



Citation: K. Bagnato (2022) “Helicopter Parenting” and Antisocial Behavior: The Role of Family Education. *Rief* 21, 2: pp. 99-115. doi: <https://doi.org/10.36253/rief-10514>.

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

“Helicopter Parenting” and Antisocial Behavior: The Role of Family Education

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Abstract

L'espressione “genitore elicottero” indica quei genitori che sono esageratamente presenti nella vita dei loro figli, che attuano una forma di iperprotezione eccessiva e che sono guidati da un alto senso di responsabilità che si esplica nel tentativo di rimuovere tutti gli ostacoli e presunte minacce che possono interferire con il benessere della prole. La “genitorialità-elicottero” può portare a lungo termine, gravi effetti negativi sul carattere del soggetto, favorire lo sviluppo di disturbi psicologici, così come la manifestazione di scatti di rabbia incontrollata, oppositività e, nei casi più gravi, emissione di comportamenti antisociali, caratterizzati da atteggiamenti di disprezzo, inosservanza e violazione dei diritti delle persone. La famiglia può svolgere un ruolo importante nella prevenzione dei comportamenti antisociali e nella promozione di condotte socialmente condivise e costruttive.

Parole chiave: genitorialità-elicottero, eccessiva iperprotezione, comportamenti antisociali, educazione familiare, strategie educative di prevenzione e intervento.

Abstract

The expression “helicopter parent” indicates those parents who are excessively present in their children’s lives, who implement a form of excessive overprotection, and who are guided by a high sense of responsibility that is expressed in an attempt to remove all obstacles and anticipated threats that could interfere with the well-being of the offspring. “Helicopter parenting” can lead to serious negative effects on the subject’s character in the long term. It can also favour the development of psychological disorders, as well as the manifestation of outbursts of uncontrolled anger, oppositionality, and, in the most serious cases, the committing of antisocial behaviors, characterised by attitudes of contempt, disregard, and the violation of other people’s rights. The family can play an important role in the prevention of antisocial behavior and in the promotion of socially shared and constructive conduct.

Keywords: helicopter parenting, excessive overprotection, antisocial behaviors, family education, educational prevention and intervention strategies.

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Introduction

In recent times, antisocial behavior has represented a problem of great interest to pedagogues, educators, psychologists, social workers, and other professionals, since its manifestation has significant repercussions of a different nature. The term refers to conduct that violates the rights of others and that ignores shared social norms and rules of appropriate behavior.

The type of antisocial behavior varies in relation to the age of the subject and, in general, it can be divided into *explicit* types (quarrels, verbal, and physical aggression, etc.) and *hidden* types (theft, lying, manipulation, damage to property, etc.; Muschitiello, 2019). Sometimes, antisocial behaviors can have a limited duration over time, at other times these behaviors can be consolidated and persist for a long time due to the interaction of multiple character variables, such as: *individual* – an inability to regulate emotions, impulsiveness, oppositionality, low self-esteem, low tolerance for frustration, and other character traits; *social* – insecure attachment, maltreatment, parental overprotection, marginalisation by peers, association with deviant peers, seeking other sources of self-esteem, and so on; *school* – failures, devaluation of school, school maladjustment, and so on.

In today's society, the data that reveal the existence of multiple and different types of antisocial behaviors that take on different forms of expression are increasingly alarming; one need only think of the different phenomena of bullying and substance misuse, acts of vandalism (appropriation of objects, thefts, disfigurement of private or public assets and works of art, creation of computer viruses etc.), individual or collective violence (fights, violence in stadiums and political demonstrations, throwing stones from bridges on the motorway, etc.), right up to physical abuse and sexual abuse. All these manifestations are both the symptoms of a serious underlying malaise and a plea for help that young people make, sometimes even unconsciously.

There is a wide scientific debate that seeks to clarify the underlying causes of antisocial behaviors: some speak of a crisis of values, others of family breakdown, still others of a school crisis or other inciting trends. Actually, none of these factors, taken individually, can create the conditions for antisocial behaviors to manifest themselves first and consolidate afterwards; on the contrary, the causes of these behaviors are multifactorial.

Among the contextual factors, the family can assume a central role and thereby constitute a possible contributing cause that drives offspring to carry out antisocial behaviors. This is because the family, in addition to being the first educational agency, is also the most fragile environment and most exposed to the continuous tensions resulting from the complex cultural and social transformations that also bring with them significant changes in family dynamics. Indeed, it is possible to observe parents increasingly often who, in the face of a society in rapid and continuous evolution, find themselves having to face a whole series of problems without however being in possession of the tools suitable for managing them adequately. This leads to dysfunctional *parenting* arrangements.

