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HEADLINE: **BACK OFF!**
EXPERTS HAVE THIS ADVICE FOR PARENTS: BEING INVOLVED IN YOUR CHILDREN'S LIVES IS GREAT, BUT YOU HAVE TO KNOW WHEN TO LET THEM BE THEIR OWN PERSON

BYLINE: From News Staff and Wire reports

The most common message from educators and parenting experts is: Get involved with your children, their school, their activities.

Then there's the small caveat: But not too much.

"The major problem nationally is underinvolved parents," said psychologist Michael Thompson, co-author of "The Pressured Child: Helping Your Child Find Success in School and Life." "But in affluent suburban neighborhoods, you get a lot of parents who are way overinvolved."

Call them controlling, pushy, enmeshed or hyper: Parents who've become too invested in their child's success (or failure), be it in academics, sports, appearance or social life. This includes parents who:

Write their high-schoolers' college essays or insist on a particular university.

Take over a homework project because the child isn't doing it right.

Ignore a child's own interests and insist on certain activities to build a "resume" for the best schools, from preschool to college.

Yell and criticize their child, coach or referee at games.

Consistently step in to solve every issue with friends, teachers or youth leaders.

Expect perfection from children.

Overinvolvement "reflects some emotional need on the parent's part, not the best interests of the child," said Dan Neuharth, author of "If You Had Controlling Parents." "Parents' hopes and fears for themselves are transferred onto the child."

Williamsville psychologist Tedd R. Habberfield says people who exhibit these traits "sound more like intrusive parents to me." Involvement, he says, "suggests an interaction between the parents and the child. For that interaction to be healthy, it is essential that we treat our children with respect." This

should include the realization that children are both like and different from their parents, as well as respect for their thoughts, feelings, interests, abilities "and where they are in the developmental process."

Clarence school psychologist Michelle Braun-Burget says children themselves pay the price when they are overscheduled at their parents' wishes. "Because kids have no downtime, they are often fatigued and less than alert for instruction during the school day," she said. "Homework often suffers."

But social ability can be hurt, too, she says: "Kids don't learn how to play or interact with their peers in unstructured settings."

While there have always been hard-to-please parents, some experts say parental micromanagement has gone mainstream.

Everything from books (recent example: "Raising Your Child to Be a Champion in Athletics, Arts and Academics") to Baby Einstein videos to the specialization of youth sports encourages the idea that it's up to parents to ensure their kids are the brightest and most athletic. Not taking advantage of every learning opportunity, one author notes, is practically considered middle-class child neglect.

"Overinvolved parents and overscheduled children are the recommended ways to raise children these days," said Dr. Alvin Rosenfeld, co-author of "The Over-Scheduled Child: Avoiding the Hyper-Parenting Trap." "And it's really not to anyone's good.

"Parents have to ask themselves, 'Do my kids feel they're the authors of their own lives, or do they feel they're living a life someone else scripted for them?'"

"Certainly, parental involvement is a great asset for children -- in moderation," said Braun-Burget. "Participate in your child's life while still allowing them to make decisions and choices when appropriate. Instead of always deciding things for them, provide them with adequate options from which they can choose, (which) gives them practice with decision-making as well as allows them to see cause and effect."

Achievement from conception

Pressure starts early and hard, beginning with new parents, says Muffy Mead-Ferro, who wrote a backlash memoir, "Confessions of a Slacker Mom." When she was pregnant, "I started to feel intense pressure to perform as a mom and make my baby to perform, too," she said. "I was already expected to be molding and shaping her even while she was in the womb."

She decided giving her children, now 4 and 6, the opportunity to solve their own problems -- and saving herself a lot of hassle -- would contribute more to their success than piping in Mozart.

"We have to examine our own motivation for overparticipating in our children's lives and driving them to accomplish and achieve at a very young age," she said. "It hurts when your 3-year-old says, 'Get out of my way,'"

because you want to be a part of everything they do. But we have to be willing to let them do things themselves, and do it imperfectly."

Life intrusion

No one's suggesting parents shouldn't be supportive, encouraging and active in their child's lives; numerous studies show children who are emotionally connected to their parents do better in school and make good life choices, such as avoiding drugs.

But overinvolved parents -- even with the best intentions -- often fail to consider the long-term effects of always intruding in a child's life, experts say.

