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OVER-INVOLVED PARENTING AND COMPETITION IN YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

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Introduction

Community-based youth programs frequently rely on volunteers and thrive through dedicated parent involvement. Effective youth program professionals must recognize the delicate balance between encouraging supportive parents and discouraging over-involved parenting behaviors. Successful youth programs can help the parenting community establish norms that support positive youth development. Increasing the responsibilities and autonomy granted to youth as they mature is an important expectation of positive youth development. Parents may require additional support and education in this practice.

Over-Involved Parenting: What is it?

Over-involved parents (originally labeled "helicopter parents" by Haim Ginott in 1969) are defined by psychologist Ann Dunnewold (2007) as "'being involved in a child's life in a way that is over-controlling, over-protecting, and over-perfecting in excess of responsible parenting." Being involved in a child's upbringing is necessary, the key difference in over-involved parenting are qualifiers such as: *excessive, frequent* and *constant.*

College administrators began using the term "helicopter parent" in the early 2000s, as the Millennial Generation began attending college. Faculty and administration began noticing an increase in practices such as parents calling their children every morning to wake them up for class, and confronting the professors about their children's grades. In addition, summer camp staff increasingly report more parents who demand daily phone contact with their children who are away at camp.

This style of parenting is not new, but has been increasingly noted in popular press, youth programs, and research. While every parent naturally desires to have a successful child, the over-involved parent makes a habit of stepping in to solve their child's problems, completing their child's tasks, and defending their child's efforts. Competitive events, in particular, may quickly elicit negative and combative responses from over-involved parents, as they seek to protect their child, ensure their child's success, or jockey their child's position and opportunities in a youth program or educational system.

Is it an Issue?

The over-involved parent's assistance may interfere with the child's developing sense of autonomy (LeMoyne and Buchanan 2011). In America and other developed countries, adolescence has now been cited by some developmental psychologists to begin at age twelve and last into the mid-twenties (Weinberger et al. 2005)**.** Due to this extension of adolescence, individuals between 18 and 25 years old have been termed "emerging adults" (Arnett 2000).

Emerging adulthood is a period characterized by instability and a focus on the self—characteristics that used to be assigned to teenagers. Emerging adults may be influenced by over-involved parents for significantly longer periods of time as their path to independence is delayed.

Some current research of young adults in college is uncovering an association between increased cell phone use, daily contact with parents, and social anxiety (Lepp et al. 2014), and approximately 80% of college students now return to live with their parents after graduation—a number that has been steadily increasing over the past few years (Ogunwole 2009).

By their late twenties, emerging adults who have been denied the opportunity to develop autonomy may not possess the life skills required to function independently as young adults (Bayless 2015). Opportunities to develop autonomy and decision-making skills are necessary for healthy adult functioning. Growing children require increasing opportunities to act and speak for themselves.

Research has begun to identify developmental and psychological issues in some emerging adults raised by excessively over-involved parents. These issues include under-developed coping skills, performance anxiety, decreased self-confidence, and depression (Bayless 2015). Over-controlling parental behavior may interfere with motivation and learning (Ryan and Deci 2003), lead to increased rebellious teen behavior and risk taking (Weybright et al. 2014), and create stresses on the parent's health (Dunnewold 2007).

For youth development programs, over-involved parents may create hostile social environments that are not conducive to positive growth and learning (Hong et al. 2014).

What does Over-involved Parenting Look Like in Youth Development?

Over-involved parenting behavior can be expressed on a continuum from mild to severe, contingent primarily on its frequency and the age of the child.

Behaviors of Over-Involved Parents:

- Investing more in the outcomes of the child's activities than the child does.
- Feelings of being in competition with other parents.
- Feeling compelled to complete the project work assigned to the child, either publically or behind the scenes.
- Unwillingness to trust or defer to programmatic support roles such as teachers, leaders, judges, referees, or other adults. (Arguing with teachers, judges, and referees.)
- Arguing in defense of the child's performance.
- Assigning fault or blame on systems that do not entitle and reward the child as much as the parent expects.