This expression refers to the habitual way of parents to relate to their children from a behavioral and communicative point of view. Generally, parenting styles are divided into three categories: *authoritative*, *authoritarian*, and *permissive/indulgent* (Cicognani, Zani, 2003). These styles differ from each other for the degree of acceptance/support and control/requests present among the members (Pinquart, 2017).

Authoritative parents are those who offer clear manifestations of affection and warmth; they are very attentive to the needs of their children, but also strict. They establish standards for the behavior of the child and expectations are created on the latter that take into account both their needs and their actual abilities, skills and peculiarities. They attach great importance

to the development of autonomy and self-determination, but they take ultimate responsibility for the behavior of the child. Authoritative parents identify rules for their children to be respected that are flexible, modifiable, not imposed, open to discussion and respected by the entire family unit, including parents. Even if parents have the last word on decisions regarding the child, these are generally made after having discussed all together. Moreover, when there are problems to be faced, the authoritative parents discuss them with their children in order to think together and always find a solution together. These behaviors are particularly functional as they favour greater autonomy and responsibility for children, without however affecting the emotional bond with their parents.

Families with an authoritarian style, on the other hand, favour obedience, conformity, punitive disciplinary measures and do not take into account the needs of their children. They do not like to argue with them, but they demand that they unconditionally accept the imposed rules, which are rarely explained. These attitudes create the conditions for the child's autonomy to be limited to the detriment of her freedom and independence. Authoritarian parents try in every way to limit their child's autonomy because they interpret it as an expression of rebellion and/or lack of respect for them. However, this interferes with the process of identifying the child who will not acquire the ability to make decisions independently and to feel responsible for their actions.

Finally, permissive/indulgent parents are those who combine a style centred on affectivity with a sort of laxity regarding discipline. They do not impose rules and give their children the possibility/freedom to act as they see fit because they think that control can interfere with their growth process. In the permissive style, the offspring are completely free, without limits and rules. The parent who adopts this style is centred on the child, is affectionate, accepts them for who they are, is not severe, does not punish, does not demand anything, is excessively tolerant, does not guide the child in their choices and does not feel responsible to correct them, satisfies their every desire even if it is nonsensical and consults them in the decisions to be made.

In this climate of unpredictability, children often drift away because they try to find that need for coherence that is absent from the family outside. The permissive/indulgent parenting style is typical of those people who find it hard to make clear decisions towards their children, who are afraid of disappointing their expectations, who allow themselves to be influenced by the emotion of the moment and who always choose the simplest path of grant, instead of analysing, discussing, denying, negotiating, etc.

An additional educational style that has long been under the magnifying glass of many educational scholars is that of «helicopter parenting» (Cline, Fay, 1990, *passim*). This is a term used to describe the phenomenon of a growing number of parents who, obsessed with success and safety of their children, constantly “hover over” them with extreme attention, protecting them from mistakes, disappointments, and risks, thus isolating them from the surrounding world.

It refers to parents who think for their child, who make decisions for them, who try to solve all their problems; in other words, they live in their child's place, not realising the negative consequences of this way of acting. It is an excessively overprotective educational style that has characteristics similar to the hyper-anxious mode; however, instead of being anxious about the child's physical safety, the parents worry too much about their emotional safety. Helicopter parenting often creates children with a low tolerance for frustration, excessive self-centeredness, insecurity, and a lack of preparedness in facing reactions other than those they are used to in the family environment. It becomes difficult for these subjects to choose what is the most appropriate behavior to adopt, so they often consider the consequences of any wrong actions terrible and have strong doubts about their personal worth.

1. Helicopter parents

The expression «helicopter parent» was coined by Foster Cline and Jim Fay (1990, *passim*) in their book *Parenting with Love & Logic: Teaching Children Responsibility* and indicates those parents who are excessively present in their children's lives, who implement a form of excessive overprotection, and who are guided by a high sense of responsibility that is expressed in an attempt to remove all obstacles and anticipated threats that could interfere with the well-being of the offspring.

Caring parents have always existed, and numerous studies and research have highlighted the positive influence of this method of parenting on the growth of children and, above all, on the development of their personal well-being, as well as on the success of their school performance (Burke *et al.*, 2018; Cheng *et al.*, 2012; Day, Padilla-Walker, 2009; Fan, Chen, 2001; Fingerman *et al.*, 2012; Howe, Strauss, 2000; Lipka, 2007; Shoup *et al.*, 2009; Wilder, 2014). The fact that excessive parental involvement has been viewed negatively in recent years underscores the need to keep in mind the distinction between “good” and “bad” helicopter parents suggested by the literature on the subject (i.e. Fingerman *et al.*, 2012; Hesse *et al.*, 2018; Roiphe, 2012; Somers, Settle, 2010). According to scholars, parental overprotection does not necessarily have to be given negative connotations because it can also take on a more or less positive value in relation to its method of implementation. In particular, it would seem that “good” helicopter parents are those who manage to maintain a balance between being there and not being there, who commit to dialogue with their child, who allow the latter to act alone, and who intercede alone when it is really needed. Conversely, “bad” helicopter parents would be those who are too entangled in their child's life, who give them little confidence without imparting an adequate sense of independence, and who are too concerned about their child's safety and personal fulfilment.

