



HELICOPTER CHILDREN

Several people brought Mimi Schwartz's New York Times opinion piece to me; it's entitled "Becoming A Helicopter Daughter" (September 9, 2015). I think it really resonated for many people on both sides of the equation.

The author describes the way she remembers being a helicopter mom when her son was young, and how there are similarities in being the primary caregiver now for her father. She describes the familiar feelings of "constant anxiety combined with overtaxed patience." She manages his daily life-- from doctor appointments to diet and activities. She concludes that over-caring is bad for a child but not for an elderly parent. "Being overly vigilant may not extend a parent's life, but it can improve it."

I think caring for someone, whether a child or a parent, is a delicate balancing act. I know I stepped over the line on more than one occasion as a parent. I've met young people who have no idea how to solve a problem, get out of a pickle, or take public transit because their parents did it all. Cell phones make it easy to continue this dynamic well into adulthood. I believe that we should be giving our children tools to be increasingly self-sufficient.

The dynamic with aging parents is different. People want to continue to perceive themselves as independent and capable, and may view help as intrusive or insulting. Yet needs are likely to grow as we age. Family members often become increasingly involved as their older relative's capacity to do various tasks—paying bills, driving, cooking, managing medications—diminishes. We need to be watchful when a parent's abilities begin to change and s/he needs more support. It's incumbent upon us to find ways to help respectfully.

On the other side of the equation, **over-caring** for a parent can be counter-productive. Performing the tasks of daily life contributes to mental and physical capacity and preserves autonomy. As caregivers, we should take care to foster those attributes wherever possible. We should make sure the ways we offer help and provide assistance add to a person's quality of life.

Helicopters tend to insert a personal agenda that reflects their own preferences, rather than listening to what the individual wants, which they fear may reflect poorly on themselves. Often this backfires, and no one feels heard or understood.

Quality time is precious and often comes in the quiet moments. Sometimes doing the very best job of family caregiving is setting aside the quotidian tasks (or hiring help) in favor of

taking time to go fishing, look through photos, watch a good movie or listen to a concert together.

As aging parents, we need to understand that our children are acting from a place of love and concern. Ideally, we will have honest conversations about when we need help and when we don't, and will try to hear our adult children's concerns with open hearts and minds. We also need to give one another space to make mistakes and help our them learn to succeed as caregivers. One day we might really need them!

About 44 million people in the U.S. provide care to adults age 50 and older. More than 75% of that care is provided by unpaid family caregivers, the majority of whom are women who are also working and raising children. A large number are themselves over age 65. The 2013 estimated economic value of family caregiving is \$470 billion.

At this time of Thanksgiving, I am thankful for family caregivers who try so hard to do the right thing. If you are a family caregiver, check out PSRC's resources and groups; we think you'll find you've come to the right place!

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