NGEN BIG IDEA

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Helicopter Parents in the Workplace
by Neil Howe and William Strauss

The Story in Brief

As members of the Millennial Generation[1] begin to enter the workplace, employers are quickly realizing that they will be facing a new phenomenon dubbed Helicopter parenting. Hovering, ultra-protective, and unwilling to let go, helicopter parenting reflects the closeness of today's young people with parents. Boomer parents have showered them with attention regarding a diverse range of concerns such as the school reform movement and new areas of pro-child health and safety initiatives; this attention has continued through into the child's adulthood. Levels of parental involvement differ based on an employer's size, location, recruitment tactics, and the type of positions they offer, and can include hovering over their twenty-something children's job search and early employment, even contacting employers to complain, cajole, and promote their son or daughter. Most employers will naturally react to this sort of intrusion by treating the parents like a disruptive nuisance. Employers need to recognize that helicopter parenting is part of a larger generational shift, and will only increase in the decades ahead. Many institutions such as schools, colleges, and the military have already effectively responded to helicopter parents by enrolling them as allies in their children's hiring and employment experience.

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Introduction

LAST YEAR, KRISTIN FORBRIGER'S MOM emailed the chief executive of the public relations company where the young woman works, asking how her daughter was doing and requesting his help in delivering a surprise sushi lunch to her desk. The zealous mom also called the owner of the bakery where Kristin's 21-year-old brother works, asking why he was scheduled to work on Thanksgiving, and insisting that he get the holiday off.

A recruiting manager for San Francisco's Enterprise Rent-A-Car was recently conducting job interviews when one young woman showed up with an unexpected companion: her dad. The father explained that "he was interested in learning about the work environment," and sat in the lobby throughout the interview. The manager was surprised, but did not resent the intrusion, and ended up hiring the young candidate.

Helicopter parents—hovering, ultra-protective, unwilling to let go—are coming to the workplace. Young people are consulting their parents before accepting a job offer. Parents are calling up managers to negotiate benefits and protest poor performance reviews. "Parents are contacting us directly," says Betty Smith, university recruiting manager at Hewlett-Packard. "This generation is not embarrassed by it. They're asking for parents' involvement."

Such parental participation would have been unheard of for earlier generations of young workers. Kristin's grandmother says that, when her own four children were young, she "would never think of calling the boss." She remembers sitting back and letting Kristin's mother handle it herself when one employer promised her a job and then gave it to a man instead. "Today's parents would have had their attorney in there to get a hold of the boss," she says.

Rising numbers of employers are seeing young employees whose parents hover over their job search and early careers. According to a 2007 Michigan State University survey, nearly a quarter of all employers have "sometimes" to "very often" seen parents involved in the recruitment and employment of recent college graduates. Employers have been surprised by this, but maybe they shouldn't have been. Parents have given this generation special attention from cradle to college, so why stop when their sons and daughters enter the workplace?

Some parents take their hovering to the extreme. A recent *Fast Company* article described a 22-year old pharmaceutical employee whose boss told him he had to work on his weaknesses before getting a promotion. When the employee told his parents, they were sure they could fix this mistake—their perfect Harvard graduate had always excelled at everything. His mother called the human resources department seventeen times, leaving frustrated messages: "You're purposely ignoring us"; "you fudged the evaluation"; "you have it in for my son." She demanded a mediation session with herself, her son, his boss, and human resources, which she got. Later, the young employee reprimanded HR for being "rude to my mom."

Examples such as this, while more extreme than what most employers experience, reflect a deeper and more important trend: the closeness of today's young people with parents. Only a minority of young workers have parents who show up at interviews, grill managers about benefits, and call to complain about a "very good" instead of an "excellent" on a performance review. But the majority of young workers are in close contact with parents—even living with them—and are constantly guided by their parents' advice and values.

Helicopter parenting is in fact just one element in a shift in the attitudes and behaviors of both the young and parental generations towards each other. Today's young people have a closer and more involved relationship with parents than any other youth generation in living memory. Throughout their childhood and adolescence, today's youth have been more likely to trust their parents, depend on their support and guidance, and tell them about their lives than prior generations at the same age. A key aspect of this new relationship is the acceptance—and even the expectation—that parents will be highly involved in their children's lives. According to the Datatel 2006 College Parent Survey, parents of today's college students say they spend much more time with their kids than their own parents did with them. By a three-to-one margin, today's parents say they are more involved in helping their children succeed in college.

Driving this society-wide trend of parental involvement is the coming-of-age of a new generation—the Millennial Generation. All of their lives, Millennials' Boomer parents have showered them with attention with regards to a diverse range of concerns such as "zero tolerance" drug rules, a powerful school reform movement, and whole new areas of pro-child health, safety, and "values education" initiatives. Largely because of this positive attention, Millennials have fundamentally different attitudes about parents, careers, and themselves than prior generations did when they were young workers, and embody many positive new trends. To understand the broad shift in youth attitudes—and how it gives rise to helicopter parenting—employers have to understand Millennials, where they come from, and how they are different.