Therefore, they are those parents who implement an educational style characterised by excessive protection that goes beyond giving affection to their children and which is expressed in preventing them from autonomously building their own image of themselves; this also prevents these children from being able to face various difficulties and to seek their own path even at the cost of making mistakes.

Although in the literature, it is possible to find a difference between good and bad helicopter parenting, in this work we will strictly refer to the negative meaning of the definition. Therefore, whenever the expression “helicopter parenting” is used, it will refer to its negative connotation. Numerous studies have identified the main attitudes and behaviors implemented by helicopter parents (Buchanan, 2011; Hormachea, 2014; LeMoyne, Moriarty, 2011; Lum, 2006; Padilla-Walker *et al.*, 2021; Padilla-Walker, Nelson, 2012; Segrin *et al.*, 2013; Wilhelm *et al.*, 2014). Below, the most common and frequent:

- *caring for children excessively*. Helicopter parents take care of their children without limit in order to eliminate all the difficulties they may encounter, defending them from criticism and stresses from the external environment. They think that by over-protecting their children, they will entirely take care of their child's personal well-being, so they do not have to experience difficult times;
- *not allowing children to experiment on their own and become independent*. Helicopter parents deprive their children of learning experiences because in addition to eliminating the possibility of having negative experiences, they also remove the opportunity to have positive experiences. In this way, children will not only have no way to develop their curiosity, but they will also not be able to learn from daily life experiences, whether good or bad. In their attempts to avoid any kind of disappointment for the child, these are parents who create the conditions whereby the child cannot acquire the ability to tolerate

- hardships and defeats. To all this, we must also add the establishment of a strong bond of dependence on the parent(s) and the consolidation of inadequate coping strategies;
- *justifying their own children's mistakes and feeling guilty when they do not help each other.* Helicopter parents tend to justify their child's wrong actions and/or failures because they do not want to cause the child any pain, not realising that, in reality, they turn the child into a "victim", since they will never feel the need to analyse their own wrong behavior, leading them to think the problem is always someone else and not themselves. Furthermore, helicopter parents feel guilty if they fail to eliminate all possible sources of difficulty for their child and if they fail to help them cope and resolve a problematic situation. This creates in them the conviction that they are not good parents, which leads them to pour out indiscriminate demonstrations of boundless affection towards the child, which only reinforce in the child the tendency to avoid obstacles of any kind;
 - *generating fear in children.* In a more or less conscious way, helicopter parents generate in their children a fear of facing the outside world and/or of creating their own, if they do not have immediate support, a "prompter" who shows them the way to go or the actions to be taken, or that even acts in their place. Of course, this only adds to a strong sense of frustration and inadequacy in the children;
 - *determining low levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy.* The helicopter parents' way of doing things negatively affects their children's sense of security and self-confidence because with their attitudes, even if implemented with the best of intentions, they do nothing but contribute to the establishment of low self-esteem. In particular, the impossibility of testing oneself independently and making mistakes, the failure to acquire the ability to make decisions and tolerate frustrations, will determine a strong bond of dependence on the parents which will affect not only emotional and behavioral control skills, but also self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Several studies hypothesise that parents do not become helicopter parents by chance, but because, for example, they are raised in families where their emotional, affection, love, and need for recognition have been denied or inadequately met: that is, their parents may have been indifferent, too demanding, or they may have been victims of psychological abuse (i.e. Bradley-Geist, Olson-Buchanan, 2014; Grolnick, 2003; Padilla-Walker, Nelson, 2012). Barocio (2004) adds that helicopter parents put in place overprotective parenting modes because (1) they confuse love for their children with facilitating their life and satisfying all their requests; (2) they feel important and calmer if they are always with their children; (3) by making decisions for the children, they can have full control over them; (4) they are afraid of seeing their children grow up and, above all, of seeing them move away from them, and finally (5) they do not trust their abilities.

