

Q&A with author of new book on how parenting affects student outcomes

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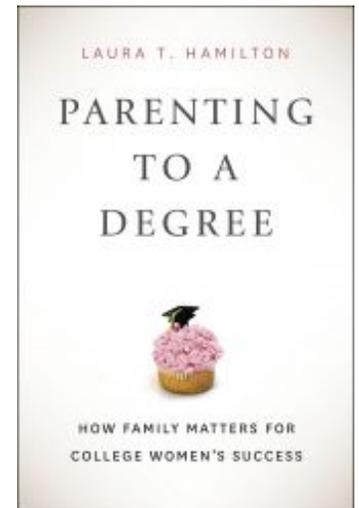
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Yes, Blame Mom and Dad

Author of a new book on how family matters for college women's success argues that four-year public institutions are increasingly dependent on active -- and wealthy -- parents, and that can harm students with less-involved parents.

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By

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While doing fieldwork at a four-year public university in 2004, Laura Hamilton, now an associate professor of sociology at the University of California at Merced, observed how parents interacted with their college-age daughters during and after move-in day.

Some parents -- those fussing over the arrangements of their daughter's bedroom or making phone calls to the university to figure out when, exactly, their child should expect the campus shuttle to arrive each morning -- became a regular presence on the residence hall floor throughout the year. Some stayed only long enough to make sure their daughters were settled, skipping orientations and receptions to honor their child's newly found independence. Other parents were not present on move-in day at all, as they could not afford to take time off work.

Hamilton observed and interviewed those daughters for the next five years as they attended the unnamed public

flagship institution. The study became the focus of Hamilton's previous book, *Paying for the Party*, which she co-wrote with Elizabeth Armstrong, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Michigan. In Hamilton's new book, *Parenting to a Degree* (University of Chicago Press), she turns her attention to the parents of 41 of the students in the original study -- both the parents who hovered over their daughters on move-in day and those who did not.

Hamilton responded to questions about her book.

Q: I'm not sure one can write a book about parenting and college today without talking about helicopter parents. And your book certainly features them. You also discuss a very particular subset of helicopter parents, though -- what you call "pink helicopters."

A: Often when people think of helicopter parents, they think of another group of helicopters that I called professional helicopters. These parents are focused on improving academic and career success for their children. But pink helicopters are not as academically invested. They cared about academics only to the extent their children needed to stay in school. Their focus is on enabling their children to have the "best years of their lives." This is a phrase you hear bandied about a lot in regards to college, and these parents are really interested in ensuring their children have that. Why? What this offers are elite social networks as well as a certain style of appearance in relating with people that will help them move within upper-class circles.

This approach is also very gendered. Parents assume that their daughters will develop the kinds of interaction styles that will allow them to eventually marry someone who is very wealthy, not because of their own skills, credential and careers, but because of their charm, their looks and who they know. This is one strategy for securing a spot in the upper and upper-middle classes. It used to be referred to as getting the "Mrs. degree." In the past, that meant you go to college to find a man. Now it's a little different in that you don't get married in college or right out of college, but you do go to meet the kind of man you want to marry eventually, when they are more successful.

You go to a prestigious school, join a sorority, learn how to flirt and interact in the right kind of way, and you move from college into the big-city social scene and eventually those networks will lead you to marry someone who is very successful. It doesn't require you to be successful yourself, but it requires you to be in the same academic and career spaces as those who are.

Parents are pretty explicit about this, which was a bit surprising to me. Maybe it shouldn't have been. I went through sorority rush in college, and one of the women going through rush with me said she was doing that just to find a husband. I found it very shocking at the time. But this approach is still a viable one to pink helicopters and their children.

Q: You write that paying a student's way is a part of helicopter parenting in general, but for pink helicopters you note that there are no limits to this spending. The parents are paying for their daughters' costly designer clothing, restaurant bills, bar tabs, spring break travel. Even for a wealthier family, that much spending doesn't always come easy. One mom you interviewed even had to go back to work to pay for her daughter's social life. What's going on here?

A: Helicoptering as a general approach is very expensive. But it becomes even more expensive when you're underwriting a social experience. There really is no limit to what that could cost. Anything from partying abroad in Spain for a year to buying the best designer clothing to help your daughter fit in to giving them lots of money to eat out and be at the bars. The problem is you can't put price tag on what it costs to have fun in college. That is potentially infinite. There is no end to how high you can go.

Parents who felt they should provide this for their daughter were also very susceptible to guilt trips. They wanted to offer the best, most fun years of their daughters' lives, and their daughters were very skilled at making sure their parents gave them what they wanted. It was easy to keep shelling out more money and to feel bad if you're not

doing as much as other parents are doing. Your daughter's friend has all this other stuff and she's complaining to you about it, and so you want to offer it.

Virtually every parent I interviewed loved their daughter dearly and wanted to offer them what they thought a good parent should offer. As a parent myself, I get that. It sounds very illogical, but when you talk to them, you hear the depth of what they wanted for their kids. For example, one mother was a widow on a constrained budget, and she sent her daughter to an out-of-state institution, paying for her tuition and other expenses. All of the mother's relatives told her this was a bad decision, but she did it anyway because she felt very strongly that these were the most magical years of her daughter's life. This was coming from a place of love and parental guilt, but it had very bad repercussions on the younger daughter in the family, who had to pay for much of her own college because the family money had basically run out.

When it was all said and done, most of these parents were dissatisfied with what their kids got out of college. Afterwards, they said they might have done things differently had they known better. It's not surprising to me that they didn't know better, however, because the notion that college is supposed to be the best years of your life is everywhere. Parents really feel that they've messed up in some way if their child doesn't have that.

