

OPEN FORUM

Alpha moms and helicopter parents

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On a recent day, a term from my son's elementary-school playground bounced into my head within hours of a strangely analogous term crossing my path at an academic conference on child well-being.

"Alpha moms" and "helicopter parents."

It almost doesn't matter which was from the third-grade playground and which from the august halls of a Washington think tank. Sometimes, buzzwords from very different arenas converge to catalyze a train of thought -- in this case, about the nature of childhood and parenting in America today, the qualities of tomorrow's Americans, the culture that we are fostering and our future economy.

Wow ... Lighten up, you might say. Yet, there is a coherent thread that links these concepts.

First, some definitions. "Alpha moms" (etymology, playground) are mothers (or fathers) who are so involved in their children's lives that they plan, choreograph and chaperone their children from music lesson to soccer practice to play date to Cub Scouts or Brownies, volunteering in their children's classrooms to boot. "Helicopter parents" (the academics' term) hover over their children from infancy to college, planning their lives to the nth degree for the sake of their kids' intellectual and social stimulation, and safety, as well as to demonstrate to one and all that they are good, involved parents. From the first pre-toddler play group to the digital tether of constant cell-phone calls and e-mails at college, these are busy, low-flying helicopters.

Obviously, there are many benefits to the alpha mom-helicopter parent syndrome. Children do receive enrichment from many of these activities. They see that their parents love them. And they are protected from the risks of unplanned, unsupervised lives. Late Baby Boomer parents -- those born from the mid-1950s to mid-1960s -- are especially likely to fall into this pattern of child-rearing.

However, there are other possible implications of this easily recognizable scenario. Let's start with corporate America and the halls of academe, work backward, and then swing forward to America, say 10 to 20 years from now. Many employers say that the first members of this cohort to enter the workforce often feel entitled to get what they want -- including big salaries and having someone else do the work for them -- and don't always have the best work ethic. Likewise, many college professors say that, while youth often think they are the smartest things since Albert Einstein -- or, maybe, Bill Gates and Steve Jobs would be more apt -- and are entitled to straight As, their academic skills are poor to mediocre, and their work habits are careless.

Of course, there are many academically gifted and motivated students and creative and hard-working employees. The achievement and work ethics are not dead among millions of young people.

Yet, returning to today's parents, it becomes easy to see where the young adults of today and tomorrow expect life to be programmed and risk-free, and to be entitled to all the toys and stock options that our society dangles before them. People often comment that suburban streets, once abuzz with children biking and playing ball, are all but kid-free zones, as parents have safer, more enriching and more planned activities for their children. People also have long commented on the ills of consumer culture and "rising aspirations," translated for today's kids into a world not simply of footballs and dolls, but of X-

Boxes, iPods, laptops, birthday extravaganzas and a new car at 16. And, while No Child Left Behind and other school reforms may enhance academic performance, researchers have pointed to an "educational flat line" in the nearly quarter-century since American students' academic shortcomings were outed by "A Nation at Risk."

Finally, let's fast-forward to 2015 or 2025 -- to an America that is older, more diverse, has less economic clout in the world, and, if present trends continue, may face domestic economic problems ranging from soaring public debt, negative private savings, an ever-rising current account deficit and growing economic inequality. Today's Alpha Moms and Helicopter Parents certainly are well-meaning, but they would also serve their children well by encouraging them to gain the skills to become productive workers, creative scientists and scholars, dynamic entrepreneurs and executives, and thoughtful, can-do public servants so that America can remain strong.

OK, as a parent, I hover too. But, maybe, the choppers just need to fly a little higher. In addition to planning that next "safe" play date, why not accept the "risk" of an unplanned, pick-up basketball game; instead of proffering that shiny new iPod, why not emphasize the importance of studying math or English; and instead of just commiserating by cell phone with your college sophomore about the travails of daily life, also ask them about Moliere or macroeconomics, calculus or the Civil War.

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