Further studies (i.e. Glass, Tabatsky, 2015; Nelson *et al.*, 2015; Segrein *et al.*, 2013) underline the more or less conscious need of helicopter parents to overprotect their children in order to benefit personally, that is, to satisfy some of their needs by:

- *supporting their self-esteem:* a parent who is not comfortable with themselves can try to compensate for this sense of inadequacy by demonstrating that they can be a "good" father or a "good" mother;
- *compensating for previous deprivations:* parents show excessive care towards their children to prevent them from experiencing what they have suffered in the past;
- *relieving feelings of guilt and discomfort:* the child's frustrations lead parents to relive

their failures and sorrows and this makes them feel extremely guilty, with the consequence of engaging in behaviors aimed at preventing the child from experiencing any kind of disappointment;

- *filling the inner void*: sometimes couples break up and this pushes parents to pay all their attention to their children in order to compensate for the consequences of separation;
- *making up for the absence of the other parent*: the absence of one parent, for various reasons, can lead the other one to feel guilty and fear that the child may grow up with emotional problems if this lack is not compensated for;
- *remedying their absence*: parents who spend little time with their children try to counterbalance this absence with the giving of gifts and the satisfaction of any desire.

Finally, some studies (i.e. Hesse *et al.*, 2018; Odenweller *et al.*, 2014; Willoughby *et al.*, 2015) have tried to identify the psycho-social variables that would push helicopter parents to adopt this educational style, including:

- *the perception that one's child is a valuable property*. For various reasons, couples procreate today at an increasingly advanced age and this leads them to consider their child as a precious asset that must be protected from everything and everyone, whatever it takes;
- *a huge social pressure that pushes the parent to over-care for their children*. If until a few decades ago parents tried to compensate for their physical and emotional absence through the purchase of gifts, today we have gone to the opposite extreme: that is, parents are excessively present in their children's lives and live only for them so that their children can avoid any kind of frustration and difficulty;
- *the uncertainty and fear generated by the economic crisis*. The economic crisis has aroused in parents a strong concern for the future of their children. The underlying fear is that they may not be able to accomplish all that society requires on their own. Therefore, parents are inclined to do whatever is necessary to accompany them as long as possible during the growth process;
- *the increase of social competitiveness*. In recent decades, companies have become very competitive, demanding more and more in terms of knowledge, skills, competences, and results. The fear that their children will not be able to keep up leads parents to take on their problems as they think they are more capable and more ready to respond to social demands.

The literature in this area (Barocio, 2004; Bristow, 2014; Casillas *et al.*, 2021; Peláez, Luengo, 1998; Segrin *et al.*, 2012; Taylor, 2006; Vinson, 2012) has also tried to identify the main attitudes and behaviors of children, which derive from helicopter parenting:

- difficulty in adapting to new situations and dependence on adults;
- a habit of trying to get everything you want;
- an inability to solve problems independently;
- an inclination to ask for help to do things and a lack of willingness to help others;
- difficulty in starting and/or finishing activities;
- an aptitude for doing things only if they are remembered;
- a predisposition to become grumpy and to complain when one has to make an effort;
- a tendency to be fearful and to feel insecure;
- difficulty in relating to peers;
- a tendency to make requests in a whiney way;

- an inclination to assume awkward postures and gestures;
- a tendency to be lazy and capricious;
- a predisposition to being insensitive to the needs of others;
- a tendency to be selfish and demanding;
- a belief that others should always please them;
- an inability to share.

Keeping all these elements in mind, it is easy to deduce how helicopter parenting can have negative repercussions for children as it can give rise to shy, fragile, nervous, insecure, fearful subjects, prone to depression and social withdrawal and who always doubt their own capability (Barnes, Farrell, 1992; Baumrind, 1991; Cristini *et al.*, 2007; Grolnick, 2003; Hammen, Rudolph, 1996; Luebbe *et al.*, 2018; Patterson *et al.*, 1989), so much so that some authors define them as *cotton wool children* (i.e. Campbell, 2019; McBurnie, 2014; Nikiforidon, 2017).

This is not to say that all children of overprotective parents will face difficulties or that everyone will face the same difficulties. However, if this parenting method results in inappropriate and dysfunctional behaviors of excessive care, this will certainly affect the personal well-being of the children. That is, overprotection is not pathogenic in itself, but it becomes so if it represents the only or main mode of interaction within the family unit.

2. *The consequences of helicopter parenting*

Pedagogical and psychological research suggests that intrusive parenting can lead to negative outcomes for the child's physical, psychological, emotional, and social well-being. An overprotective attitude during the first years of life can lead to an excessive presence of parents even in adulthood and nurture subjects with a weak character, that is, unable to make decisions independently or to adapt to a constantly evolving world (Hwang, Jung, 2021; Kwon *et al.*, 2016; Segrin *et al.*, 2012). In particular during the adolescent period, one can observe the onset of a whole series of behavioral, emotional, and psychological problems based on feelings of insecurity, lack of esteem, and uncertainty about one's abilities.

