

Helicopter Moms, Satellite Dads, and How to *Really* Help Your Child Do Well in School

By Michael H. Popkin, Ph. D.

Some parents hover over their children while they study like helicopters approaching a target, waiting for the opportune moment to strike with a machinegun-like rattling of comments, criticisms and admonishments designed to push the anointed child towards the holy grail of school success, a “good college” and, ultimately, a life of achievement and prosperity. Other parents behave more like satellites, blissfully ignorant of their children’s homework struggles as they orbit about in the deep space of their own preoccupations: work, social life, marriage and dating, and dissatisfaction or boredom with all of the above. In the past, helicopter parents were traditionally mothers while their satellite counterparts were more often dads, but in today’s world of gender equality, parents are free to err on either side of the school involvement equation.

Because helicopter parents are getting all of the press lately, I coined the term “satellite parents” because I see them as a bigger problem. Sure, helicoptering is bad news for kids. After all, who can think with all that racket? And no one in her right mind wants someone correcting every misplaced comma while she works. Even so, a helicopter parent at least shows some interest in their children’s school success: they care enough to get involved. Unfortunately, they get *too* involved and sabotage their own efforts, but at least give them an “E” for effort. Satellite parents, though, well that’s another story.

Before the women’s liberation movement changed the face of parenting, the typical satellite parent was a hard-working father who put in long hours at the office or on the road and had little time or energy for such family-centric activities as helping with homework, going to parent-teacher conferences, or participating in most other parenting activities. Oh, he could lay down the law and enforce some ruthless discipline when he felt it necessary, but when it came to the nitty-gritty of actual parent involvement, the satellite dad was either making money, resting from making money, or trying to knock a little white ball into a five inch hole on a rolling expanse of carefully trimmed grass. He operated like a distant satellite on the fringes of family space, staying in contact with his family by having it live by his rules, but not really “being there” either.

In today’s supercharged, stressed-out family of the new millennium, most mothers also work outside the home. Many are single parents who face incredible challenges when it comes to time, money and parenting. I have genuine compassion for these moms, who often become satellites simply out of fatigue. Perhaps it takes a real “supermom” to stay involved in spite of these hardships, but they do exist. Unfortunately, the opposite exists, as well. Many of today’s mothers are just too into themselves and their own needs to devote the time and effort that active parenting requires. These women have made the mistake of following the traditional male model of parenthood, rather than insisting that men adjust more to theirs, the traditional female model.

While many men have in fact become more involved with their kids' lives, taking interest in schoolwork, activities, and so on, many others—especially in families broken by divorce—drift farther and farther into space. Quite often, the tiny light of their satellite fades altogether as they abandon any semblance of fatherhood and, to use a trite and misguided mantra of our times, “move on.” So, today we have both too many men and women easing into orbit as satellite parents, and with what result? Thirty percent of teenagers now drop out of high school before graduation. Only about 40% of college freshman classes are made up of young men these days, down from almost 60% a couple of decades ago. Drug use among teens is still high, with alcohol use astronomical. Teen pregnancy, though occurring at a lower rate in recent years, is still a major problem. Equally troubling in a different way is the fact that more and more young people lack passion for their working futures. Eighty-five percent of college graduates today wind up working in fields other than their major. None of these youths, it seems, know what they want to be when they grow up. This may or may not be a problem, depending upon the individual student's flexibility and motivation. It is a problem, however, that so many students do not even seem to care. For them, the world of work often becomes a baffling and dissatisfying means to the simple ends of earning pay checks, rather than the source of meaning and fulfillment that it could be.

Are all of these problems the result of poor homework habits fostered by parents who either helicopter above or satellite beyond the bounds of active parenting? Well, yes they are. In a way. I realize that it's not a perfect correlation, but there is plenty of evidence (over two hundred separate studies, in fact) indicating that the most important predictor of a child's school success is not the quality of his teachers or the school's curriculum and facilities; nor is it the education or income level of the parents. The best predictor of student success is the involvement of the parent in the child's learning. A closer look at the situation would most likely reveal that it is the *quality* of that parent involvement, and not the quantity, that makes the difference. The over-involvement exemplified by the helicopter parent will likely backfire with more children than it benefits. In response to the invading aircraft, a child will run for cover or return fire—that is, she'll withdraw or engage in open rebellion. But *effective* parent involvement is another story. The parent whose involvement with the child lies between the extremes of the helicopter and the satellite—that parent makes all the difference! That parent is the secret to the child's academic success. That parent is the best hope for our very future as a country.

What are some of the secrets of effective parenting? There are dozens, but let's start with five that will help you make sure that, unlike helicopter and satellite parents, you stay *grounded* when it comes to parent involvement:

1. Grounded parents help their kids set and keep homework routines.

While helicopter parents are busy hovering over their children during homework time, making sure every “t” is crossed, and satellite parents are oblivious that their children have homework at all, the grounded parent understands that kids need reasonable structure and support in order to develop good study skills and habits. In other words, they believe that children should handle their own responsibilities like adults, but they

also understand that children need guidance from an adult with the bigger picture in mind. So, grounded parents work out a routine with the child that includes a regular time for homework and a quiet space with good lighting and the right tools. Rather than dictate these terms to their child, the parents and child decide together when and where the blessed homework ritual will occur each school night. The parents should exercise their authority by making sure that it actually happens, but they don't hover over the child. They do, however, make themselves available to offer help and support if the child needs it.

