that although only 22% of 2007 college grads said they planned to move



By Alejandro Gonzalez, USA TODAY

home for more than six months, 43% are still living there. That's a slight drop from 2004 and 2005, says the survey arm of Monster Worldwide, when an average of 58.5% of graduates did the old boomerang.

## Trying aimlessness

Even if the trend is slightly hopeful, it's still driving us nuts. But is this aimlessness really so terrible? What we've done is delayed the growing-up process a little bit more, and probably poured a whole lot more money into it to boot. Now, we have an opportunity to land the helicopters so that our coddled kids can think outside the track. We've had these kids going since the very beginning when we put their names on waiting lists for the best nursery schools, pushed them to get lead roles in the production of *Annie Get Your Gun* and then finally cheered them on as their debate team won the state championship with a killer line of logic.

Devra Renner, co-author of *Mommy Guilt*, says she has heard from some university academic counselors that more students are on the honor roll today than ever before because the professors don't want to deal with calls from

parents when the student gets a B.

We need to step back, take a deep breath and watch from the ground level. Maybe we need to let these kids face a few years of dead-end jobs. Maybe they should set up in group houses where the fridge looks more like a science experiment, or lose their passport in Nice. Or teach English in Japan, or Korea, or even China.

While we baby boomers like to think of ourselves as intensely success-focused, we forget that we had years where we did a whole lot of bouncing around. The difference is that our parents didn't jump in to rescue us when the landlord refused to heat the apartment or when we drove our car into a snow bank. We figured it out — they can too.

They'll make plenty of mistakes now. Our role as retired helicopter parents is to let the blunders and absurdities creep in. We can cringe; we can hold our breath. But if we don't move back to let these kids take the first step on the road to independence, they'll never get off the ground. In fact, they'll never even get the dirty T-shirts off the floor of their bedroom.

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