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How Parents Are Robbing Their Children of Adulthood

Today's "snowplow parents" keep their children's futures obstacle-free — even when it means crossing ethical and legal boundaries.


By Claire Cain Miller and Jonah Engel Bromwich

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Nicole Eisenberg's older son has wanted to be a star of the stage since he was a toddler, she said. He took voice, dance and drama lessons and attended the renowned Stagedoor Manor summer camp for half a dozen years, but she was anxious that might not be enough to get him into the best performing-arts programs.

So Ms. Eisenberg and others in Bloomfield Hills, Mich., the affluent suburb where she lives, helped him start a charity with friends that raised more than $250,000 over four years.

"The moms — the four or five moms that started it together — we started it, we helped, but we did not do it for them," Ms. Eisenberg, 49, recalled. "Did we ask for sponsors for them? Yes. Did we ask for money for them? Yes. But they had to do the work."

She even considered a donation to the college of his choice. "There's no amount of money we could have paid to have got him in," Ms. Eisenberg said. "Because, trust me, my father-in-law asked." (Ms. Eisenberg's son was admitted to two of the best musical theater programs in the country, she said, along with nine more of the 26 schools he applied to.)

College has been on their radar since her son was in diapers. "We've been working on this since he was 3 years old," she said. To apply, she said, "I had to take him on 20 auditions for musical theater. But he did it with me. I don't feel like I did this. I supported him in it. I did not helicopter parent him. I was a co-pilot."

Or was she, perhaps, a … snowplow parent?

Helicopter parenting, the practice of hovering anxiously near one's children, monitoring their every activity, is so 20th century. Some affluent mothers and fathers now are more like snowplows: machines chugging ahead, clearing any obstacles in their child's path to success, so they don't have to encounter failure, frustration or lost opportunities.

Taken to its criminal extreme, that means bribing SAT proctors and paying off college coaches to get children in to elite colleges — and then going to great lengths to make sure they never face the humiliation of knowing how they got there.

Those are among the allegations in the recent college bribery scandal, in which 50 people were charged in a wide-ranging fraud to secure students admissions to colleges. According to the investigation, one parent lied about his son playing water polo, but then worried that the child would be perceived by his peers as "a bench warmer side door person." (He was assured that his son wouldn't have to actually be on the team.) Another, the charges said, paid someone to take the ACT for her son — and then pretended to proctor it for him herself, at home, so he would think he was the test-taker.

The parents charged in this investigation, code-named Operation Varsity Blues, are far outside the norm. But they were acting as the ultimate snowplows: clearing the way for their children to get in to college, while shielding them from any of the difficulty, risk and potential disappointment of the process.

In its less outrageous — and wholly legal — form, snowplowing (also known as lawn-mowing and bulldozing) has become the most brazen mode of parenting of the privileged children in the everyone-gets-a-trophy generation.

It starts early, when parents get on wait lists for elite preschools before their babies are born and try to make sure their toddlers are never compelled to do anything that may frustrate them. It gets more intense when school starts: running a forgotten assignment to school or calling a coach to request that their child make the team.

Later, it's writing them an excuse if they procrastinate on schoolwork, paying a college counselor thousands of dollars to perfect their applications or calling their professors to argue about a grade.

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The bribery scandal has "just highlighted an incredibly dark side of what has become normative, which is making sure that your kid has the best, is exposed to the best, has every advantage — without understanding how disabling that can be," said Madeline Levine, a psychologist and the author of "Teach Your Children Well: Why Values and Coping Skills Matter More Than Grades, Trophies or 'Fat Envelopes.'"

"They've cleared everything out of their kids' way," she said.

In her practice, Dr. Levine said, she regularly sees college freshmen who "have had to come home from Emory or Brown because they don't have the minimal kinds of adult skills that one needs to be in college."

One came home because there was a rat in the dorm room. Some didn't like their roommates. Others said it was too much work, and they had never learned independent study skills. One didn't like to eat food with sauce. Her whole life, her parents had helped her avoid sauce, calling friends before going to their houses for dinner. At college, she didn't know how to cope with the cafeteria options — covered in sauce.

"Here are parents who have spent 18 years grooming their kids with what they perceive as advantages, but they're not," Dr. Levine said.

Yes, it's a parent's job to support the children, and to use their adult wisdom to prepare for the future when their children aren't mature enough to do so. That's why parents hide certain toys from toddlers to avoid temper tantrums or take away a teenager's car keys until he finishes his college applications.

If children have never faced an obstacle, what happens when they get into the real world?

They flounder, said Julie Lythcott-Haims, the former dean of freshmen at Stanford and the author of "How to Raise an Adult: Break Free of the Overparenting Trap and Prepare Your Kid for Success."

At Stanford, she said, she saw students rely on their parents to set up play dates with people in their dorm or complain to their child's employers when an internship didn't lead to a job. The root cause, she said, was parents who had never let their children make mistakes or face challenges.

Snowplow parents have it backward, Ms. Lythcott-Haims said: "The point is to prepare the kid for the road, instead of preparing the road for the kid."

Helicopter parenting is a term that came into vogue in the 1980s and grew out of fear about children's physical safety — that they would fall off a play structure or be kidnapped at the bus stop. In the 1990s, it evolved into intensive parenting, which meant not just constantly monitoring children, but also always teaching them.

This is when parents began filling afternoons and weekends with lessons, tutors and traveling sports games. Parents now spend more money on child rearing than any previous generation did, according to Consumer Expenditure Survey data analyzed by the sociologists Sabino Kornrich and Frank Furstenberg.