While most employers see young workers' close relationships with parents as a problem, it is in fact an enormous opportunity. Handled properly, helicopter parents can be an enormous asset to employers' goals of recruitment, productivity, and retention. Instead of shutting out parents, employers can develop a strategic response to enroll parents as allies and harness these potential strengths. Employers that respond successfully to protective moms and dads will have a key advantage in attracting and retaining young workers in the decades to come.

Extended families are coming back

Helicopter parenting in the workplace is just one sign of a shift in the relationship between today's young people and their parents. Rising numbers of young adults continue to live with their parents, even after finishing their education. Almost 16 million families had at least one child over 18 living at home in 2003, the Census Bureau reports, up 7% since 1995 and 14% since 1985. According to a 2007 MonsterTrak survey, 48% of 2006 college graduates expected to live at home "for some time"—one year later, fully 42% of them were still living at home. Pop culture representations, including the movie "Failure to Launch" and the Fox TV series "Free Ride" show the prevalence of this trend.

For Millennials, however the move back home is not a "failure to launch," but a natural, even desirable step in their close relationship with parents and extended families. Generation X "boomerang kids" tried to start independent lives, and ended up moving back home. Many Millennials, on the other hand, never even thought to leave. Unlike Boomers and Gen Xers at the same age, Millennial young adults often enjoy living with their parents. A recent Associated Press survey reports that teens and young adults rank "spending time with family" as the one thing that makes them the most happy. Seventy-three percent say their relationship with their parents makes them happy, and nearly half say their parents are their heroes. Many also see parents more as friends and confidants than as figures of authority. Trend watchers at Hallmark have noted that friendship between parents and their offspring is becoming an important greeting card theme, with messages like, "To my mother, my best friend."

Parents, in turn, are generally thrilled to have their young adult children stay close. A quarter of people ages 40–70 expect their children to move in with them at some point, reports a survey by Del Webb, an

"active adult" community developer. The company is now adding extra parking spaces for extended houseguests and gearing amenities towards younger residents. A recent Families and Work Institute study shows that 25% of employed parents have children ages 18-29 living at home. Institute President Ellen Galinsky commented, "From my point of view, it's wonderful to have children around. They can live with me now as long as I can live with them later."

Some new economic realities are reinforcing these trends, especially for second generation immigrants and children of working and middle class families. For young people who have hefty student loans and are struggling with low-paying entry-level jobs and an expensive housing market, moving back home is a key way to address their money crunch. Generation Xers (now in their late twenties to mid-forties) started the "boomerang" trend in the 1990s, as they struggled with sharply rising tuition and housing costs. Millennials are continuing the trend as college debt and housing prices continue to soar. A recent Time poll found only half of those aged 18 to 29 consider themselves financially independent, and a Pew study shows that 73% of 18- to 25-year olds have received financial assistance from their parents in the past year.

Even for Millennials who live far from home, digital-mobile technology facilitates constant communication with parents. According to the Chartwells 2006 College Student Survey, students communicate with their parents an average of 8.8 times a week through phone, email, text messaging, and other means. When they graduate, students are bringing these high levels of parental communication to the workplace. The Time poll showed that almost half of Americans ages 18 to 29 talk to their parents every day.

From legislation to reality TV, today's culture is beginning to reflect a widespread acceptance of young adults' closeness with their parents and reliance on their parents' resources. There is some media backlash—recent headlines include "The Coddling Crisis: Why Americans Think Adulthood Begins at Age 26" and "More 20-Somethings Depending on Parents Again"—but there is rising evidence that public opinion is turning in favor of this trend. New Jersey recently passed a law allowing unmarried adult children to be covered under their parents' health insurance until they are 30. Six other states now extend coverage to offspring in their mid-20s, reflecting the general acceptance that true adulthood now begins far later than age 18.

Today's popular teen TV shows are also reflecting a young adult world full of highly involved parents. Shows such as "My Super Sweet Sixteen," "The O.C.," and "Gilmore Girls" feature parents as prominent characters. Parent-child relationships are key plot drivers more often than before. Ten or fifteen years ago, parents were conspicuously absent from TV shows about teens and young adults, such as "Beverly Hills 90210" and "Party of Five." Now, MTV is airing "Date my Mom," a show where young contestants meet prospective dates through the recommendations and persuasion of the date's mother. The network also airs "Parental Control," where contestants' moms and dads interview young men or women and choose one or two for their child to date. After the dates, the child decides whether to stay with his or her current partner or switch to one chosen by the parent. TV programs that give parents a key role in the personal life decisions of their adult children would have been unpopular when Boomers were young, and unimaginable when Gen Xers were young.