A child raised in an environment of excessive attention and suffocating concern, with the wishes of the parents transformed into obligations or expectations that are too high, can face numerous and different difficulties in the growth phase. They will be an immature person, weak, shy, and with low self-esteem who can be largely influenced by bad company or the context of reference.

Holly Schiffrin (2014, 2017, 2019) also points out that helicopter parenting leads to increased levels of anxiety in children and, based on research conducted by the same, it emerged that the children of overprotective parents are more prone to formulating dysfunctional thoughts, the development of excessive dissatisfaction with personal life; they are more predisposed to experiencing negative emotions and moods (insecurity, mistrust, unhappiness, discontent, agitation), and are unable to solve problems independently, even ones that are easy to solve. In other words, according to Schiffrin, the excessive involvement of parents can create a generation of young people who are weak, deprived of autonomy, and completely unable to survive in an increasingly competitive world.

As suggested by Schiffrin, it seems to go against the development of the so-called «Theory of Self-determination» (Decy, Ryan, 1985, *passim*), according to which, in order for a person to be considered fulfilled, they must satisfy three basic psychological needs: autonomy (feeling free to act and perceiving that you are acting based on your own will), competence (believing

you can act with your abilities and in your environment), and relationships (developing safe and positive relationships with others). In order, for the individual, to be able to satisfy these three needs, they must be able to develop a certain amount of self-determination, as well as skills and knowledge that allow them to adopt self-regulated, autonomous, socially shared and directed behaviors towards a specific goal. Relating Deci and Ryan's theory to helicopter parenting, it can be said that the latter adversely affects the well-being of emerging adults due to its negative impact on the basic psychological needs of self-determination (Schiffirin *et al.*, 2019).

Furthermore, van Ingen and Collaborators (2015) show that the children of helicopter parents appear to manifest health and emotional problems in adulthood. The former are expressed in an inability to manage their health because parents have always suggested what to do. Consequently, once adults, they will not be able to take care of their health. The latter (emotional problems) refer to the greater probability of experiencing depressive states and perceiving dissatisfaction with life because these children grew up without having learned to regulate their emotions.

Additional side effects of parental overprotection are: low self-esteem, low levels of self-efficacy, incorrect ways of attributing the cause of events, inadequate problem-solving skills, and dysfunctional coping strategies (Bradley-Geist, Olson-Buchanan, 2014; Cui *et al.*, 2019; Reed *et al.*, 2016; Shoup *et al.*, 2009; Schiffirin, Liss, 2017; Spokas, Heimberg, 2009; van Ingen *et al.*, 2015; von Bergen, Bressler, 2017).

In relation to low self-esteem and low levels of self-efficacy, the excessively overprotective parenting attitude generates dysfunctional thoughts in the children, such as: the idea of not being good enough, of not being able to do it alone, of not being in possession of particular abilities and, above all, the belief that solving problems independently will only lead to negative results. This creates the conditions for these subjects to have no confidence in themselves and instead to have many doubts about the outcome of their efforts. Furthermore, they do not interpret the problems that can be encountered in everyday life as challenges to be overcome, but as threats to be avoided in order not to risk highlighting their incapacities; as a result, they show low levels of commitment, especially if they encounter difficulties or encounter an opinion contrary to what they think. Excessive concern with the judgment of others leads them to never aspire to achieve good results, but to "simply" hope not to make a fool of themselves. Finally, their exaggerated concentration on their incapacities and weaknesses consolidates the belief that they must always be accompanied by someone else in order to face obstacles or to be able to live peacefully.

Feelings of self-esteem and self-efficacy are closely related to the process of attributing the cause of events, which indicates a cognitive process by which an attempt is made to explain, in terms of cause and effect, an event by linking it to a cause. The attributions can be *internal* or *external*, and they are fundamental for human beings because they determine the perception of control of events and the ability to be able to overcome difficulties. Generally, individuals attribute their successes and failures to both external and internal causes, in relation to their self-concept and the specific characteristics of a given situation.

Children of helicopter parents also develop both styles of attribution (internal and external), but in a dysfunctional way as they attribute their successes to *external* causes (parental support, simplicity of the task, luck, etc.) and their failures to *internal* causes (inadequate skills, low intelligence, etc.). In particular, always attributing failures to one's own incapacity will increase the perception of self-doubt, decreasing motivation, commitment, and sacrifice. All this will not only lead the subject to no longer believe in themselves but will also consolidate in them the need to always have to be accompanied by someone.

Another aspect to consider is problem solving, which is expressed in a strategy through which the individual reviews all the solutions made available through their personal resources, and identifies the best possible. The family plays an important role in developing problem-solving skills as, in this protected environment; the child begins to put their solving skills into play. In the case of the children of helicopter parents, this ability is seriously compromised because they never try to actually solve a problem because the parents constantly solve problems for them. All this on the one hand makes the subject feel immune from everything, and on the other, condemns them to the perception of a constant sense of insecurity, inadequacy, and frustration because in any case, sooner or later, they will have to face problematic situations when the parents will not be able to be present.

