



Grounding Helicopter Parents, and Helping Their Kids (and You) **FIND GRIT**

BY COLONEL JILL MORGENTHALER

There is a societal challenge facing today's managers: Helicopter parents have raised fragile, brittle, and breakable children—the opposite of resilient—who are now young adults in the workplace.

As a result, managers must understand what a helicopter parent is and how to build resiliency in the survivor of one.

The military, hiring managers, youth sports coaches, high school teachers, and college administrators have one thing in common. These professionals are likely to have encounters with helicopter parents. These are the parents of our Millennials and Generation Z children. This type of parent takes over the responsibility for their child's experiences, successes, and failures, and in turn raises a child without "grit" or the resolve to succeed. The children who were unable to solve problems without adult interference have grown up and now are a part of our workforce. How do you manage the helicopter parents of your employees? How do you help these employees find their "grit" and resolve the problems they face every day in the workplace? And how do you find the grit in yourself?

HELICOPTER PARENT ON THE FRONT LINES

In 2004, a year of attacks on the Green Zone, convoys, and in Fallujah, I was sitting at my desk in charge of all public affairs for the commanding general. I was informed that I had a telephone call from a sergeant major in Kuwait. I assumed it was about embedding the media with a combat brigade. I took the call. I was wrong. He explained that he had in front of him a mother who had traveled from the United States to Kuwait and now wanted to enter Iraq and go to Fallujah to see her son, a young Marine. The sergeant major had tried to explain to her many times, "Civilians cannot go into Iraq. We are at war."

She would not hear his "no." Desperately, he called me, the only colonel he knew how to reach in Baghdad. He requested that I try to talk some sense into her. I said, "Sure. Put her on the line." I explained to her that her son was an adult, a warrior, and a Marine. I told her that she would be a huge embarrassment to him, that she would undermine him as an adult, a warrior, and a Marine. She said, "No, no, no," and I said, "Yes, yes, yes. This is war and your presence would be the worst thing that could happen to him. Now, go home." And I hung up.

A few months later, one of my soldiers informed me that a Marine corporal wanted to talk to me. That was strange. Corporals usually avoid colonels. I said OK. I had an open-door policy.

A young Marine came in and stood at attention and smartly saluted me. And then he said, "Ma'am, I understand that you spoke to my mother."

"Oh, that's who you are—the Marine in Fallujah."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Yes, I did."

"Thank you, ma'am, for sending her home."

"Ah, you're welcome."

As he smartly saluted and turned to go, I added, "I understand why you joined the Marine Corps and ran away to Iraq."

"YES, MA'AM!"

I have learned since that experience in 2004 that I had interacted with a helicopter parent. These parents are hyper-involved in their kids' lives and hold their hands through every stage of growing up, whether the kids want them to or not.

SIGNS OF HELICOPTER PARENTS

Psychologist Ann Dunnewold, according to MomJunction blogger Rebecca Malachi in her article "8 Warning Signs Of Helicopter Parenting And 5 Adverse Effects On Your Child," calls helicopter parenting overparenting, which means overcontrolling, overprotecting and overperfecting a child's life.

As a mother of two Millennials, I wondered if I was a helicopter parent—if I was too involved in my son's homework when he was in middle school. I'm glad to say that as I examined the eight warning signs Malachi shares about helicopter parenting, I did not recognize these traits in myself and have not demonstrated any of them:

1. You negotiate for your child's conflicts.
2. You do their academic works.
3. You train your child's trainers.
4. You stick with your kids even if it is a short walk away.
5. You hold the responsibility for all your child's house chores.
6. You shield them from failure.
7. You don't allow them to tackle their problems.
8. You don't allow them to make age appropriate choices.

According to Malachi, if you find yourself nodding to most of these practices, you might want to move away from your helicopter parenting style and permit more autonomy and risk taking. In her MomJunction article, Malachi states that there are four reasons parents fall into helicopter parenting and hinder their children from becoming full-fledged adults:

Fear. You fear your child's possible failures. You think you can shelter them from disappointments in life. Unfortunately, your fear can lead to their low self-esteem, anxiety, lack of coping skills, and overall unhappiness.