Some observers link young adults' increasing reliance on parents to a failure to "mature" according to traditional standards. They cast a somewhat negative spin on today's young adults, with terms like "adultalescence," "youthood," and "boomerang kids." But the trend towards slow maturation didn't start with today's 20-somethings—it actually started with the parents of today's 20-somethings: Boomers. During the Consciousness Revolution in the late 1960s and '70s, young Boomers began rejecting the established timetable of adult responsibilities, marrying and having children later, prolonging their studies, and avoiding stable jobs. The data is in fact not yet in on whether Millennials will follow in their parents'

footsteps and continue slowly on the path to adulthood. Most data currently cited on this issue extends no further than the middle of Generation X (born 1961-1981). For example, Census Bureau data show a sharp decline from 1960 to 2000 in the share of young people finishing school, leaving home, getting married, having a child, and reaching financial independence by age 30. These data compare the Silent Generation (born 1925-1942) with Generation X. Since the oldest Millennials are now 25, we do not know what developmental benchmarks they will achieve by the age of 30, and whether their numbers will be less or greater than those of Gen Xers.

Millennials' closeness to parents does not make it inevitable that they will continue the trend towards a slow start in life. As the life-trajectory of Boomers shows, there is a critical distinction between closeness to parents and delaying adulthood. Boomer youth tended to postpone adult responsibilities as a way to rebel against their parents and reject the standards and values of the adult world. Millennials who move back home are often doing just the opposite—they tend to feel close to their parents, trust their values, and want to get the right start in life in order to meet adult standards. History in fact shows that Millennials may well break the trend towards delayed adulthood. Throughout American history, there has been a periodic shift in the trend towards earlier or later marriages, first children, and financial independence. In 1941, for example, a greater share of 18- to 29-year olds was living at home than do so today. By the late '50s and early '60s, the trend had swung dramatically towards early departure from the family household. This early departure is often considered the baseline to which later generations of youth are compared, when in fact it was one extreme of the pendulum swing.

However today's young people end up developing, whether they meet adult responsibilities earlier or later, they will have the support and approval of their parents every step of the way.

A generational approach to helicopter parenting

Helicopter parenting is one of many indicators that today's young people think very differently about their parents, the world, and themselves than the youth who came before them. To understand this shift, employers need to understand that today's group of young workers are part of a new generation—the Millennial generation—which has been shaped by the era in which its members have grown up and come of age.

A generation is a series of consecutive birth years, spanning roughly the length of time required to become an adult, whose members share a common "age location"—the phase of life they occupy when those events occur—and, as a consequence, exhibit distinct beliefs and behavior patterns.

The importance of generations seems intuitively obvious when we think about the mindsets and habits of today's living generations. Today's ninetyish elders, for instance, came of age with the New Deal, World War II, and collective heroism. Even in late elderhood, they retain their penchant for teamwork and civic loyalty—and often wonder why self-obsessed "yuppies" never had it. Their fiftyish juniors, on the other hand, came of age with Vietnam, Watergate hearings, and "Consciousness III" euphoria. They retain their taste for introspection and cultural stewardship, and often wonder why bustling "senior citizens" never had it. The 90-year-old had no Woodstock, the 50-year-old no D-Day—nothing even close. This coming-of-age contrast will continue to influence both groups' attitudes toward the world—and toward each other—for as long as they live.

For centuries, some of the best minds in the west have helped to define the social theory of generations. John Stuart Mill formally defined a generation as "a new set of human beings" who "have been educated, have grown up from childhood, and have taken possession of society." Wilhelm Dilthey described a generation as "a relationship of contemporaneity…between those who had a common

childhood, a common adolescence, and whose years of greatest vigor partially overlap." Observing that members of a generation tend to share certain beliefs and behaviors, Auguste Comte concluded that each generation develops a "unanimous adherence to certain fundamental notions." In the direct aftermath of World War I, Karl Mannheim, José Ortega y Gasset, François Mentré (who coined the term social generation in a book by that name), and many others produced an extensive body of writing on generations.

Employers must understand that today's young workers comprise a new generation with fundamentally different attitudes about family, independence, and life goals than the generations of young workers that came before them. With a generational perspective, employers will see that Helicopter parenting in the workplace is merely the most recent manifestation of a new attitude towards family involvement that Millennials have brought with them (and will continue to bring) to every phase of life.

Millennials' place in history

Like all American generations that came before, Millennials have been uniquely shaped by the era in which its members grew up and came of age, and that formative influence has had enduring effects.

Many of the grandparents of today's young workers are members of the Silent Generation (now mostly in retirement). They were children during the crisis years of the Great Depression and World War II, and defined youth during the "golden age" of the 1940s and '50s. They entered the workplace during the post-war era when returning veterans were given top priority (well captured in the film "The Best Years of Our Lives"). They were expected to be, and they were "organization men."

Many of the parents of today's young workers are Boomers. Members of this argumentative and values-obsessed generation (today squarely in midlife) were children during an era of postwar complacency. They defined youth in the 1960s and 1970s; an era of social turmoil, youth anger, and steeply worsening youth trends (such as rising crime rates and substance abuse, and falling academic achievement). They entered the workplace at the height of the Consciousness Revolution, as arguments between the young and old reached a fevered pitch and workplace productivity began to decline.

