

What Missionaries Ought to Know about Children of “Helicopter Parents”

The field had eagerly anticipated Paul’s coming to serve with them. He had become a Christian during his teens, was active in his church, had a clear call to missions, did well in his Bible major, and had great references from his professors at the university.

However, they were disappointed to find out that Paul was unable to get to work on time, did not know how to budget money, and did not relate well to his mentor. He had been unable to set up his own apartment, keep it clean, and did not know how to prepare his own food.

Although Paul had hundreds of “friends” on Facebook and Skyped daily with his parents back home, he did not relate well face-to-face. He looked good “on paper,” but Paul did not function well in real life as a missionary. Much of his problem was due to living in the 21st century and having helicopter parents.

What are “helicopter parents”?

Helicopter parents are called that because they are always hovering around their children, rarely out of reach. There have always been overprotective parents, but not as many, not as blatant, and not extending “childhood” for such a long time as some parents do now. The term was invented in the 20th century, and became widely used around the beginning of the 21st century as college

administrators began using it to refer to parents of some students. New technology, especially the cell phone, has made it possible for parents and “children” to remain constantly connected for many years. Today, if university students do not want to take a course suggested by their advisors, they can (and do) pull out their cell phones and have mom or dad talk to the advisor.

These overparented students are now graduating and moving into the workplace—and into missions. In 2007, Michigan State University did a survey called “Parent Involvement in the College Recruiting Process: To What extent?” This survey of 725 employers found that about a third of the large employers and about a quarter of smaller employers (60-3700 employees) reported experiencing “parent involvement.” Here are the types of such involvement reported:

- Getting information about the company (40%)
- Submitting resume (31%)
- Promoting son or daughter (26%)
- Attending career fair (17 %)

Some employers who contacted students with good resumes found that the students knew nothing about it and had no desire to work for the company! Four percent reported that a parent attended the interview!

What does the Bible say about helicopter parents?

Of course, no one in the Bible is labeled as being a helicopter parent, but back in Genesis Rebekah, mother of Esau and

Jacob, is a good example. She liked Jacob better than Esau, so she always looked out for him. Her overprotection was most obvious when Isaac was about to give Esau his blessing as firstborn. By that time the “boys” were both over 40 years old (Genesis 26:34).

Rebekah eavesdropped on their conversation when Isaac asked Esau to bring him food (Genesis 27).

- She told Jacob what she overheard (v. 6).
 - She told Jacob to kill two goats so she could cook them the way Isaac liked (v. 8).
 - She told him to take the food to Isaac to get Esau’s blessing (v. 9).
 - When Jacob objected, she called for the curse to fall on her, that he should “Just do what I say” (v. 13).
 - She cooked the goats, and she put Esau’s clothes on Jacob (v. 15).
 - She put goatskins on Jacob’s hands and neck and gave him the food for Isaac (v. 16).
 - When she heard that Esau was furious, she told Jacob what Esau was planning (v. 42).
 - She told Jacob to go and stay with her brother, Laban, until Esau calmed down (vv. 43-44).
 - Then she promised to let Jacob know when Esau was over it so he could come back home (v. 45).
- Does that sound like a helicopter parent?

How do they affect my team?

Children of helicopter parents may not be able to function on their own because their parents have always taken care of them. Even while in college their mothers still phone

them to get out of bed, and their fathers call their professors whenever there is a problem. They have never learned basic life skills about how to live on their own and relate to people in real life.

Without independent living skills and wanting to be served rather than to serve, they may become “high maintenance” on the field. This may require large investments of time by people on the field, and other missionaries may become enablers of the immaturity and irresponsibility of the children of helicopter parents.

Being asked to use their time to “care for” such individuals who not only accept but also expect help doing everyday tasks is likely to make other missionaries unhappy as their own projects begin to lag. This may result in low morale or anger across the field.

How do they affect me as a parent?

Your own children may expect more of you when they see what you and other missionaries do for the children of helicopter parents living on the field. If you fold clothes and sweep floors for others their own age, why do they have to do that for themselves?

When your child goes to college, he or she may expect you to do what helicopter parents do for their children back “home.” When you take them to the campus and they see other parents setting up rooms for their children and calling them to get out of bed, they may want you to do the same for them. Your own children may feel that you don’t love them if you refuse.

The rise of helicopter parents is one of the reasons for the origin of the parents’ orientation you are likely to be asked to attend. Trying to think of something to keep parents out of student orientation and advising, many

colleges and universities finally came up with the idea of parents' orientation, which is nearly always offered at the same time as student orientation.

What can we do?

Problems like this can usually be solved by prevention, correction, or some combination of the two.

Naomi Singer (pseudonym) suggested prevention as a possibility in "Life Skills & Assessing New Candidates" in the July, 2012 issue of *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (EMQ). She suggested assessing several life skills including whether a candidate:

- Demonstrates responsible, independent living.
- Has practical work skills.
- Handles money and resources well.
- Is skilled socially.
- Has personal disciplines.

These things can be measured by some of the following means:

- Ask someone who has lived with the candidate to fill out a life skills evaluation.
- Engage field workers to make life skills checklists for their field.
- Have candidates self-evaluate on a checklist.
- Require candidates to have lived independently and worked for someone else several years before serving on the field.

One of the disadvantages of rejecting people until they develop life skills is that in the process of developing those skills, they may become enmeshed in life itself. Those individuals may buy a home so they have a

mortgage to pay or that they found or work at a job that they do not want to leave.

Correction by mentoring and/or educating candidates after they become part of the agency is another way to solve the problem created by helicopter parents. Although some correction may come through "education" using books, lectures, and discussion, it is likely that mentoring of some type will be needed. People can read books about parenting, attend seminars about marriage relationships, and engage in discussions about having neat homes, but still not be able to apply that knowledge to their own lives.

Children of helicopter parents may literally need a "life coach." They do not need someone to talk with them and help them discover their potential nearly as much as they need someone to observe them and then help them to face "life" in the real world of everyday living. Like a football or basketball coach, these coaches may watch the person performing a life skill, such as clean the house, and then suggest and demonstrate better ways. Then the coaches may watch again and make more suggestions, etc. This may be repeated as often as necessary for each deficient skill.

Finally, rather than either the agency or candidate making a long-term commitment, it may be better to have a definite "trial period" to see if both the agency and the candidate work well together. At the end of the time (a year or two), either or both may want to end the relationship, and it can be done without either one "losing face" and without huge investments in time and money being lost by either party.

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