Q: At the start of *Parenting to a Degree*, you describe five ideal visions of the college experience that parents can have: the career-building experience, the social experience, the mobility experience, the adult experience and a hybridized experience. Pink helicopters seem to value that social experience pretty heavily. You describe other kinds of parents, too, including "professional helicopters," "paramedics" and "bystanders." Are these other groups so easily paired with one of the five visions of college?

A: They all sort of fit with particular notions of the ideal college experience. Professional helicopters, for example, are focused on creating a space for career building. This involves carefully monitoring virtually every aspect of college to remove any barriers -- not just those that arise in the classroom. These might include a boyfriend who wants a trophy wife, not forming [friendships] on campus or failing to do enough extracurricular activities. These parents are happy to micromanage it all in order to create space for their children to move forward academically. They also look ahead to graduate school and particular career fields to ensure that all pieces fall in place as they move through college.

Bystander parents really need their children to be adults in college. Some of them would have done more if they could have, but they saw themselves as outsiders. They did not feel equipped to offer logistical support to their students -- and some parents saw themselves as hindering their children if they did.

Paramedics sit between helicopters and bystanders. Rather than micromanage either the social or the academic, their focus is on building autonomy. They want to see their kids make mistakes so they can learn, but there is a big safety net there. Once a kid makes a really big misstep or is headed toward one, here's the ambulance, lights flashing, zooming in to fix it. They did not hover, however. And they were very clear about that. There were also paramedics that did not have a lot of money but still had experience with higher education. Their focus was on autonomy and in creating kids who are capable of moving through school and life on their own.

Q: How large of a factor is class in determining these parenting styles?

A: Class definitely matters. To be a helicopter, you have to have a certain base level of resources. You have to have a college education. You have to have a certain amount of money. That means anyone from middle class all the way up to upper class can try to do it. However, I should note that middle-class families may not do it very well given the amount of resources it takes to succeed. For them, it could even be disastrous.

Paramedics had a wide variety of backgrounds. You have some very wealthy parents, even millionaire parents who took this approach, but they had typically grown up working class so they had working-class beliefs about the importance of autonomy combined with a lot of resources as adults. There were also working-class paramedics that

did not have a lot of money but had some experience with higher education, which set them apart from their peers. Their focus was on autonomy and on creating kids who are capable of moving through school and life on their own. These parents highlight the fact that class definitely shapes parenting approaches but does not determine it.

But bystanders were typically on the bottom end of the class spectrum. These were parents who had very limited resources and who often did not have college educations or any experience with college. They could not take time off their jobs to move kids into college. They could not be there physically in ways other parents could. They did not know how to advise their students on classes to take or how to fill out financial aid forms or what career paths would be a good fit.

Q: There are consequences to all styles of parenting presented in this book. Pink helicopters succeeded at providing a social experience for their daughters, but they left college with poor academic records and little chance of finding jobs that could support the lifestyles they enjoyed while in school. With paramedics, sometimes their rescue attempts came too late, in terms of helping their children find the right area of study or even preventing drug and alcohol abuse. Is there a “best” or “worst” way to parent?

A: All parenting approaches have their costs and benefits. If you are an absolute risk-averse parent, maybe you need to be a helicopter. If you want to ensure your child will not drop out of college or fail to get a decent-paying job after college, you should be a professional helicopter. But there are costs with that, even beyond the financial costs. These kids are more dependent on parents. I recently did interviews with these women who are now 30, and they are still calling their parents about major decisions. They are unsure of themselves, more anxious than others and not as comfortable in their own skin as you might expect a 30-year-old to be. The reins of responsibility were not handed over.

The bystander approach isn't ideal for students. But one thing I make very clear is that this is not because bystander parents are not parenting adequately. In fact, it is reasonable for them to assume that higher education institutions offer the kinds of support they need. I place ultimate blame on institutions and on limited state support of higher education. Once you get to the point where education is less funded by the state, a university's new partners become families who can offer lots of tuition dollars and come with the time and expertise and connections necessary to move students forward. In this particular configuration, bystander parents just absolutely lose.

Bystander parents need their students to be adults, and four-year universities are not really set up to accommodate adults. Colleges assume virtually every child has a helicopter or paramedic parent waiting in the wings.

Universities are not offering the kinds of things that kids from modest backgrounds need in order to compete with and be as successful as their affluent peers. You want to allow children from lower-income families to have an experience that's a little closer to the experience that affluent students can have. For example, offer financial support beyond tuition and fees so that they can participate in the life of campus. Some degree of social integration is important. Colleges also need to understand the whole student. Students go to different offices for different functions, but the decisions they are making are holistic ones. A student shouldn't be an event-planning major if they are low income, because that career relies heavily on family ties and social taste, not actually on having a college degree.

I should note that universities do care deeply about these students. At almost any university, you're going to find administrators who are trying to work on supporting low-income students. However, universities are complex and there are many offices with many different purposes. Ultimately, decisions made on the basis of finances limit the extent to which many state schools can support students of modest means.

Q: You wrote that the daughters of pink helicopter parents also struggled after college. Should institutions be doing any intervention there?

A: Colleges cater to pink helicopters. If nearly half of a college's net income comes from tuition, they're going to

operate a lot like private schools in that they must cater to the higher-paying customers. They provide massive Greek systems and advertise that quintessential college experience. The campus tours focus on lazy rivers and climbing walls and recreational centers. All of this is a function of catering to affluent families that want a social experience for their children.

Universities are hamstrung, because they need those dollars. Most administrators are not gleefully building a Disneyland for college kids. They're worried about the costs of this. They're worried about the side effects like alcohol poisoning and rape. All of those are byproducts of the social world that they are building. But in order to remain financially solvent, you kind of have to cater to the pink helicopters. They are a bit stuck.

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