Millennials' older siblings and younger parents are part of Generation X. These pragmatists and survivalists were children during the Consciousness Revolution. They defined youth during the 1980s and early 1990s, and became the young workers of the dot com bubble, an individualistic era of market-driven free agency.

Likewise, the Millennial Generation has its own place in history. Recall the last quarter century of American family life. The greatest change came in 1982. The February 22, 1982 issue of Time offered a cover story about an array of thirty-something Boomers choosing (finally) to become moms and dads. That same year, bright yellow "Baby on Board" signs began popping up in station-wagon windows. During the Gen Xer childhood, planned parenting meant contraceptives; suddenly it meant visits to the fertility clinic. *The era of the wanted baby had begun.*

In September 1982, the first Tylenol scare led to parental panic over trick-or-treating. Halloween suddenly found itself encased in hotlines, advisories, and statutes—a fate that would soon befall many other once-innocent child pastimes, from bicycle-riding to BB guns. A few months later came national hysteria over the sexual abuse of toddlers, leading to dozens of adult convictions after what skeptics will liken to Salem-style trials. All the while, new books (The Disappearance of Childhood, Children Without Childhood, Our Endangered Children) assailed the "anything goes" parental treatment of children since the mid-1960s. *The era of the protected toddler had begun.*

Through the early 1980s, the national rates for many behaviors damaging to children—divorce, abortion, violent crime, alcohol and drug abuse—reached their postwar high-water mark. The well-being of children began to dominate the national debate over family issues. In 1983, the federal Nation at Risk report on education blasted grade-school students as "a rising tide of mediocrity," prompting editorialists to implore teachers and adults to do better by America's next batch of kids. In 1984, "Children of the Corn" and "Firestarter" failed at the box office. These were merely the latest installments in a child-horror film genre that had been popular and profitable for well over a decade, ever since "Rosemary's Baby" and "The Exorcist." But parents were beginning to prefer a new kind of movie ("Baby Boom," "Parenthood," "Three Men and a Baby") about wonderful babies and adults who improve their lives by looking after them. *The era of the worthy child had begun.*

In 1990, the *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times* had headlines—"The '60s Generation, Once High on Drugs, Warns Its Children" and "Do As I Say, Not As I Did." Polls showed that Boomer parents did not want their own children to have the same freedom with drugs, alcohol, and sex that they once enjoyed.

Between 1986 and 1991, the number of periodicals offered to young children doubled. In tot-TV fare, "Barney and Friends" (featuring teamwork and what kids share in common) stole the limelight from "Sesame Street" (featuring individualism and what makes each kid unique). During 1996, major-party nominees Dole and Clinton dueled for the presidency in a campaign full of talk about the middle-school offspring of "soccer moms." The next year, Millennials began to make an impression on pop culture. Thanks to the Spice Girls, Hanson, and others, 1997 ushered in a whole new musical sound—happier, brighter, and more innocent. *The era of the perfected teen had begun.*

Through the late 1990s, these same much-watched youths passed through high school, accompanied by enormous parental, educational, and media fascination. After the April 1999 Columbine tragedy was replayed again and again on the news, this adult absorption with Millennial safety, achievement, and morality reached a fever pitch. Teen employment declined, in part because it was perceived as less useful than other ways of building resumés and careers. Young people began to spend less time flipping burgers and more time doing homework, and new industries emerged offering resumé-enhancing summer experiences other than paid employment.

By the year 2000, Millennials began graduating from high school and entering the workplace, the armed forces, and colleges. Colleges began to feel the glare of the media and a level of parental involvement that college administrators had never seen. By the middle 2000s the term "helicopter parent" was in wide use on campuses. In the spring of 2002, the first Millennials received Associate degrees, and increasingly entered trades and service fields. At the same time, internships started to rise both in numbers and importance, as Millennials in 4-year degree programs looked ahead to their future employment. In 2003-04, Millennials met with recruiters, wrote resumés, graduated from college and entered the workplace in full force. Employers began noticing something new, from a focus on long-term job security to a desire for constant feedback, to comfort with teamwork, to hovering parents. *The era of the obsessively-coached young worker had begun.*

In 2006 and 2007, Millennials started graduating from business and law schools. The glare of the media turned to student loan controversies as the pressure of student loans began bearing down on this generation of young graduates. More and more media and corporate attention focused on youth culture in the workplace, from young adult surveys to articles on workplace attire to special training workshops on how to manage today's young employees.

What are parents doing?

Highly involved parents have followed Millennials through every stage of life, attending "mommy and me" pre-school classes, challenging poor grades, negotiating with coaches, and helping their children register for college classes, and choose among prospective employers. Now, a rising tide of parents are hovering over their twenty-something children's job search and early employment, contacting employers to complain, cajole, and promote their son or daughter.