The formulation of dysfunctional thoughts, low levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy, the attribution of internal causes of failures, and inadequate problem-solving skills also have significant repercussions on coping strategies for problematic situations. The term *coping* refers to the set of cognitive-behavioral efforts with which subjects are able to cope with the psychological distress resulting from an awareness of experiencing personal and relational conflicts. In relation to helicopter parents, it would seem that their attitude of protecting their children would lead children to perceive events as insurmountable and uncontrollable and, therefore, to choose dysfunctional coping strategies. In particular, the predominant strategy would be that of escape/avoidance coping, which is expressed in the physical and cognitive evasion of the stressful situation. This would occur both as a result of the continuous repetition of dysfunctional thoughts deriving from their low self-esteem, and because, usually the solution to the problem is taken care of by the parents. The offspring therefore has little chance of knowing their own abilities and using them to solve a problem precisely because of the parent's continuous intrusive and dangerous presence. Having the perception of always being protected, safe and immune from any problem, will not be of benefit in times when your "protector" is not physically near. In cases like this, children who do not know how to deal with an event and who are ignorant of their own abilities will decide to run away and find refuge in their parents.

The interaction of all these individual variables with the contextual ones inherent in helicopter parenting can therefore lead to serious negative effects in the children in the long term: inadequate social skills, difficulty in expressing one's ideas and feelings, poor autonomy, relational difficulties with peers and adults, manifestation of psychological disorders and uncontrolled anger shots. In addition, the children of helicopter parents, precisely because of excessive emotional and social control, may show inability to respect the rights of others and externalize rebellious behaviors characterized by impulsivity, inability to control their emotions and emission of oppositional and hostile behaviors. In the most serious cases, the committing of antisocial behaviors, characterised by attitudes of contempt, disregard, and the violation of other people's rights (Barnes *et al.*, 2006; Borawski *et al.*, 2003; McGinley, 2018; Roman *et al.*, 2012; Yi-Chan *et al.*, 2014).

Individuals who have experienced overprotection – characterised by deprivation of their independence and autonomy, complete control, excessive and suffocating care – may come to feel hatred towards parental figures and manifest attacks of *non-functional* anger with the aim of moving away from the parents because they are perceived as too intrusive and dangerous. In other words, these children become so angry with their parents that they even want to weaken the bond with them. This non-functional anger, in addition to reaching high levels of hatred, can determine the manifestation of violent behavior towards family members (Bacchini *et al.*, 2011; Barber *et al.*, 1994; Bean *et al.* 2006).

In other words, a family context characterized by excessive protection can play an important role in the manifestation of aggressive and antisocial behavior since it acts as a risk factor.

3. *The role of family education*

It is clear from what has been previously said, that a need has emerged to help helicopter parents to build new educational relationships and to develop and enhance specific resources and skills.

Educational counselling lends itself well to achieving these objectives as it is configured as a tool capable of facilitating the process of restructuring educational relationships in moments of bewilderment and when there are problems for the *parents*, allowing them to gain greater self-awareness, analyse their motivations, and profitably direct their educational action (Bellotti, 2021; Perillo, 2018; Simeone, 2002; Viganò, 1997).

The macro-objective of educational counselling aimed at the helicopter parents is to help the latter find the strength within itself to face difficulties and crises in order to acquire the ability to analyse the suggested proposals and know how to adapt them to their own developmental needs. Educational counselling for helicopter parenting is expressed in an intentionally structured relationship in which the counsellor aims to help helicopter parents understand themselves and their critical issues in relation to their experiences and the management of their emotions. It rests on the assumption that the family is the bearer of both educational needs and potential. Consequently, the counsellor must help the helicopter parents to make a positive change and to identify those spaces for action that allows it to be realised.

This means promoting *empowerment* in the family, in particular increasing its internal power. The objective of the empowerment process is not only and exclusively change, but also to become aware of the possibility of change, that is, the latter must be an essential objective as the helicopter parents could also decide to remain in its own situation, but with a better knowledge and a more adequate perception of one's abilities, possibilities and limits. The primary purpose is, therefore, to enhance the freedom and responsibility of the parental couple, increasing the possibilities of choice and promoting the achievement of specific objectives. An educational consultancy course aimed at helicopter parenting should, therefore, provide parents with information regarding the specific methods of parenting implemented by the same, but also teach them the skills necessary to improve interactions with children, encourage the emission of attitudes and positive behaviors and adequate management of the various educational situations that could arise.

