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Raising Children in a Changing World: A Comparative Look at Parenting Styles

Parenting in the United States has changed dramatically over the past four decades. New expectations, pressures, and ideas have transformed how parents raise their children. These shifts reflect broader cultural, economic, and social transformations within our society. The three major parenting styles that have dominated over the years are helicopter parenting, intensive parenting and gentle parenting. These approaches emerged in response to changing fears as well as societal norms. Understanding the development of these styles over time reveals how parenting is shaped by forces outside of the home, such as economic inequality, educational pressures, mental health awareness, and the influence of technology and media.

Helicopter parenting first gained national attention in the 1980s. It was mainly fueled by anxieties regarding safety as well as the growing cultural ideas that children were vulnerable and in need of constant supervision. By the late 1990s, this protective approach evolved into intensive parenting, a style of parenting which focuses on improving children's academic and extracurricular successes. However, intensive parenting became deeply tied to economic concerns and reinforcing an already unequal society. Most recently, in the 2010s and 2020s, many parents have turned to gentle parenting to raise their children. This approach emphasizes empathy, emotional openness, and a lack of punishments. Gentle parenting rose in popularity as a reaction to the pressures associated with intensive and helicopter parenting, and it also reflects modern concerns about mental health, emotional stability, and the expectations that are placed on

families today. Following these parenting styles throughout history allows for a deeper understanding of how parenting has evolved throughout generations.

Helicopter parenting emerged during a time of national fears, changing education expectations, and shifts in cultural attitudes towards childhood. This style is used to describe parents who were intensely involved in and observant of their children's lives. The 1980s marked a major turning point in how Americans viewed child safety. The media frequently reported stories about kidnapping and violent crimes involving children. Furthermore, highly publicized cases, such as the disappearance of Adam Walsh in 1981, created a sense of fear, leading parents to feel that danger was everywhere (2015). As a result, parents began supervising their children more closely than previous generations, limiting their outdoor time and monitoring their children's interactions.

Education was another major factor behind the rise of helicopter parenting. The 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, warned that American students were falling behind their peers globally. This sparked a widespread belief that children needed more parental involvement in their education. Over the next two decades, educational reforms, such as No Child Left Behind, only intensified the pressure placed on students to perform academically, as well as on parents to ensure that their children were keeping up (2015). With increased schoolwork, standardized testing, and college admissions anxiety, parents became even more watchful of their children's academic progress. Helicopter parenting grew out of these pressures, and parents who adopted this style believed that they were protecting their children from harm as well as ensuring their future success. However, many argue that this approach limited children's independence and their ability to make decisions on their own (Furedi, 2018).

By the late 1990s and early 2000s, helicopter parenting began to evolve into intensive parenting. This style placed even stronger demands onto parents. Rather than just monitoring their children, parents began to actively arrange their children's lives in very structured ways. According to the New York Times, modern parents increasingly believe that they must spend significant time and money "educating and enriching their children". This idea is driven by fears regarding the economy as well as concerns that failing to give children every opportunity could threaten their ability to achieve a secure middle-class life (Miller, 2024). Sociologist Sharon Hayes first identified this style in the 1990s, describing it as a labor intensive and emotionally demanding approach that is focused on developing children's talents through everyday interactions (Miller, 2024). Annette Lareau later expanded on this idea with her concept of "concerted cultivation", which is a parenting attitude characterized by organized extracurricular activities and parental involvement in children's academic and social lives (Pinsker, 2019).

Intensive parenting was also shaped by larger economic and political contexts at the time. In the late twentieth century there was a decline of stable, well-paying jobs and a rise of economic inequality. Parents became increasingly anxious about their children's futures especially when it came to having economic security. Survey data from The Atlantic indicates that parents across race and class all aspired to have hands-on, intensive styles because they believed that this approach was the best in this time of widening inequality (Pinsker, 2019). Parents also began to prepare their children for highly competitive education and job markets. This cultural shift only reinforced the idea that children's success is dependent on the investments of their parents. While many children benefitted from the opportunities that were provided to them through intensive parenting, the style had negative qualities. It contributed to

rising stress among parents and children, deepened class inequality, and created unrealistic standards for what parenting should look like (Miller, 2024).

