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Fathers are helping, mothers are hovering: Differential effects of helicopter parenting in college first-year students



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BACKGROUND

- Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985/1991) states that humans have three critical needs – autonomy, competence, and relatedness – that are necessary for optimal development.
- The current study posits that helicopter parenting may interfere with the development of these needs. Helicopter parenting is defined as excessive parental involvement, attention, and investment (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012); these parental practices have been linked with adolescent negative outcomes, including greater mental health symptomatology and decreased autonomy (Schiffirin et al., 2014).
- The current study intentionally focused on first-year college students who were experiencing significant developmental changes in social and academic domains and were away from home for the first time.
- We examined both mothers and fathers given the different roles they may play in adolescents' lives.
- Because helicopter parenting theoretically and empirically impinges on SDT needs, it was hypothesized that first-year students with helicopter parents would be more likely to experience negative outcomes (i.e., greater depression, panic, social anxiety, sexual and substance risk taking, peer insecurity, and less social and academic competence).

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

- First-year college students ($N = 156$; 45 Males, 111 Females) completed a forty-five minute online questionnaire.
- After the completion of the questionnaires, the participants were rewarded with either course credit or a five dollar gift card.

Measures

- The *Helicopter Parenting Behaviors* (Schiffirin et al., 2014; 9 items for each parent) and *Helicopter Parenting* (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012; 5 items for each parent) questionnaires were standardized and aggregated to examine perceived helicopter parenting behaviors of mothers ($M = .15$, $SD = .88$) and fathers ($M = .13$, $SD = .93$).
- The *Inventory of Depression and Anxiety Symptoms* (Watson et al., 2007; 64 items) assessed depression ($M = 45.15$, $SD = 14.23$, possible range = 20-100), social anxiety ($M = 11.03$, $SD = 5.02$, possible range=5-25), and panic ($M = 11.66$, $SD = 4.43$, possible range = 8-40).
- *Substance Use Risk-Taking* questions (4 items) were created to assess alcohol and drug use ($M = 5.10$, $SD = 1.64$, possible range = 4-16).
- *Sexual Risk-Taking* questions (3 items) were created to assess participants' risk-taking in sexual domains (i.e., use of protection, number of partners; $M = 1.75$, $SD = 1.93$, possible range = 0-8).
- The *Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment* (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987/2009; 25 items) was used to assess security to peers ($M = 100.64$, $SD = 13.45$, possible range = 25-125).

METHOD (continued)

Measures (continued)

- The *Self-Perception Profile for College Students* (Messer & Harter, 1986; Neemann & Harter, 2012) questionnaire was used to assess social competence (8 items; $M = 2.60$, $SD = .54$, possible range = 1-4) and academic competence (8 items; $M = 2.79$, $SD = .66$, possible range = 1-4).

RESULTS

Correlations

- Correlations among all variables can be found in Table 1. Of note, mothers' helicopter parenting was positively associated with fathers' helicopter parenting, social competence was positively associated with academic competence, and indices of internalizing problems were all associated with one another.

Table 1

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. M Helicopter	--								
2. F Helicopter	.71***	--							
3. Social Competence	-.12	.11	--						
4. Academic Competence	-.03	.10	.17*	--					
5. Substance Use	-.04	.05	.32***	-.12	--				
6. Sexual Risks	-.11	.06	.31***	-.10	.26***	--			
7. Peer Security	-.10	-.01	.43***	.14	.17*	.07	--		
8. Depression	.10	-.07	-.25**	-.51***	.04	.02	-.20*	--	
9. Social Anxiety	.15	.01	-.45***	-.31***	-.09	.05	-.25***	.63***	--
10. Panic	.13	.03	-.14	-.24**	-.05	.02	-.12	.64***	.61***

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, + $p < .10$; M=Mother, F=Father

Regression Analyses

- Eight multiple regressions (Table 2) were conducted examining the impact helicopter parenting has on first-year college students. The same predictors (i.e., gender, mothers' and fathers' helicopter parenting) were examined in each regression. The outcomes included depression, panic, social anxiety, substance use, sexual risk-taking, peer security, academic competence, and social competence.
- Higher scores in *mothers'* helicopter parenting were associated with greater depression and social anxiety.
- Higher scores in *fathers'* helicopter parenting were associated with greater social competence and peer security and less depression.
- Thus, the pattern of results suggests that mothers' helicopter parenting was associated with negative outcomes, whereas fathers' helicopter parenting was associated with positive outcomes.

RESULTS (continued)

Table 2

Outcome: Depression				Outcome: Social Anxiety			
Predictors	B	SE	p	Predictors	B	SE	p
Gender	-.00	.19	.99	Gender	-.14	.18	.46
M Helicopter	.37	.14	.01**	M Helicopter	.31	.13	.02*
F Helicopter	-.32	.13	.02*	F Helicopter	-.19	.13	.14
$F(3, 147) = 2.76, p < .05, R^2 = .05$				$F(3, 147) = 2.38, p < .07, R^2 = .05$			
Outcome: Panic				Outcome: Sexual Risk-Taking			
Predictors	B	SE	p	Predictors	B	SE	p
Gender	-.22	.17	.20	Gender	-.14	.19	.46
M Helicopter	.22	.12	.07	M Helicopter	-.32	.14	.02*
F Helicopter	-.10	.12	.41	F Helicopter	.29	.13	.03*
$F(3, 147) = 2.14, p < .10, R^2 = .04$				$F(3, 147) = 2.01, p < .12, R^2 = .04$			
Outcome: Social Competence				Outcome: Academic Competence			
Predictors	B	SE	p	Predictors	B	SE	p
Gender	-.27	.18	.14	Gender	-.14	.18	.44
M Helicopter	-.46	.13	.001***	M Helicopter	-.29	.13	.03*
F Helicopter	.45	.13	.00***	F Helicopter	.31	.13	.02*
$F(3, 147) = 5.03, p < .00, R^2 = .09$				$F(3, 147) = 2.12, p < .10, R^2 = .04$			
Outcome: Peer Security				Outcome: Substance Use			
Predictors	B	SE	p	Predictors	B	SE	p
Gender	-.67	.18	.00***	Gender	.14	.17	.41
M Helicopter	-.34	.13	.01**	M Helicopter	-.11	.12	.36
F Helicopter	.29	.13	.02*	F Helicopter	.10	.12	.37
$F(3, 147) = 5.71, p < .00, R^2 = .10$				$F(3, 147) = .76, p < .52, R^2 = .02$			

CONCLUSIONS

- Previous research has generally found that helicopter parenting is problematic for development; our research found that, at least in first-year students, mothers' and fathers' parenting may be viewed differently.
- Mothers may have been perceived as being intrusive, and their parenting negatively impacted the student; fathers may have been seen as protective, and their parenting was positively received. Future research should examine the different perceptions of mothers' and fathers' helicopter parenting and examine why these different perceptions exist.
- Although this study relied exclusively on self-reports, this method was crucial to our research questions – we obtained insight into adolescents' parenting perceptions and answers to sensitive questions (e.g., sexual behavior) to which other informants would not have had such insight.

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