Employers report a wide variety of parental involvement. "Most of the stuff parents do is benign," says Phil Gardner, director of the Michigan State study, but most employers see parents as intrusions.

Parents who get involved most often gather information about prospective employers: Fully 40% of employers have had parents gather employment information for their children. Nearly one-third of employers have seen parents submit a resumé on their child's behalf, prompting one manager to comment: "Please tell your child that you have submitted a resumé to a company. We have called a student from our resumé pool only to find they did not know anything about our company and were not interested in a position with us." Over one quarter of employers have had parents promote their children for a position, and 15% have had parents call to complain if the company does not hire their son or daughter.

A smaller share of employers report even more hands-on parental involvement, including negotiating salary and benefits (seen by 9% of employers), advocating for salary increases (seen by 6%), and actually attending the interview (seen by 4%).
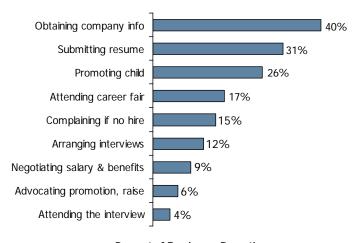
Figure 1: Type of Parental Involvement as Reported by Employers in 2007

Percent of Employers Reporting

Source: Collegiate Employment Research Institute (2007)

Commonly, young workers get help from their parents to complete work assignments by a deadline, or have parents review their work and make improvements, report employers. Employers have also witnessed a number of employees who insist on talking to their parents before meeting with a supervisor who is reprimanding or disciplining them.

Employers report that fathers are more likely than mothers to get involved in negotiations when a son or daughter is not hired or is being disciplined by an employer. Mothers, on the other hand, are more likely to collect information on the company and arrange for company visits and interviews.

Some young hires feel their parents take hovering too far. An online poll of 400 students and young adults last year by career Web site Experience Inc. found 25% said their parents were "overly involved to the point that their involvement was either annoying or embarrassing." Yet employers acknowledge that, for the most part, this generation expects and welcomes parental involvement more than older generations did at the same age.

Which employers are most affected?

Some kinds of employers encounter helicopter parents more than others. Levels of parental involvement differ based on an employer's size, location, recruitment tactics, and the type of positions they offer. According to the 2007 Michigan State University survey, four kinds of employers experience the most interaction with parents:

1. *Large employers with regional and national brand recognition*

   Parents may feel that their children could get lost at a large, brand name company, whereas a small, intimate workplace will provide the personal mentoring they have come to expect for their children. Smaller companies are also more likely to be local, so the parents of employees may know them personally and be less likely to seek out information and get involved.

2. Employers with strong internship programs and those who recruit heavily on campuses

   Large companies with national brand recognition often have internship programs, so these categories likely overlap. Parents also know that many companies use their internship programs to develop long-term relationships with prospective employees, and want to fully investigate any company that may affect their child's long-term future. Interns also tend to be younger than entry-level employees and therefore draw more intense protection from parents. Companies that recruit heavily on campuses may encounter many parents who are accustomed to being involved in campus events. One employer surveyed by Michigan State commented: "If parents can come to campus for a football game, there is no reason they shouldn't come to the career fair or our information night."

3. *Employers in the Northeast and Northwest*

   Employers in these regions of the country see higher parental involvement than those in the Southwest and the states adjacent to the Great Lakes. Companies in the Northeast and Northwest may attract more job candidates from affluent backgrounds, whose parents have often invested large sums of money in their education. Parents who have spent upwards of $200,000 on private universities may feel that their financial contributions entitle them to negotiate for their children's careers to take off on the right foot. Companies in the South and the Midwest are also, on the whole, less bureaucratized than those in the Northeast and Northwest, and may present a reassuringly personal, smaller scale environment to worried or protective parents. The Northeast and Northwest may also be leading the helicopter parent trend because they are more heavily urbanized than the South and the Midwest. Urban areas tend to be ahead of rural areas in many Millennial trends, from rising school achievement to falling substance abuse and risk-taking.

4. *Employers filling positions in marketing, human resources, and sales*

Employers in these fields see higher parental involvement than those filling engineering, research, and scientific positions. It is possible that parents whose children work in marketing, human resources, and sales positions intervene more because these careers have higher outcome uncertainty. Positions in fields like accounting and engineering have very well-known credentials as well as a narrow range of salaries based on those credentials. Marketing, human resources, and sales jobs typically offer a less rigidly established career track, perhaps prompting more parental concern and oversight. These are also alpha-personality careers, which may have been pushed on their children by alpha-personality moms and dads—exactly the kinds of moms and dads who are likely to intervene with employers.

How are employers responding?