Anxiousness. Your anxiety about a child's career, the economy, and the world in general can cause you to overprotect. Malachi quotes Dr. Carolyn Daitch: "Worry can drive parents to take control of their children to keep them from being disappointed or hurt."

Overcompensation. Parents who were neglected, ignored, and unloved as children try to ensure their own children do not feel that way. They pay excess attention and monitoring to counter their own neglect.



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Peer pressure. Micromanaging parents may influence other parents to overparent. All parents feel at one time or another that they are bad parents. When they witness other parents being excessive, they feel guilt that they are not.

Writing in the Huffington Post, Anna Almendrala says, “While most parents start scaling back their involvement when children head to college, helicopter parents ramp up support. The worst examples of helicopter parenting include previously unheard-of behaviors like parents attending their adult children’s job interviews or calling college professors to argue over a grade. Meanwhile, their kids emerge from childhood without basic survival skills like how to cook, clean, or do their own laundry.”

CONFRONTING HELICOPTER PARENTS

As a leader or manager, how do you handle the helicopter parent? You have three real choices—what I call “the three I’s.” As you look at your work culture, decide which is best. The most important point is not to blame the recipient/child of the helicopter parent. He or she may be embarrassed by the over-possessiveness.

The three I’s for handling the helicopter parent are:

Impede. Forbid, ban, or block the parents from involvement. This is what I did for the young Marine. Involvement and interference were not permitted. A friend of mine who manages a team of Millennials found that one young man had trouble making decisions because he was not allowed to do so as a boy. At the workplace, he called his mom. The manager asked him why. She then patiently explained that this parent probably knew less about the situation than the young man did. She worked with him on decision-making skills. Another friend of mine, a human resource manager, had parents call in about their children’s job applications. She firmly explained that she had found that applicants whose parents call in are less serious about the job than applicants

who contact her directly. If they pressed her, she read them the privacy regulation.

Inform. One way to preempt the parent is to have information sheets, “frequently asked questions,” and other materials ready to email to them. An FAQ may satisfy parents’ common questions about hours, pay, application timeline, vacation days, dress code, and so on.

Involve. Embrace the interaction. Have a “Bring a Parent to Work Day,” where parents can learn about the mission, environment, and responsibilities. If your organization has a nonprofit foundation, enlist the parents’ help. My husband’s company volunteers at Feed My Starving Children and recruits parents, spouses, and children to help out.

Don’t hold helicoptering parents against the candidate or the employee, as they are unable to control how they were raised and the actions of their parents. Instead, find ways to strengthen their weaknesses that were brought on by helicopter parenting.

HELPING CHILDREN OF HELICOPTER PARENTS FIND THEIR GRIT

I define grit as courage and resolve, or strength of character: “She displayed the true grit of a navy pilot.”

One impediment to acquiring grit is a lack of training in resilience. The children of helicopter parents may lack training in resilience because they have never faced true conflict without the interference of an adult. The characteristic that helps get through the unknown is grit: courage and resolve and strength of character. A study by Angela Duckworth found that the cadets at West Point who were most likely to succeed were not necessarily the smartest ones or the fittest ones. What they had was grit—the resolve to succeed no matter what.

It explains my success in the military. I often was in the top 10% of a class but rarely the top student. I was physically fit, but by no means an Olympic athlete. Where I differed

from others is that I never backed down from an obstacle. I succeeded where others quit because I faced the tasks with a stubbornness to never surrender and a passion based on knowing that I came from a long line of soldiers.

I was not born with grit. However, my parents raised me to know that when I started a project or a class, I could not quit until it was over. In seventh grade, I signed up with my brother, Jeff, for judo classes. I was proud to be the first girl to take the class. My pride lasted for the first five minutes of the class! The instructor was a huge guy and a mean teacher. He loved to literally toss us around like little beanbags. By the third class, I wanted out of there. "Not an option," said my dad. Instead, he worked with Jeff and me to perfect the proper fall. Fortunately, after eight weeks, the program was over, and I knew how to land without knocking the breath out of my body.

