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Want to Win Custody? Become a Helicopter Parent

by Lenore Skenazy (Subscribe to Lenore Skenazy's posts) Aug 31st 2010 11:00AM

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What do you call a dad who texts his kid 30 times a day and photographs each message?

Quite possibly "the winner" -- in divorce court.

Increasingly, courts are defining "good parenting" as "helicopter parenting," says Gaia Bernstein, a Seton Hall law professor who wrote "Over-Parenting" with Zvi Triger. Their paper looks at how divorce court judges are beginning to reward the parents who hover -- even smother -- the most. And parents are taking this to heart.

"We talked to attorneys and they describe this 'race for involvement' that's going on," says Bernstein. "So if somebody's about to get divorced and it's the parent who was less involved, the divorce attorney tells them, 'Now you have to get really, *really* involved. So you should get to know all the names of your children's teachers and friends and the parents of the friends, and coach their Little League, and attend Parent-and-Me classes if the child is young ...'"

While the lawyers also caution their clients not to overdo it, they always do. Hence the 30 dad-to-kid texts a day (photographed to use later as evidence of "involvement"). Hence not just coaching Little League, but coming in and taking over. Hence setting up playdates and sitting through every piano lesson and hovering to the point, says Bernstein, where "they leave the children with no independence."

All in the hopes that the judge will reward them.

What's disturbing is the judge just might. After all, we are clearly in an intensive parenting moment. A mom who lets her third grader walk to school could be considered "negligent" for ignoring the extremely tiny chance he could get kidnapped. A dad who lets his daughter knock on a neighbor's door could be considered "lazy" for not escorting her there and back. When the courts start actually codifying things like, "A good parent is one who drives his kids to school every day," helicopter parenting becomes literally the law of the land.

The belief behind it is that the more we love our children, the more hours we clock by their side. The problem with this is that if you take the time to teach your child how to tie his shoes, you don't have to spend the rest of your life tying them. Which means you don't have to spend quite as much time squatting next to his sneakers. Which could mean that, in the eyes of the law, you -- literally *because* you taught your child some independence -- are a bad parent. At least compared to the one who is still bending down, making bunny ears, year after year.

Why are we rewarding parents for stunting their kids?

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