2. Grounded parents allow their children freedom within limits.

Children need a combination of freedom and limits almost as much as they need fresh air and sunshine. Freedom allows them the opportunity to learn to make good decisions, while limits provide a safe venue for them while they're learning from their mistakes. When they have both freedom and limits, children learn the incredibly important character trait of responsibility. Kids who learn to say, "I'm responsible for my actions," early have taken a huge step along the path to school success and beyond. Kids who do not accept responsibility for their actions fail to learn from their mistakes, as they become experts at playing the blame game and learning how to make excuses for their problems and misbehaviors. Helicopter parents do not allow their children enough freedom to own their mistakes, robbing them of any real lesson in responsibility. Satellite parents allow plenty of freedom but are not there to limit this freedom when it's more than the child can handle. The grounded parent asks questions like, "Would you rather do your homework before or after dinner?" This gives the child freedom to choose within limits that are appropriate for the situation.

3. Grounded parents ask good questions, listen and communicate.

Most kids really don't feel like reenacting their school day for their parent's edification. Still, an involved parent needs to show an interest in what is actually happening within the hallowed halls of learning and surrounding environs, such as whether some bully is exploiting money from their progeny on the bus ride home. The helicopter parent asks 101 questions, prying into whatever seems interesting with little regard for the child's feelings or privacy. Satellite parents could not tell you what subjects their child is studying at school, and if they do manage to ask, "What did you do in school today?" they're happy to accept the default "nothing" as a satisfactory answer. Grounded parents, on the other hand, ask a few good questions, listen with genuine interest to the answers, and share their own thoughts and feelings in a supportive and encouraging manner. At least that's their goal; after all, nobody does this perfectly. Here are a few evocative, open-ended questions (and by open ended, I mean questions that can not be answered in one word) to get your child talking about school:

What did you talk about in English today?

What tests do you have coming up that you need to prepare for?

What's one interesting thing that happened to you today in school?

*What was your high point today?
What was your low point?*

4. Grounded parents support the school's discipline plan.

It's pretty tough to succeed in school or anywhere else if you don't have the self-discipline to follow the rules. Let's face it, you wouldn't last until halftime in a sporting event if you didn't play by the rules, and excepting for a lack of referees, the rest of life is not really that different. Grounded parents are therefore keenly aware of the importance of teaching their children that discipline is an important part of any activity. If you break a rule, you pay a consequence, whether it's a minute in the penalty box or an hour in detention. Every school has a discipline policy in place, and most follow through with consequences for broken rules. The grounded parent takes the time to become familiar with the policy and go over it with their child, making sure that the child understands that if she gets into trouble at school, she is also in trouble at home. If you do not agree with the school's discipline plan, make an appointment to talk with the principal, but never give your child the idea that he can ignore it.

5. Grounded parents respect their child's learning style.

Research towards the end of the last century produced a lot of evidence that children do not all learn the same way. Some are more visual learners, while others seem to do better hearing information. Some like to study lying on their beds, while others prefer a desk and sturdy chair. Many kids these days seem to be able to multi-task, which may mean knocking out their math problems while downloading music to their Ipod. Helicopter parents do not care a byte about these differences and insist that their children do their work as they think it should be done. If this means in a hard chair, at a cramped desk with no music, then so be it--the child simply must conform. Never mind that he may learn better by mixing it up a little. Satellite parents may ask the child if he has any homework, but that parent is not about to get involved in helping the child figure out how he learns best. Grounded parents work with the child to determine what is best for that particular individual. They take the time to observe study skills and offer a reasonable amount of help. For example, the child might come up with a plan to study vocabulary words on her own and then have the parents call the words out as a practice test.

While satellite and helicopter parents fly off in opposite directions, grounded parents do the hard work of parenting day in and day out. They work with teachers, coaches and other adults in their children's lives as cooperative partners in the business of developing successful human beings. And what do they get for this hard work, commitment and skill? They get a feeling of joy down deep in their bones that a satellite or a helicopter cannot even imagine. ■

About Michael Popkin

Dr. Popkin is best known as the pioneer of video-based parent education with the introduction of *The Active Parenting Discussion Program* in 1983. Since then, millions

of parents have completed his parenting courses, including the best-selling *Active Parenting Now* and *Active Parenting of Teens*. A frequent keynote speaker and media guest, Dr. Popkin has appeared on hundreds of shows including “The Oprah Winfrey Show” and Montel Williams, and as a regular parenting expert on CNN. Look for his newest book, *Taming the Spirited Child: Strategies for Parenting Challenging Children without Breaking Their Spirits* (March 2007, from Fireside/Simon and Schuster). You can visit his website at www.ActiveParenting.com.

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