Over-Involved Parents in a Competitive World

A traditional definition of a parent that is overly-competitive is one who tries "to fulfill their need for satisfaction and success through their children" (Hong et al. 2014). Over the last decade, parental competition has also been reconceived as a socially derived and frequently subconscious compulsion. *Am I a good enough parent? Are my children judged critically if I don't step in and help them? Are my children safe if I am not supervising all their activities?*

Parenting therapist Ann Dunnewold counsels an increasing number of parents suffering from "extreme parenting" (2007). Over-anxious parents, judging themselves and their children against perceived standards of perfection, are ultimately competing with their own fears.

An over-protecting parent may feel the need to defend their child from assessment, judgement, mistakes, and, eventually, even comparison. The "over-producing" parent carefully engineers experiences so that they do not have to judge themselves in light of their child's apparent failures. Parents who attempt to control the outcomes of community competitive events may not only be cheating their child out of valuable learning opportunities, they also may be inciting conflict with other parents.

What Can Be Done?

Youth program managers and leaders faced with over-involved parents may frequently feel futility in dealing with such driven individuals. Competitively over-involved parents may have unrealistically high expectations for themselves and their children. Their interactions with other adults and youth can have a detrimental effect on program quality, particularly if those programs are attempting to build community cohesion and promote positive youth development.

A successful youth program that engages families will help set normative expectations, which is one of the primary benefits of community and small group involvement (Tuckman and Jensen 2010). Here is a short list of suggestions and resources to help youth program leaders return some balance to programs steered awry by challenging parents.

Encourage developmental autonomy. A healthy competitive program assists participants in discovering that there are benefits and learning opportunities in competition for "losers" and "winners" alike (e.g., "making the best better" and acting with good sportsmanship). Encouraging independent decision making and responsibility is a cornerstone of positive youth development.

Programs struggling with over-involved parents can also temporarily shift to focus on other essential elements of positive youth development, such as community service, servant leadership, and team building. This can help reinforce the message to over-involved parents that they are in a community that *shares* in successes and challenges.

Remind parents that the goal of a positive youth development program is a healthy young adult at the other end.

Recommended Reading: *Reclaiming Youth at Risk: Our Hope for the Future.* Brendtro, L.K., M. Brokenleg, and S. Van Bockern. 1990. (Revised ed.).Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

This book describes the essential elements of positive youth development and identifies their negative counterparts.

Recognize the opportunity for education. Preparing parents for competition provides an excellent opportunity to share information about the dangers of over-involved parenting. Greater *awareness of the issue* may be enough to help parents mitigate over-engaging behavior.

Recommended Reading: *Play TAG with your Children.* Maloney, L., D.W. Andrews, and R.A. Musgrave. 2009.

This fact sheet provides a positive reframing for reflecting on competitive experiences.

Clarify parental objectives. It is a good idea to ask parents why they have chosen your program out of the many that are available. What do they know about your program? How do they see themselves fitting into the program and their child's efforts?

Most parents establish healthy boundaries in their children's developing social lives, but competition can trigger over-involved parenting in what would seem the least likely of individuals. Interviewing incoming parents about their reasons for choosing your specific program may clue you in to the parent's needs, as much as the child's.

Recommended Reading: *Even June Cleaver Would Forget the Juice Box: Cut Yourself Some Slack (and Still Raise Great Kids) in the Age of Extreme Parenting*. Dunnewold, A. 2007. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc.

This is an excellent self-help book for over-involved parents.

Recognize the need for structural support. A program with multiple families engaged in over-parenting or competitive aggression may need intervention.

Parental codes of conduct are becoming increasingly common in competitive events. The issue with a code of conduct is that it establishes an external locus of control, which is antithetical to a strength-based/positive development pedagogy.

Developmental psychology has long moved away from the notion of forcing people to have self-control. Taking time to offer parental round tables, reading groups, and educational workshops can help parents set norms that are in line with program vision.

Conclusion

Parenting is one of the most challenging tasks humans can take on. Many youth programs focus on socio-economically deprived children growing up abused and neglected.

Over-involved parenting is a much more likely scenario in a youth development program where parents volunteer and engage *with* their youth in competitive events. Helping over-involved parents be mindful as they embrace the challenges and rewards of social norming can provide them with a more balanced and healthy approach to supporting their child's development.

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