

Hovering parents need to step back at college time

By Judy Fortin
CNN

ATLANTA, Georgia (CNN) -- Competition is tougher than ever this year to get into the freshman class at Georgia Tech in Atlanta. The admissions office received close to 10,000 applications for just 2,400 slots.



Parents are a bigger part of college admissions than ever, says Georgia Tech admissions chief Ingrid Hayes.

Every day, Director of Admissions Ingrid Hayes and her staff field calls from anxious parents wanting to know how their child stacks up.

"I know they want to give the extra nudge and we appreciate that," Hayes said, "but we really do want the students to take center stage in the process."

These over-involved moms and dads have come to be known as "helicopter parents." Hayes said they are a bigger part of the college admissions process than ever.

Clinical psychologist Mark Crawford explained the term comes from the concept of hovering. "They're always around their kids' life, kind of on the fringe, always making sure things go the way they need to go and not really allowing the kids to figure out solutions to problems on their own."

Crawford described well-meaning parents he's counseled who want the best for their child, but never want that child to fail.

"I see a lot of parents who hold their kid's hand across the high school graduation stage and think when they send them off to college all will be well," Crawford said. "They are not doing them a favor. They are actually doing them a disservice."

Crawford said children of "helicopter parents" may have trouble later when they're asked to take responsibility in the adult world. "They tend to blame others for bad outcomes that result from neglecting responsibilities or making poor choices," Crawford said.  [Watch how hovering parents can actually hurt their children's growth »](#)

Some turn out to be "perpetually anxious adults who take very few risks outside of their comfort zones," he said.

Georgia Tech Dean of Students John Stein often has to deal with the immediate effects on campus. "It's a rare day that I don't have at least one telephone call from a family member who is concerned about something going on with their son or daughter."

Times have changed from his days as an undergraduate, he observed. "My mom never called the college I attended. It's a very different world now. We've had to adapt."

Stein believes part of the problem is that college students are tethered to their parents via cell phones, e-mail and instant messaging. "They have made for a 24/7 kind of connection," Stein said.

In fact, a report from the National Survey of Student Engagement reported 86 percent of first-year college students were in frequent contact with their mother via phone or computer. And 71 percent of freshmen communicated frequently with their fathers.

The same report concluded students with higher levels of parental involvement had significantly lower grades.

"I see students struggle with this every day," Stein said. "You know, this is a life experience. It's the first time many students have to navigate daily life on their own."

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It's a message Stein delivers directly to parents when they drop off students in the fall. "I congratulate them and say their hard work and investment in their child has paid off, but I also remind them that it's time to step back and allow their son and daughter to go forth in the world."

Stein acknowledged stepping back isn't easy, but he believes it is the only way to equip a growing child with coping skills.

He said a high grade-point average isn't the only measure of success. He looks at "the student's ability to problem solve, to cope and to be resilient."

It's a sentiment echoed by Crawford: "One of the best things you can do for your child is let them leave home believing they have the ability to overcome adversity. If we interfere with their ability to do that we really handicap them." [E-mail to a friend](#) 

Judy Fortin is a correspondent with CNN Medical News.