Most employers now treat helicopter parents like a disruptive nuisance, without considering the generational origin of this phenomenon or the parents' point of view. According to the Michigan State survey, employers respond negatively to highly involved parents and prefer less parental "interference." Numerous managers, career counselors and human resources professionals have blasted this new trend. "It's unbelievable to me that a parent of a 22-year-old is calling on their behalf," commented Allison Keeton, director of college relations at St. Paul Travelers. Jennifer Seymour, who runs the Atlanta intern program for the global public relations firm Weber Shandwick, says a candidate with helicopter parents creates a negative impression. "It hurts. Absolutely," she says.

Employers generally agree that helicopter parents make a young applicant look like he or she is not self-sufficient. "Psychologically, it's somewhat eroding," says Charles Wardell, managing director of the northeast region at Korn/Ferry. "When an employer is hiring someone, they're hiring an adult for an adult job, and then they have to deal with a parent."

Many employers deal with intrusive parents by deflecting any of their efforts at getting involved. "I remain polite and explain we don't discuss employment-related issues with [outsiders]," says one HR professional on fielding parental calls. "If they continue to push, I suggest they discuss the matter with their [child]. If the employee follows up with me, I say why it's inappropriate, and I hope it won't happen again." Yet many employers are finding that this strategy has limited success. Straight-arming involved parents often fails to deter them, while generating resentment from both the parent and the young employee.

Managing Millennials by enlisting their parents

What employers, career counselors, and journalists are missing is the larger generational picture. Helicopter parenting is not a random passing trend that employers can wait out or ignore, but is rather a function of the era in which Millennials have been raised and a fundamental part of their collective character. This parenting style will therefore continue and strengthen over time as this generation fills in the ranks of young workers.

If employers understood that helicopter parents are a generational trend, they would want to learn from institutions that have previously served Millennials and worked with their parents. In the 1990s, public schools suddenly found themselves bombarded by highly involved parents. At first, they failed to adjust their policies to accommodate these parents, banning cell phones (a key means for students to contact parents throughout the day), and leaving parents to learn about their children's curricula one night per term in parent-teacher conferences. But these policies did not deter hovering parents, who only became more

frustrated (MetLife's 2005 *Survey of the American Teacher* reported that new teachers consider engaging and working with parents as their greatest challenge, even more than getting sufficient resources and maintaining classroom order). In response, schools have begun to allow students to bring cell phones to school so they can contact their parents during the day. Many have set up online systems that allow parents to monitor their children's grades and assignments in real time. Teachers and administrators now report that the most effective way to handle involved parents is to keep them in the loop.

In the early 2000s, colleges began seeing a rising tide of involved parents who call admissions committees to complain if their child is rejected, come to campus events, and intervene if a son or daughter experiences academic or social problems. Professors and administrators found that refusing to give parents access to their children's college experience only increased the problems. In response, rising numbers of colleges and universities today are offering parents avenues for constructive involvement in college life. Some have parents and students sign a "relationship covenant" to establish what is expected of each party, or give parents special readings or videos about how they can help their child in the right way. Many offer parent orientations that sport titles like "May they Follow Your Path Not Your Footsteps" and "Between Mothering and Smothering, Between Fathering and Bothering." Some send out regular parent newsletters, or even have full-time, salaried "Parent Liaison" positions to field parent calls and concerns.

According to Patricia Somers, an education professor at the University of Texas who has recently studied levels of parental involvement at fifteen universities, an estimated 40–60% of parents, from all socioeconomic groups, can today be categorized as "helicopter parents." She has identified "five types" of parental hovering, ranging from benign to pathological. Somers' research is currently triggering much discussion in the academic community.

The American armed forces saw an influx of helicopter parents around the same time. At first they tried to avoid dealing with parents, targeting recruitment messages to recruits alone and highlighting themes of independence and individuality. As Millennials moved into the recruitment age bracket, however, the military began falling short of recruitment quotas; young recruits were no longer responding to the familiar Gen-X era messages. Today, the military has begun co-marketing extensively to parents, with a parents' section on their Web site, new recruitment ads showing young people and their parents discussing the decision to join, and the parent-targeted Army slogan, "you made them strong, we'll make them Army strong." By inviting instead of blocking parental participation, the armed forces have dramatically improved their recruitment of Millennials.

All of these institutions have found that they simply cannot block parents' efforts to get involved. Instead, they are shifting to a more collaborative mode.

How employers can enlist parents productively

Like schools, colleges, and the military, employers will have to accept that parents will remain actively involved in Millennials' lives and enroll them as allies in their children's hiring and employment experience. Few major employers have thus far implemented a strategic plan to enroll parents as allies. But just as in schools, colleges, and the military, companies who have tried this approach report good results.

Employers should develop a response to helicopter parents that considers them, not as obstacles to overcome, but as potentially valuable assets. For example, parents are pushing Millennials to think of their careers in the long term, including opportunities for advancement, health care, and retirement plans. This parent-driven youth mindset could give employers new opportunities to minimize turnover. Developing a positive relationship with parents will allow employers to capitalize on strengths such as these.