"The main concern as a parent is always how much involvement does my child need?" said Habberfield. "We agonize over not stepping in to help, guide, support and protect our children enough and doing too much for them and interfering with the development of the pride and self-assurance that arises from being able to say, 'I did it myself.'"

"My advice to parents is always to listen first . . . If we listen carefully and with patience, we can discover who they are and help them learn how to express what it is that they want and need."

Children struggling in school performed better when parents took hands-off, positive approach rather than a critical, controlling one, according to a study by Eva Pomerantz, a psychology professor at the University of Illinois. Her research was reported in a spring issue of *Child Development*.

"For low achievers with moms who had controlling responses, kids' grades went down over six months," she said. When parents offered encouragement and supported the child's problem-solving skills, children had better grades in the same time period.

High achievers did well regardless of parents' response, Pomerantz said. That could be because these children already get positive feedback in school and don't need parents to reinforce their competence, she noted. "Low achievers need that extra boost from parents."

Overinvolved parents end up with children who are "artificially shielded from natural life events that would otherwise assist them in coping with adversity," says Braun-Burget. "With overinvolved parents, these coping mechanisms are poorly developed, (which) sets kids up for failure as greater independence is expected."

These youngsters, she said, "never develop a firm sense of self-efficacy, and confidence, image and motivation suffer."

"The more you step in, the more your child becomes dependent on you for the next time," agreed Michael Murphy, head of Seattle Country Day School, an independent private school with kindergarten through eighth grade. "Parents can't constantly rescue children from every mistake. Kids have to slip and stumble sometimes for their long-term growth."

Young children will attempt to please their parents, then burn out and "just throw you over" when they're old enough to assert their independence, Thompson said.

Neuharth agrees: "If you make decisions for your child, like making him try out for the school play because you always wanted to, the probable effect is alienating your child as he grows older."

The consequences can also stretch into relationships and future workplaces. Controlling parents often refuse to let children disagree, or negate their anger, said Neuharth, a marriage and family therapist in California. If children feel they have to act a certain way to gain their parents' love or respect, "one possible legacy as an adult is that it's hard to be oneself. It's hard to have a full emotional range."

Grade problems

Of all the areas where parents overcontrol, academics may be the most common. Some parents feel their child's grades reflect their parenting skills.

"One thing I'm getting now is a lot of parents who are frantic that kids aren't reading by the end of kindergarten," said Thompson, a school consultant and co-author of "Raising Cain." "It used to be, kids learned to read in first grade. Parents can't stand that now."

Being ahead early doesn't mean a child will be gifted or a high achiever later in school, Thompson said. "But there's a hyperfocus on it."

The result, declares Rosenfeld, is "today, every kid is either gifted or learning disabled. 'Normal' has been abolished."

That view can be difficult on teachers, who are left breaking it to parents that, sadly, their children are not superstars.

"One of the things that bugs teachers the most is when parents have a completely unrealistic idea of their child's ability," said Thompson. One dad told a private-school administrator, "I didn't send my son to your school to get Bs."

"It's good kids know education is important, but it's amazing how much parents pick at both kids and teachers with constant fault-finding," Thompson said.

More than half of teachers said districts that back down from assertive parents contribute to schools' discipline problems, according to a spring survey of middle- and high-school teachers by Public Agenda, a nonprofit research organization.

In March, a university professor posted this rant on an Internet education forum about students demanding better grades: "I recalled their demeanor: some arrogant ('Well, I think I deserve an A'), some polite, some bewildered, some desperate, telling me how they have to get all As, they have to get into law

school, they have to keep their scholarships, a B will ruin their lives forever, or -- most upsettingly -- their parents will be furious if they get a B-plus.

"And then I thought, 'So that's where they come from.' They've grown up with their parents storming down to their schools and pitching hissy fits over every low grade. Or they've grown up with the threat of 'Make straight As or else' hanging over their heads. Or possibly both.

"What is with these parents who yell at the school board? ... Do they not pause to think about the example they're setting for their offspring? 'OK, Junior, you're not allowed to make a mistake and learn from it. Not ever. Remember, your having a 4.0 GPA is more important than your actually learning anything.' "

News Staff Reporter Anne Neville contributed to this report.