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A Cure for Hyper-Parenting

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PARIS — I recently spent the afternoon with some Norwegians who are making a documentary about French child-rearing. Why would people in one of the world's most successful countries care how anyone else raises kids?

In Norway “we have brats, child kings, and many of us suffer from hyper-parenting. We’re spoiling them,” explained the producer, a father of three. The French “demand more of their kids, and this could be an inspiration to us.”

I used to think that only Americans and Brits did helicopter parenting. In fact, it’s now a global trend. Middle-class Brazilians, Chileans, Germans, Poles, Israelis, Russians and others have adopted versions of it too. The guilt-ridden, sacrificial mother — fretting that she’s overdoing it, or not doing enough — has become a global icon. In “Parenting With Style,” a working paper from the National Bureau of Economic Research, the economists Matthias Doepke and Fabrizio Zilibotti say intensive parenting springs from rising inequality, because parents know there’s a bigger payoff for people with lots of education and skills. (France is a rare rich country where helicoptering isn’t the norm.)

Hyper-parenting is also driven by science. The latest toddler brain studies reach parents in Bogotá and Berlin too. And people around the world are breeding later in life, when they’re richer and more grateful, so the whole parenting experience becomes hallowed. Scandinavians complain of “curling parents,” a reference to the sport in which you frantically scrub the ice to let a stone glide across it. (In Norway, “we do not, for example, count goals in soccer for children under 12, because they should all feel like winners,” the producer said.)

Twenty-first century parenting isn’t entirely illogical. Rather than trying to

eradicate it, I suggest a strategy of containment: Rein in its excesses, and keep it from getting worse. Based on my own research, an unscientific reading of parenting literature, and a sample size of three kids, here are some key things modern parents should know:

Babies aren't savages. Toddlers understand language long before they can talk. This means you can teach them not to pummel you with carrots at dinnertime, making your life calmer (and your floor cleaner). "Expect more from your children, and they will rise to it. Expect less, and they will sink," Emma Jenner writes in the book "Keep Calm and Parent On."

Seize windows of freedom joyfully, without guilt. Remember that the problem with hyper-parenting isn't that it's bad for children; it's that it's bad for parents. Between the mid-1990s and 2008, college-educated American moms began spending more than nine additional hours per week on child care; this came directly out of their leisure time. The greatest insight to emerge from France since "I think, therefore I am" is that children's birthday parties should be drop-offs. The other parents get three hours to go off and play.

Don't just parent for the future, parent for this evening. Your child probably won't get into the Ivy League or win a sports scholarship. At age 24, he might be back in his childhood bedroom, in debt, after a mediocre college career. Raise him so that, if that happens, it will still have been worth it. A Dutch father of three told me about his Buddhist-inspired approach: total commitment to the process, total equanimity about the outcome.

Try the sleeping cure. Most parenting crises are caused by exhaustion. Force yourself to observe the same nighttime rituals as your toddler: bath, book, bed. When you feel an adult tantrum approaching, give yourself a timeout.

Have less stuff. Messiness compounds the chaos of family life.

Don't worry about overscheduling your child. Kids who do extracurriculars have higher grades and self-esteem than those who don't, among many other benefits, says a 2006 overview in the Society for Research in Child Development's Social Policy Report. "Of greater concern," it noted, "is the fact that many youth do not participate at all."

Don't beat yourself up for failing to achieve perfect work-life balance. The French have national paid maternity leave, subsidized nannies, excellent state day care and free universal preschool, and yet they blame the government for not

helping parents enough. We Americans have none of the above, yet we blame ourselves.

Teach your kids emotional intelligence. Help them become more evolved than you are. Explain that, for instance, not everyone will like them. “When a girl meets a new person, she often automatically strives to be likable, even before she has decided whether or not she likes the new person herself,” Rachel Simmons writes in her book “The Curse of the Good Girl.” “Tell your daughter to switch the order: Size up the person before you start worrying about what she thinks of you.”

Transmit the Nelson Mandela rule: You can get what you want by showing people ordinary respect. When Mr. Mandela heard that an Afrikaner general was arming rebels to prevent multiracial elections, he invited the general over for tea. The journalist John Carlin writes that Gen. Constand Viljoen “was dumbstruck by Mandela’s big, warm smile, by his courteous attentiveness to detail” and by his sensitivity to the fears of white South Africans. The general abandoned violence. Remind your kids that this technique also works on parents.

It really is just a phase. Unbearable 4-year-olds morph into tolerable 8-year-olds.

Don’t bother obsessing about what you think you’re doing wrong. You won’t screw up your kids in the ways you expect; you’ll do it in ways you hadn’t even considered. No amount of hyper-parenting can change that.

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