To work successfully with helicopter parents, companies can establish a formal division of labor between the employer and the parent, in which the employer welcomes parental participation in certain areas, but not in others. Employers can also develop creative new strategies to leverage Millennials' close, trusting relationship with their parents and dependence on their parents' guidance.

Employers can implement these five strategies to enlist parents as workplace allies:

1. *Co-market employment opportunities to Millennials and their parents*

   Parents have a significant influence on where today's young workers apply and what job offers they take. Employers can target recruitment materials *both* to parents and young workers to take full advantage of parents' influential role. Develop slogans and pamphlets telling parents that you'll take extra good care of their very special children. General Electric has begun running catchy ads, with lines like, "Let us take your son or daughter off your payroll and put them on ours," in campus newspapers and on schools' parent Web pages. Companies can create a section in the employment portion of their Web sites specifically directed towards parents and their concerns.

   Employers can also provide information on the company, position, and job offer for parents of accepted applicants, as well as to the applicants themselves. Firms such as Enterprise Rent-A-Car, Stockamp and Associates, and Ferguson Enterprises are sending letters to parents of students who have been offered a position, touting the company, explaining what the job is, and sometimes detailing the offer. HR representatives say these tactics are raising their acceptance rates. When Stockamp and Associates offered to send parents these letters, they were surprised at the large number of young hires who accepted, some explaining that their parents wanted to frame the letter and put it with the other trophies.

2. *Provide ongoing information to parents*

   Parents will be less inclined to call up managers if they feel they are already being kept in the loop. Employers can allow parents to opt in to a regular newsletter, or update a parent section of their Web site with general information on what the company is doing and any structural or policy changes that may affect employees. Employer fears that parents might regard this as an invitation to meddle are unfounded. The message should be that the employer cares personally about the experience of each employee and respects the desire of their parents to keep up with what they are doing.

   As of yet, most employers who share information with parents do so only during the recruiting process. Office Depot has a special page on its Web site for job candidates' parents, which directs them to a book on how to be supportive but not intrusive. Ernst & Young has begun distributing "parent packets" to students during career sessions, as well as computer memory stick containing company information that students are encouraged to share with their parents. In the years ahead, companies will find it even more effective to keep parents continuously informed about the company after their children are hired.

3. *Engage personally with parents*

   Parents of Millennials are accustomed to visiting and examining their offspring's daily environment from kindergarten through college. This parental habit will not end when their sons and daughters graduate. Employers can give their companies a personal, family-friendly touch by inviting parents to visit their children's workplace and engage with managers. Merrill Lynch, for example, is launching a program to invite parents of new hires to visit its offices. Employers can hold a yearly event when young employees bring their parents to work, give parents of new hires a tour of the company, or have a dinner where employees can invite parents and other family members.

4. *Involve parents in social and community service activities to maintain a continual relationship with them*

No employer wants parents involved in the day-to-day business of the company. But employers can channel parents' desire for involvement into alternate activities for the benefit of the company and of young employees. Many K-12 school districts have zealous parents donate their time to a variety of activities that don't interfere with the business of teaching. Similarly, employers can invite parents to help organize community service activities, or to organize and participate in social activities such as group trips and sporting or cultural events. As Millennials' parents continue to enter retirement over the next decade, many will have the time for these kinds of activities, and some will have expertise that a company can use to their advantage. Companies such as State Farm already have large community service initiatives within their companies and invite families to participate. Traditionally, this has meant the children of employees, but why not the parents of employees as well?

5. *Help Millennials plan for the care of elderly parents down the road*

Elder care has already become an important issue for older workers, but the close relationship between Millennials and their parents, and Boomers' lack of financial preparation for retirement, means these issues are going to rise in importance. Boomers and Gen Xers never planned in advance how they would care for aging parents, largely because they tended to have more distant relationships with their parents. But Millennials, with their closer relationship with parents and penchant for long-term planning, will be thinking about this problem at a younger age. Employers should start thinking now of innovative ways to support employees devoted to aging parents, including flex time for elder care and financial counseling on acute care insurance, reverse mortgages and long-term care.

Firms that work strategically in these ways to enroll parents as allies will gain a competitive advantage with today's young recruits. As Millennials and their parents continue to flood the workplace over the next fifteen years, firms that fail to do so will lose the opportunity to brand themselves to the new batch of young workers, and will find themselves losing the top candidates.

A nation of extended families

Every generation comes of age with a new set of behaviors, attitudes, and skills that tend to provoke criticism from older generations. Generation X has become the greatest generation of entrepreneurs and job creators in American history—but when they were coming of age in the 1980s and '90s, employers complained that young workers lacked work ethic, loyalty, and teamwork. Employers today have the opportunity to work with a new youth generation with very different attitudes and skills: They are team-oriented, focused on achievement, trusting of adults, and eager to meet expectations—and they come with the hovering parents who made them that way.