According to time-use data analyzed by Melissa A. Milkie, a sociologist at the University of Toronto, today's working mothers spend as much time doing hands-on activities with their children as stay-at-home mothers did in the 1970s. Texting and social media have allowed parents to keep ever closer track of their progeny.

Snowplow parenting is an even more obsessive form.

"There's a constant monitoring of where their kid is and what they are doing, all with the intent of preventing something happening and becoming a barrier to the child's success," said Laura Hamilton, the author of "Parenting to a Degree: How Family Matters for College and Beyond" and a sociologist at the University of California, Merced.

The destination at the end of the road is often admission to college. For many wealthy families, it has always been a necessary badge of accomplishment for the child — and for the parents. A college degree has also become increasingly essential to earning a middle-class wage.

But college admissions have become more competitive. The number of applicants has doubled since the 1970s, and the growth in the number of spots has not kept pace, remaining basically unchanged at the very top schools.

At the same time, it's no longer guaranteed that children will do as well as their parents. Children born in 1950 had an 80 percent chance of making more money than their parents, according to work by a team of economists led by Raj Chetty at Harvard. Those born in 1970 had a 61 percent chance. But since 1980, children are as likely as not to earn less than their parents did.

It's painful for any parent to watch their child mess up, or not achieve their (or their parents') goals. Now, however, the stakes are so much higher.

"Increasingly, it appears any mistake could be fatal for their class outcome," said Philip Cohen, a sociologist studying parenting and inequality at the University of Maryland.

The problem is: Snowplowing is a parenting habit that's hard to break.

"If you're doing it in high school, you can't stop at college," Ms. Lythcott-Haims said. "If you're doing it in college, you can't stop when it comes to the workplace. You have manufactured a role for yourself of always being there to handle things for your child, so it gets worse because your young adult is ill-equipped to manage the basic tasks of life."

In a new poll by The New York Times and Morning Consult of a nationally representative group of parents of children ages 18 to 28, three-quarters had made appointments for their adult children, like for doctor visits or haircuts, and the same share had reminded them of

deadlines for school. Eleven percent said they would contact their child's employer if their child had an issue.

Sixteen percent of those with children in college had texted or called them to wake them up so they didn't sleep through a class or test. Eight percent had contacted a college professor or administrator about their child's grades or a problem they were having.

"Some of them think they're doing the right thing by their children," said David McCullough, Jr., a high school teacher and the author of "You Are Not Special and Other Encouragements," who helped popularize the "snowplow" term. "Parents understand that going to a highly prestigious college brings with it long-lasting advantage."

It's not just the wealthy. Recent research suggests that parents across lines of class and race are embracing the idea of intensive parenting, whether or not they can afford it.

Often, that involves intervening on behalf of their children. In a recent study that surveyed a nationally representative group of parents about which parenting choices they thought were best, people, regardless of race, income or education, said children should be enrolled in after-school activities so they wouldn't have to feel bored. If a child didn't like school, they thought parents should talk to the teacher to get the child different work.

Still, true snowplow parenting is done largely by privileged parents, who have the money, connections and know-how to stay two steps ahead of their children. Families without those resources don't necessarily have the money to invest in lessons and college counselors, and may not have experience navigating college admissions or ultracompetitive job markets.

Carolyn O'Laughlin worked as a director of resident life at Sarah Lawrence and Columbia, and now does a similar job at St. Louis Community College, Meramec. "I don't talk to parents nearly as much here, where parents are down the street, as I did when the parents were across the country," she said.

At the elite schools, Ms. O'Laughlin said, a mother once called her to ask her to list the items in the school salad bar so she could choose what her daughter should eat for lunch, and another parent intervened over video chat to resolve a dispute with a roommate over stolen peanut butter.

Now, many of the students she works with are immigrants or first-generation college students.

"As I read about the scandal, I feel for those parents, I do," she said. But "first-generation students coming through here are figuring out how to navigate an educational system that hasn't always been built for them," she said. "It is changing the course of their lives and the lives of their families."

Cathy Tran, 22, a senior at the University of Pennsylvania, is the daughter of people who immigrated from Vietnam who did not attend college. “They do give me a lot of emotional support, but they haven’t really been able to tell me about what I should be doing, like next steps,” she said.

Clearing her own path to college had some benefits, Ms. Tran said. “I actually think that I have a sense of independence and confidence in myself in a way that some of my friends whose parents attended college might not have,” she said. “I had some friends who didn’t even know how to do laundry. I guess in some ways I feel like I was forced to be an adult much earlier on.”

Learning to solve problems, take risks and overcome frustration are crucial life skills, many child development experts say, and if parents don’t let their children encounter failure, the children don’t acquire them. When a 3-year-old drops a dish and breaks it, she’s probably going to try not to drop it the next time. When a 20-year-old sleeps through a test, he’s probably not going to forget to set his alarm again.

Snowplowing has gone so far, they say, that many young people are in crisis, lacking these problem-solving skills and experiencing record rates of anxiety. There are now classes to teach children to practice failing, at college campuses around the country and even for preschoolers.

Many snowplow parents know it’s problematic, too. But because of privilege or peer pressure or anxiety about their children’s futures, they do it anyway.

Felicity Huffman, an actress charged in the college admissions scheme, has long extolled the benefits of a parenting philosophy in which children are to be treated as adults. On her parenting blog, What the Flicka (which was taken down this week), she described raising children as “one long journey of overcoming obstacles.” In another post, she praised schoolchildren “for walking into a building every day full of the unknown, the challenging, the potential of failure.”

This week, Ms. Huffman was accused of paying $15,000 for an SAT proctor to secretly inflate her daughter’s test scores.

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