

Out of the way, helicopter parents: Bulldozer parents mow down their child's every obstacle

They call to request a favorite teacher or to complain about a grade. They intervene in homework assignments and fill in their kids' college applications. They demand extra playing time for their child on the soccer field.

Dubbed "bulldozer," "snowplow" or "lawnmower" parents, they are the grown-ups who try to mow down obstacles in their children's way to make their lives easier and help them succeed. Their actions are well-intended but not harmless, say counselors and parenting experts, who stress that young people need to learn to handle obstacles on their own even if they sometimes stumble or fail.

"I think it's a byproduct of the current state of our society and our culture," said Lauren Muriello, founder and director of the Well Being Therapy Center in Montville and Short Hills. "Parents have a lot of resources and a lot of education and are trying to protect their kids from experiencing hardship or stress.

But of course what we see then are adolescents and adults who are not capable of dealing with stress," Muriello said, "because they didn't have to face all those little challenges when they were in middle school and high school, because well-intended parents trying to make it easier indirectly caused them to miss those life lessons."

Concerns about over-the-top parenting have been around for years, but received renewed attention last spring following reports that wealthy parents paid bribes and helped their children cheat on the SAT exam to gain admission to elite colleges and universities.

In New Jersey, school counselors said they welcome parental involvement, but also offer words of caution and advice for parents who want to help kids succeed and grow.

Crossing a line

Muriello uses her own analogy — comparing parents to street pavers who pave roads for their children that have no bumps, potholes or roadblocks.

For instance, such parents will get involved if a friend was not nice to their child, even writing a text message to that friend. Or they call school officials to complain if their child didn't make a sports team or get a lead role in a play.

"[Young people] have to face those things and experience sadness and normal levels of anxiety," Muriello said.

Timothy Conway, director of counseling at Lakeland Regional High School, said parents want what's best for their children. They can sometimes cross the line, though — when they call to try to get a grade changed, for instance.

"Especially if the grade changes, what has the student learned?" Conway said. "The student has learned that hard work and achievement are not the most important components, in the end — the actual grade earned is more important and that his or her parent will swoop in to save the day.

"Students need to learn to advocate for themselves, especially as they get into middle and high school," he said. "Teachers are good people, and students just need to ask for help."

Fred Douglas, a counselor at Parsippany High School, said technology is partly to blame for the rise in hyper-parenting.

People often post on social media about who their child got as a teacher, what classes they are taking and what he or she has accomplished. The media's focus on rankings of top schools has also fueled a frenzy, Douglas said. Parents may feel like they're missing out and apply pressure on their child or school.

But overall, he sees parental involvement as critical to a child's development — and encourages it.

"The lingering message for that student is 'I'm important, people care about me, and I'd like to perform well,'" said Douglas, who is also president of the Morris County Professional Counselor Association. "That carries over tenfold when they develop in themselves the pride of doing something well."

College admissions pressure has fueled the trend of bullish parenting. In its most extreme form, wealthy parents took criminal action when they lied, cheated and bribed to get their children into colleges, in a scandal that roiled admissions offices last spring.

In an interview after the scandal broke, Jeff Gant, director of undergraduate admissions at Montclair State University, said over-parenting is a problem. He said he has received applications for admission that were clearly filled out by parents instead of students. He has read essays written in an adult's voice and seen parents make mistakes such as writing their own social security numbers or dates of birth on forms. More than once, a parent has even filled in his or her own name on the application.

"Gone are the days of helicopter parents," Gant said. "Now we have bulldozer parents who clear the way for them through life."

In a study released last year, researchers from the University of Minnesota found that over-controlling parents made it harder for young people to navigate school environments.

"Children who cannot regulate their emotions and behavior effectively are more likely to act out in the classroom, to have a harder time making friends and to struggle in school," said lead study author Nicole B. Perry.

Parents may be making lives easier for their kids in the short term, but they're missing out when they don't learn problem-solving, conflict resolution and coping skills they need for life, say experts.

Advice for parents

Counselors suggested ways that parents can refrain from the bulldozer approach while still helping their children excel in school and learn important life skills.

Conway said parents should monitor children's work and seek help where needed, whether from a teacher, tutor or counselor. Most importantly, they should remind children about the importance of education.

Before getting involved in a situation at school, parents should first ask themselves what their child will learn or gain.

"If your child sees your teacher and parent working together, then that's a win," he said. "If it becomes an adversarial relationship, and your child hears you making comments about the teacher or school staff at home, then the child will learn and internalize those messages."

Douglas said parents should include older children in conversations, requests and messages when asking about matters such as teacher expectations, class assignments and graduation requirements.

"We have to understand if parents and students are on the same page and whether everyone is looking to do everything the same way," he said.

Muriello said parents need to be OK seeing their children a little uncomfortable or stressed.

"Next time you catch yourself trying to jump in front of your child to solve the problem or make everything OK, stop yourself and ask, 'Do I really need to help my child in this situation or could this be an opportunity for a big life lesson?'" she said.

Muriello recommends that parents ask their children questions when a conflict or obstacle arises, such as "How do you want to handle this?" and "What do you think about this?" and then encourage them to address it.

"It's really important for parents to wait before jumping into problem-solving mode," she said.

"The mom who is telling her daughter what to text back to a friend — we want them to be able to try it themselves," she said. "Or a parent who is calling a teacher before giving kids a chance to talk to the teacher first."

"When they wake up the next day and say 'I am fine,' and 'I handled it myself,' they learn they are capable of getting through hard times," Muriello said. "That is one of the most important experiences teens and tweens can have in order to become a competent adult."