

The Rise of the Lawnmower Parent

by Karen Fancher on June 25, 2016 in Mom, Parenting

It happened again this week. Several times, in fact.

I'm a professor at a well-known local university, and my office is located directly across from the elevators. Because I maintain a literal "open-door" policy for my students, visitors often mistake me for the department secretary, as I am the first person they see when the elevator doors open. At this time of year, the same scenario happens repeatedly:

I'm concentrating on something, but out of the corner of my eye I see the elevator doors slide open. It's a teenage girl and a middle-aged woman, presumably her mother. The parent walks into my office, with the girl trailing sheepishly behind. The mother says, "My daughter will be starting here in the fall. We've got a problem with her class schedule." I try to make eye contact and address the girl as I politely give them directions to the Office of Student Services down the hall, but it's the mother who apologizes for interrupting me. They leave my office, Mom leading the way with the class schedule in her hand.

Do you see the problem here? The child has been accepted into a major university and is weeks away from starting a difficult area of study, but it's her parent who is doing all of the talking to get her problem corrected, while she says nothing and appears to be dragged along against her will.

You're probably familiar with the term "Helicopter Parents," where parents hover over their children and swoop in to rescue them at the first sign of trouble. At the college level, the physical presence required to hover may be limited, so we are now observing a different parenting style: "Lawnmower Parents." These are the parents who rush ahead to intervene, saving the child from any potential inconvenience, problem or discomfort.



Lawnmower parenting: rushing ahead to remove perceived obstacles so your child doesn't have to deal with them herself.

Other variations of this style of parenting include “Snowplow Parents,” “Bulldozer Parents,” and my personal favorite: “Curling Parents,” given the similarity to the Olympic athletes who scurry ahead of the gently thrown stone, frantically brushing a smooth path and guiding the stone towards an exact pre-determined location.



Olympic hopefuls or over-involved parents? Image from Vancouver Sun (available at <http://www.vancouversun.com>)

All humor aside, **this kind of parental behavior can have long-lasting, detrimental effects on your child.** Some of these include:

- She becomes poorly equipped to deal with routine growing and learning experiences. This includes everything from asking for directions and dealing with an annoying roommate to much broader skills like communicating with superiors, negotiating for something she wants and coping with disappointment.
- She doesn't develop a sense of personal motivation or drive, since she only knows how to follow the path that the Lawnmower Parent has already prepared.
- She can't make a decision, big or small, without the guidance of others.
- She constantly receives the message that she isn't good enough to do this herself. In essence, the Lawnmower Parent is repeatedly demonstrating to the child that she cannot be trusted to accomplish things on her own.

Please consider these additional thoughts from a college faculty perspective:

- As a result of blatantly abusive behavior of some parents, many universities maintain a policy that all contact from a parent is referred to the administration office. A parent's request to “just keep this conversation between us” or “don't tell my daughter that I called you” isn't likely to be honored, and may actually single your child out to administration for an unflattering reason.
- There is some information that we legally cannot reveal to you if your child is over 18 and hasn't granted us permission. Under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), there are scenarios in which the university cannot release the student's academic record to the parents, regardless of who is paying

the tuition. And guess how I find out what I am permitted to reveal to a parent? I need to contact the school administration (see the previous bullet point).

- Faculty members are professionals, but if your behavior is threatening, outlandish, repetitive or otherwise inappropriate, there's a good chance that we're going to discuss it among ourselves. Your child may quickly gain a reputation within the faculty that is the exact opposite of how you are hoping that she will be received.
- Faculty are heavily involved in job searches, writing recommendations, making referrals, and so forth. If a parent has been contacting me to "help" her child through my class, how can I honestly rate that student highly on communication, motivation and maturity to a future employer when I haven't ever seen the student demonstrate those skills?

How can you avoid becoming a Lawnmower Parent?

- School age kids: start practicing now! Let your kid do the talking as often as possible: ordering at restaurants, asking for directions, or calling a friend on the phone to ask for a playdate instead of arranging it yourself via text message.
- High school kids: while there is still room for parental involvement at this age, insist that your child attempt all communication on her own first. If she needs to miss a quiz and do a make-up, have her make the arrangements with the teacher, and only intervene AFTER she has made the first attempt on her own. If she has a conflict between track practice and music lessons, have her discuss the possibilities with the involved groups, then have her make the decision and deal with the potential consequences.
- Kids of all ages: TRUST your kid to do well, and tell her repeatedly that you believe that she can make good decisions on her own. Give her room to make mistakes, even major ones sometimes, and learn from them together.

As parents, we will inevitably watch our kids struggle, feel uncomfortable and even fail. As painful as that can be, you aren't doing your child any favors by trying to shield her from this part of life or solve her problems for her. Instead, give her opportunities to learn strength and self-confidence, so she can handle future challenges with grace.

About Karen Fancher

Karen Fancher is a "relapsed Pittsburgher." Raised near Latrobe, PA, she studied pharmacy at Duquesne University but was lured away by the sunny skies of Florida shortly after graduation. She spent 10 years in Tampa, and during that time acquired an insightful daughter, a kindhearted son, a Midwestern husband and a spoiled cat (but not in that order). In 2010, the entire crowd relocated home to Pittsburgh. She is currently a professor in Duquesne University's School of Pharmacy, where she teaches oncology. When she's not on an adventure with her family, you can find her cooking, reading or daydreaming about musical legend Sting.