Preliminary to all, this is the observation of helicopter parents in their natural environment in order to make them aware of their educational style, their emotional experience and everything that guides them in the education of their children. Furthermore, observation in the family context would help helicopter parents to grasp with more ease and immediacy the close link between their overprotective attitudes and behaviors and the more or less adequate behavioral, emotional and relational responses put in place from the offspring, as well as the circumstances that affect them. This phase is of fundamental importance since it should "trig" the need for helicopter parents to make significant changes in the interaction with their children.

Therefore, we work with helicopter parents on two levels: on the one hand, awareness of their parenting style is increased, consisting of beliefs, previous experiences, beliefs, emotions and sensations connected to their history of attachment and care received, etc.; on the other hand, the educational, communicative and relational errors committed more frequently and the related dysfunctions are highlighted.

In particular, the educational consultancy course aimed at helicopter parenting could be designed in stages, each of which will devote the time necessary for its development:

- to provide detailed information on the child's socio-affective and psychological development;
- to increase the level of awareness of one's educational style and of one's ways of interacting with children;
- to enhance communication skills and problem-solving skills;
- to increase the ability to regulate emotions;
- to offer educational strategies that modify and facilitate parent-child interaction.
- The gradual succession of phases will allow helicopter parents to achieve some specific objectives:
 - to acquire, refine and strengthen their educational skills and communication and interpersonal skills;
 - to give them those conceptual tools that are useful for making valuable choices that will guide the educational action;
 - to restore confidence in their parental self-efficacy;
 - to support them in dealing with the problems that may arise at any time;
 - to give them back the joy of fulfilling their role as the first educational agency.

Operating on two levels, one of awareness of one's own educational style and the other of pedagogical/educational support, helicopter parenting will have an opportunity for profound help, without, however, implying a delegation of one's own skills and responsibility.

In relation to helicopter parenting, a further element not to be overlooked is that of implementing educational actions that can act at the level of primary prevention in order to create the conditions for parents not to implement forms of excessive protection, as well as any other dysfunctional educational style. In fact, today, being a parent requires a particular preparation without which the risk of facing complications increases substantially. It seems, therefore, that today's priority is *to learn to educate*.

However, how do you teach parents to learn to educate? A possible solution could be to implement training courses aimed at the family and with the aim of improving the quality of life and promoting the personal well-being of the same. Specifically, it would be desirable to provide for the implementation of what are defined as «Parenting Courses» (Gordon [1970], 1975, *passim*), «School for Parents» (Pati, 1998, *passim*²), or «Parent Training» (Robiati, 1996, *passim*), which aim to offer support to parents showing them the practices of parenting and the most functional attitudes for the harmonious growth of children. This is because strong and effective families and a positive family environment seem to be the indispensable requirements for preventing the most varied forms of discomfort and malaise in children, which can lead them into antisocial behavior.

Furthermore, studies on resilience affirm that parental support represents an important protective factor capable of promoting both planning and the ability to set positive goals in children (Ary *et al.*, 1999; Cerrocchi, 2018; Kumpfer, 1999). To achieve these goals, parenting courses could be offered to new couples when they are about to become parents. They could be offered them alongside the pre-birth courses or within them in order to be able to hook a large number of future parents and accompany them along the path that will lead them to becoming a mother and a father. Parenting courses could become a particularly useful tool in developing greater awareness and competence for solving problems inherent in the management

² From now on, all footnotes and translations are the Author's, unless otherwise specified, Editor's Note.

and education of children. These courses would aim to develop and/or improve the sensitivity and skills necessary to deal with successful complex and multiple aspects of family life and parent-child relationships.

On the basis of what has been reported in the literature and the experience gained in contexts of family dysfunction, it is proposed the implementation of a Parenting Course aimed at making the couple acquire the “useful equipment” to make them become a precious resource and capable of implementing adequate parenting methods, of facing difficult situations that may occur in the family environment and promoting the emission of positive and constructive behaviors. The basic assumptions of the aforementioned program are: (1) the parents are the agents of primary importance in the development of their children, (2) they fulfil the fundamental function of exerting a positive influence on them, and (3) they must be given back the responsibility of supporting their children in their growth process. Through a series of weekly meetings, time is first devoted to the couple to become aware of their educational belief and, subsequently, they move to the construction of parental self-efficacy and practical principles for educating children.

In the work of supporting parenthood it is important, first of all, to critically explore the educational models implicitly transmitted from generation to generation, on the one hand because through reflective devices it is possible to deconstruct and build parental identity, transforming implicit and unconscious knowledge into critical and validated knowledge (Fabbri, 2004); on the other hand, because the awareness of the basic pedagogical model is the first step towards the possible weakening of its binding power (Gigli, 2007).