My dad was teaching us grit—the resolve to make it through, regardless of the obstacle.

Here is an acronym to help you and your employees find the GRIT to get through your trials and tribulations:

Greet each day, each obstacle, with "Times are tough, I am tougher." I ran Homeland Security for the governor of Illinois. Unfortunately, like many Illinoisan governors, he went to prison. I was tainted dirty as well. I could not get a job interview, let alone a job. I knew it was time to be resilient, creative, and positive. I realized that I had developed a great reputation as a speaker, so I reached out to organizations that had heard me speak. I started to blog on leadership. I realized I had a story to tell and it might make a book. I repeated my mantra, "Times are tough and I am tougher." I also started every day with "I am meant to grow!"

Remove quitting as an option. "Never give up—never surrender!" is another favorite mantra. With a mortgage and two teenagers depending on me to bring home some bacon, I knew that rolling over and giving up was not an option. Every day, I did something to find a job and develop my speaking expertise. Remove the option of quitting and you will be more resourceful.

Invest in what you need to tough it out: time, resources, training, and people. When you face a problem, have you taken the time to figure out what you need? Do your own brainstorming. Don't be shy about asking for help. Apply the wisdom of others. Quitting is not an option, neither is being frozen in place. Do something to go forward.

Take charge of your goals. You have talents and you have purpose. Lead your life. Don't let life happen to you. As Alan Kay, chief scientist at Atari and formerly a member of the research organization Xerox PARC, once said, "The best way to predict your future is to create it."

FINDING THE GRIT IN OURSELVES

Before you can help your employees find their grit, you

have to find it in yourself. The benefit of finding the grit in ourselves is that it gives us the resilience to face whatever life throws at us. Resilience is something we all have. Andy Molinsky, professor of organizational behavior at the Brandeis International Business School, argues in his 2017 *Harvard Business Review* article "You're More Resilient Than You Give Yourself Credit For" that we can better leverage the resilience we already have.

Molinsky says that to understand where your grit comes from, understand these three facts: We're braver than we think; we are more flexible than we think; and the situation is not as bad as we think.

We're braver than we think. I have a fear of heights, and yet when my family and I went to Hawaii, I really wanted to soar above the jungles and waterfalls. So I signed us up for ziplining. After we were buckled into our harnesses and given instructions, the guide asked which two people wanted to go first. My son and I raised our hands. My husband looked startled. I felt ill on the platform and my son was excited. I knew I could not be a scaredy-cat in front of my children. As he stepped off the tower, I took a deep breath in, and he did, too. We soared!

We are more flexible than we think. Life has knocked us down and we have picked ourselves up—since babyhood. Simply remembering we can adapt and adjust can prepare us to face the unknown or unfamiliar.

The situation is not as bad as we think. As an emergency manager, I have trained for the worst-case scenario, but I don't expect the worst case. Being optimistic and seeing life as a learning process permit your mind to operate instead of freeze. Planning gives you choices, and if it turns out to be the worst case, you are already mentally prepared to cope.

When you face a difficult situation, stop to think about the resources you have at your hand. The Internet, library, mentors, colleagues, family, and friends can provide solutions, ideas, guidance, and support. Grit is the secret ingredient that helped me succeed where others quit. Anything you want to achieve, you can. Just dig in to that side order of grit and grin through it. And you can help the children of helicopter parents soar on their own too. [AQ](#)

Through the understanding of different cultures that make up today's workforce, Colonel Jill Morgenthaler (U.S. Army, retired) has given her personal and professional experiences to help her audiences find strategies and the true GRIT that they need to make their home and workplace a success. Colonel Morgenthaler was in the experimental class where the Army tested to see if women could lead men. She was the first woman battalion commander in the 88th Division and the first woman brigade commander in the 84th Division. She received the Bronze Star in Iraq, and the Legion of Merit for her leadership. She is the author of The Courage to Command: Leadership Lessons from a Military Trailblazer (McGraw-Hill, 2015).