Nearly all employers report that parental involvement is rising. They concede that a good relationship with parents helps hiring and retention and are responding with ad-hoc policies. Yet most see parental presence primarily as a problem. Employers should change course and recognize that helicopter parenting is part of a larger generational shift, and will only increase in the decades ahead. Instead of trying (and failing) to stifle this trend, they should think more creatively about how to take advantage of the opportunities it offers. Even employers who now attempt to respond positively to helicopter parents have not yet orchestrated their efforts into an overall strategy that touches all aspects of HR policies. Employers who develop such a strategy in the years ahead may be able to brand themselves as top choice workplaces for this generation of graduates. Those who fail to do so may find themselves struggling to recruit and retain the top candidates.

More broadly, employers can recognize that the new closeness between parents and offspring will extend far beyond the workplace and change our society in a number of ways. This trend will play out as the age wave soon to hit America puts a squeeze on both public and family finances. Over the next two decades, America will experience a very steep rise in the ratio of elder dependants to working age people. Rising tax rates for pay-as-you-go pension plans (most importantly Social Security) and the fast-rising cost of public healthcare benefits (especially Medicare and Medicaid) will put enormous burdens on families. The pressure will be compounded by the increased personal time and money that working-age people will have to devote to helping take care of their aging parents. The resurgence of the extended family, with a much higher share of frail independent elders living with or near their grown children, could greatly ease the personal burden and may remove many of the drivers behind the cost growth of public programs. For example, experts are projecting enormous hikes in the cost of long-term care—but if more Millennials care for their parents themselves, long-term care costs may not rise as steeply.

In our current age of low fertility and declining trust in government institutions, closer lifelong parent-child relationships can help smaller families continue to carry out an array of important social functions. People may find themselves more in need of the advantages that extended families have traditionally provided, from finding jobs to caring for children to providing an economic safety net. The negative literature that equates close family ties with immaturity and personal dysfunction has hinted at few if any of these positive social changes.

Whatever might confront America in the decades ahead, the recent strengthening of the family will be a decided advantage. The improved relationships between parents and children could help form a young adult generation equipped to handle many of the key challenges of our time.

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Endnotes

[1] Howe and Struass define the Millennial Generation birth years as 1982 – present. New Paradigm research defines the Net Generation as those born from 1977 to 1997.

The 8 Norms of the Net Generation

New Paradigm has identified certain normative attitudes and behaviors endemic to the N-Gen, which differentiate them from previous generations. These norms have become part of the vernacular of marketing.

Freedom

To an N-Gener, choice is like oxygen. With the proliferation of media, sales channels, product types, and brands, N-Geners leverage technology to cut through the clutter and find the products that fit their needs. They expect to choose where and when they work; to be able to use technology to escape traditional office space and hours; and to integrate their home and social lives with their work lives.

Customization

N-Geners have grown up using media they can customize. With their own blogs and Web sites, personalized cell phones, TiVo, Slingbox, and podcasts, they get the media and information they want, when and where they want it, and alter it to fit their unique needs and desires. They want to be able to customize their workplace—doing things like helping improve work processes and having input into their own job descriptions.

Scrutinizers

They are the new scrutinizers. Older generations marvel at the consumer research available on the Internet: N-Geners expect it, and as they grow older, their online engagement increases. N-Geners know that their market power allows them to demand more of companies. As employees they demand trusting and transparent relationships with the companies they work for.

Integrity

When deciding what to buy and where to work, they look for corporate integrity and openness. Whether they are exposing a flawed viral marketing campaign or researching a future employer, N-Geners make sure a company's values align with their own.

Collaboration

Unlike their TV generation parents, N-Geners interact with media and with others through media. They collaborate online in chat groups, play multi-user video games, use email and share files for school, work, or just for fun. They influence each other through "N-Fluence Networks," where among other things, they discuss brands, companies, products and services. Marketers must recognize that there is more to the consumer relationship than brand recognition. Having grown up being authorities on something important, they have a different view of authority in the workplace.

Entertainment

N-Geners want their work, education, and social life to be fun and entertaining. They bring a playful attitude to work—they know that there's always more than one way to achieve a goal, just like in the latest video game. They seek entertaining experiences in products and services. Workplaces must be fun—as work, learning, collaboration and entertainment are for the first time inseparable.

Speed

N-Geners need speed—and not just in video games. In a world where information flows rapidly among vast networks of people, communication with friends, colleagues, and bosses takes place faster than ever. Marketers and employers should realize that N-Geners expect the same quick communication in return—every instant message should draw an instant response. N-Geners are speeding up the metabolism of business—for the good.

Innovation

For N-Geners, digital tools have encouraged and facilitated innovation in all aspects of their lives. Marketers reach them in increasingly creative ways, while N-Gen business leaders have literally changed entire industries. Their need to innovate challenges established norms, some of which will need to be adapted, and some to which N-Gen will need to adapt.

This report is an analysis of a Big Idea, presented as part of New Paradigm's Net Generation: Strategic Investigation Program. The program, sponsored by leading companies such as yours, is investigating the impact of the Net Generation in the marketplace and the workplace.

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