All this expresses a very important concept because it highlights that the only way to learn to be a mother or father is *to* be a parent: *doing* is always linked to knowledge, but if knowledge is not recognized, it cannot be expressed in competence (Formenti, 2008). In most cases, the parent is not aware of being a bearer of knowledge and therefore needs to discover it, to see themselves in action, but above all to confront and tell others. If the “job of parenting” is learned through experience, from that of being a child to learning for participation in social practices, it can be said that parents, through paths based on a reflective approach, can be accompanied and helped in transiting from a condition of beginner parent (*pre-reflective* parent, which refers to implicit and unconscious knowledge), to one of competent parent (*reflective* parent who refers to explicit and authentic *knowledge*). Parental knowledge comes from the personal history of each one and from the experiences lived as a child and as a parent. For this reason, a reflective approach to parenting seems appropriate because it allows you to dwell on the styles, attitudes, behaviors, resources and abilities of your parents based on which future parents build, in sharing or in opposition, their own. This process serves not only to reflect critically on the past, but also on the present. The goal is to provide the couple with the opportunity to reconsider or rethink about themselves through the critical exploration of their experiences and their personal lives in an exercise of comparison between themselves child and parent. In this way, the couple have the opportunity to better understand what they have learned from their parents, from the socio-cultural context of reference, from personal training, from interaction with the partner and/or with the children and how much still remains to be explored to enrich their cognitive heritage.

The adoption of a reflective approach allows, therefore, to make parents or future active parents builders of their knowledge and skills and conscious interpreters of their own experiences, giving way to make explicit and transparent the implications and ideological and cultural assumptions underlying actions, relationships and events. Subsequently, space will be given to the construction of parental self-efficacy since it is strongly convinced that before acquiring

tools and skills functional to the implementation of an adequate educational style, it is essential that future parents have confidence in themselves and in their educational abilities; that is, they have the conviction to be able to adequately manage both the tasks necessary to raise their children and the relationship with them in the different stages of life. Only after the couple has acquired adequate educational self-efficacy will it be useful to teach them what are considered the practical principles for educating their children, namely all those tools, skills, and skills useful for promoting suitable parenting practices, as well as the management of problematic situations in an appropriate and effective way. Specifically, the meetings of this second part focus on parental care practices, parent-child interaction, and contingencies, which can favour positive and/or negative behaviors.

Different working methods will be used in all the meetings, including short theoretical explanations useful for promoting a greater understanding of the effects of different educational styles on the personal well-being of children, couple and/or group activities aimed at comparison and mutual exchange of ideas and beliefs, and "homework", which aims to put into practice what has been learned.

A parenting course, therefore, structured in this way can be configured as a prevention path that allows future parents to acquire and improve their educational and relational skills through the deepening of educational topics and the use of active methodologies. From this point of view, family education is configured as a specially structured action aimed at helping parents to fulfil their responsibilities and educational tasks in the best possible way, to bet on their potential and training skills, and not to consider education as a "trivial" implementation of indications provided by specialists (Formenti, 2011; Milani, 2018; Pati, 1995). Precisely for this reason, the use, first of all, of a reflective approach proves to be of fundamental importance because, on the one hand, it leads future parents to have awareness of their emotional, psychological and social background that acts as an unconscious filter of any information that is processed and of any relationship that is established, especially with children; on the other hand, it creates the conditions so that the use, subsequently, of an information-based approach does not turn into a pure and simple training of "good idealistic resolutions", but is configured as a moment of conscious and critical acquisition of that equipment necessary to be "good parents". From this point of view, the use of an information-based approach is therefore particularly useful and valuable to achieve certain goals, to learn the job of parenting and to grow from a personal point of view. In addition, it offers a new vision on more or less known issues and gives new points of view that can be useful to do better what parents do or will do.

In conclusion, being a parent today is an increasingly complex task that requires will, commitment, and effort, but also the acquisition of a whole range of skills and abilities to be able to carry it out properly. Of course, love for children is fundamental, but it is not enough and, above all, in some situations it may be more advantageous to "rework" some educational, emotional, and relational ways in order to fulfil one's educational role more effectively. In the family, the first important emotional bonds are built, the basic norms and values are internalised, the initial stages of cognitive and emotional development are carried out, and the skills necessary to be in society and interact consciously and responsibly with others are learned.

Therefore, the family can play an important role in the prevention of antisocial behavior and in the promotion of socially shared and constructive conduct. Hence, it is essential to teach the family "to learn to educate", and to support it in acquiring a *toolbox* that is effective in preventing the establishment and consolidation of antisocial behaviors, thereby enabling it to play an active role in promoting positive behaviors in order to effectively fulfil its educational task.

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