By the 2010s and 2020s, a growing number of parents began to turn away from the high pressures of helicopter and intensive parenting. Gentle parenting emerged as a response to burnout among parents as well as an attempt to prioritize children's emotional well-being. This style focuses on the parent-child relationship, and encourages empathy, respect, and communication between the two. Parents who follow this approach attempt to help their children identify their emotions, understand conflicts, and develop self-respect through connection (Dawson, 2025). Furthermore, gentle parents do not punish their children or use traditional behavior rewards, they argue that this is because they want children to develop their own moral compass instead of behaving in order to please adults. Instead of focusing on consequences, gentle parenting emphasizes understanding why a child is in distress and working together to identify a better way to manage their behavior.

One of the main aspects of gentle parenting is its focus on realistic developmental expectations. According to Brown Health, empathy involves understanding what behaviors are normal for a child's age. Mood swings in young children and testing boundaries in older children are seen as normal. This perspective allows parents to respond to their children's behavior with patience instead of frustration. Furthermore, gentle parenting allows for flexibility and encourages parents to acknowledge and fix situations when they handle something poorly (Dawson, 2025). This shows their children that mistakes are normal and gives them a model for healthy emotional regulation.

The rise of gentle parenting is linked to cultural and technological developments. According to Macalester College, raising children has become harder due to the isolation felt

during the COVID-19 pandemic and the advice from social media influencers on the proper way to raise children (Pezalla, 2025). Gentle parenting often acts as a counter to traditional more authoritarian parenting, which relies largely on discipline and hierarchy (Pezalla, 2025). Instead, it focuses on making sure that children's feelings are both validated and taken seriously. However, this parenting style can be emotionally draining for parents, who feel pressure to constantly regulate their own emotions as well. Additionally, parents focus on boundaries as an important part of this approach, however, there is no uniform definition of what these boundaries should look like. This makes the style really difficult to consistently follow.

When focusing on helicopter parenting, intensive parenting and gentle parenting, it is clear that each style rises from its historical moment in time. Helicopter parenting emerged from a period of increased fear and cultural concerns regarding children's safety. Intensive parenting developed as a response to economic pressures and increased competition. It also reflects a period in which success was seen as highly dependent on parental management. Gentle parenting demonstrates a shift towards emotional awareness and connection, shaped by rising mental health awareness and exhaustion from decades of intense parenting styles.

The cultural pressures that produced these styles reflect deeper societal worries. The New York Times notes that many parents today feel overwhelmed by technological change, unsure how to prepare their children for a rapidly changing job market, and distrustful of political solutions to family issues. Social media has only made comparisons between families more intense, making many parents feel that they are behind or inadequate. This has made parenting feel very individualized and like even more of a burden, which contributes to feelings of stress and loneliness (Miller, 2024).

While each parenting style has its own strengths, all three also hold challenges. The focus on safety seen throughout the helicopter parenting style can hinder children's independence and problem-solving abilities. Intensive parenting provides children with valuable opportunities but it also risks being too overwhelming for both children and parents. Gentle parenting supports emotional development, however it becomes difficult if boundaries are unclear or parents lack the time, support, or emotional stability to consistently practice this style. Furthermore, each parenting style is very dependent on the socioeconomic conditions of the families themselves. Helicopter parenting requires a lot of time from parents themselves to watch over their children. Intensive parenting is usually only accessible to only with significant financial resources, which can widen opportunity gaps. And gentle parenting requires time, emotional openness and often access to information regarding child development. These demands make the approaches more challenging for parents who are experiencing any types of economic or personal strain.

Despite these challenges, parenting styles will continue to evolve as society changes. As economic pressures change, research on child development grows, and cultural attitudes as well as conversations about mental health expand, parents will continue to adopt new strategies that reflect the needs and values of their time. Future parenting approaches may blend all three of the styles, combining the structure of intensive parenting with the more emotionally focused aspects of gentle parenting, while avoiding controlling issues that arise in helicopter parenting. Furthermore, policy may play a large role, especially if social support systems are able to expand to reduce parental stress and inequality.

The evolution of helicopter, intensive, and gentle parenting styles reveals a lot about our society as a whole. These approaches reflect the deep desires of parents to protect, prepare, and support their children emotionally, even as modern life makes these goals increasingly complex

and difficult. Parenting is a private and political act that is influenced by cultural norms, social expectations, economic situations, and family dynamics. Understanding how these styles have developed demonstrates the changing nature of childhood and the transformations that are occurring in American life over time. Ultimately, the progression from helicopter parenting, to intensive parenting, to gentle parenting shows how parents have adapted to societal pressures as well as how they continue to try to do what they believe is best for their children, even in a society that is constantly changing.

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