

Keuka College

## The Culture of Parent Control

*And the Mechanisms of Psychological Control That Lead to an Adulthood of Resentment or Dependence*

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Becoming a parent is possibly one of the most simultaneously inspiring and daunting adventures an individual can experience in their lifetime. The miracle of life comes with the heavy responsibility of raising a child into a functional, respectable adult. When a child is born, it is only natural for parents to have inherent concerns about their protection, health, and subsequent well-being. “I cannot think of any need in childhood as strong as the need for a father’s protection” (Sigmund Freud). The instinct to protect a child is present in almost every new parent. Since the invention of the baby monitor, it has been the go-to device for parents who have the best intentions to protect their newborns. However, at what point in a child’s lifetime does the sense of responsibility raising a child presents morph into the manifestation of over-monitoring children, perhaps without their knowledge or consent? And when does this invasion of privacy cross the line, resulting in the production of maladjusted, unhappy adults? Modern technology has made it possible for today’s parents to cross that line, interfering with the growth of a child’s independence and overall autonomy. Overinvolved, overprotective “helicopter” parents tend to exert certain mechanisms of psychological control onto their children, either leading to an adulthood of resentment or dependence.

The baby monitor, all arguments aside, was revolutionary when it came to the care taking of newborn children. The 1932 Lindberg baby kidnapping sparked the invention of the first baby monitor in 1937, the Zenith Radio Nurse (Davis). Since then, the baby monitor has transformed into a necessary precaution, found within the homes of almost every American tasked with raising a newborn. It eases anxiety and stress related to protecting the child, and has even been known to aid parents in getting additional sleep at night. It is impossible to testify that this technology as a whole is harmful to the growth of children, especially when society heavily justifies the product on the basis of safety and protection. However, when parents come to rely

on this ‘surveillance equals safety’ attitude, their well-meaning intentions easily shift into an obsession surrounding the constant, relentless monitoring of their children. Though their actions may be rooted in underlying parental anxiety, it ultimately leads to the production of resentful or dependent adults. In an article published in the *Journal of Family Issues*, a study was done examining the use of baby monitors within a population that was representative of well-educated, married women: “...in their discussions of monitors, parents normalize parental anxiety and that they depict the baby as both fragile (and thus in need of care) and mischievous (and thus in need of control)” (Nelson). The coupling of care and control while a child is young may seem reasonable, but this justification of parental anxiety tends to cultivate and carry the habit of over-monitoring into adolescence and beyond. Nelson goes on to conclude that “...as parents adapt to the anxieties associated with parenting by monitoring their babies, they gain some forms of freedom while accepting tethering... issues are raised about the links between parental monitoring of babies and increasing surveillance in contemporary society”. The age of technology my generation has grown up in has given modern parents the equipment they need to feed into their obsession of watching their child’s every move.

The most tangible consequence of the manifestation of monitoring children is camouflaged by a smartphone application, referred to as Life360. Life360 is marketed as a way to bring families closer together and provide security. The free, basic features include location sharing, battery monitoring, location E.T.A., 2 place alerts, and location history up to 48 hours. The premium, monthly-paid subscription version comes with an additional 28 days of location history, unlimited place alerts, roadside assistance, crime reports, crash detection, and driver reports (“Life360 Support”). This was the version my parents saw worth in while we struggled to buy groceries, living paycheck to paycheck. Life360 was seen as a necessity in our family;

nobody was allowed to delete the app or turn off location services. I was constantly monitored as I went to and from school, work, home, and everything in between. It was annoying as a thirteen year old, but such an intense invasion of privacy became repugnant as a seventeen year old. I hated my parents for not trusting me, and the unwavering feeling of being controlled has now (as a young adult) made me want to do nothing but hide where I am and what I'm doing from my parents. I feel obligated to regain the massive amount of privacy I lost as a child, compelling me to physically and emotionally distance myself from them. The mechanisms of psychological control described, such as Life360, are silent, slow killers of the bond between parents and their children.

The first path to adulthood that children suffering from overinvolved, psychologically controlling parents may find themselves on is one that results in resentment. This is the path that I happen to find myself on. My experience with Life360 has caused a dramatic drift between my own parents and I, but it is not the only mechanism of psychological control that feeds into an adulthood of animosity. Although over monitoring plays a substantial role, the number one factor in this process is parents who possess the quality of perfectionism. Perfectionist parents tend to unintentionally damage the self esteem of their children, making this specific parental quality a predictor of lower well-being and the development of depression in adulthood (Soens et al). Four qualified researchers contributed to a detailed research study that examined the role of qualities like perfectionism in the development of parental psychological control. The report, published in the *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, states that

Perfectionist parents have a tendency to pursue their own personal goals rigidly (Blatt, 1995), they may lack the empathic ability to be attuned to their children's needs and aspirations. Instead, these perfectionist parents may extend the wishes and norms that they feel unable to achieve themselves to their children,

critically evaluate their children's behavior, and engage in psychologically controlling parenting techniques. (Soenens et al)

By placing such high achievement expectations onto their children, perfectionist parents breed a culture wherein success is a direct measurement of worth and value as a human being. Parents who experience the success of their children vicariously are especially dangerous, in that instead of supporting them in their moments of failure or struggle, they contribute to their child's low self-esteem and warped sense of worth. This may be due to their vicarious experience of the failure, perhaps perceiving it as their own and in turn becoming disappointed, frustrated or upset. Throughout elementary, middle, and highschool, I was expected to come home with nothing less than straight A's. I grew up believing that I had brought these high standards upon myself. I'd sit up at night thinking that maybe if I had not achieved such substantially high grades in my youth, maybe I wouldn't be chastised for that one 83 on my midterm, or scolded for that one time I forgot to turn in a homework assignment. My older sibling was coddled when his grades put his highschool graduation into question, and accepted back home when two different colleges were too much academic work for him. Why was it that I was terrified of punishment after that one semester of eight that I didn't make the high honor roll? The only time I've ever felt good enough for my parents was after the release of my SAT score. 1400 became a number that defined me, a number that my parents could look at and say, "okay, now you're worth something." I felt I bore the weight of becoming successful as if my quality of life directly depended on it. In an interview on his book, *The Parents We Mean to Be*, Richard Weissbourd speaks on how parents respond to their underlying fears of their children's failure: "...the bigger problem is more subtle. Many of us have unacknowledged fears about our children not achieving at a high level. And because of these unrecognized fears, many of us are quietly organizing our children's lives around achievement" (Weissbourd). The emphasis on achievement in families

can be easily and unknowingly exaggerated, and ultimately overshadow any concerns about the child's genuine happiness and mental health. Children who grow up in an achievement-orientated, highly demanding and critical environment are likely to foster bitterness towards their parents.

Perfectionism is not a ubiquitously negative quality to have. Several people would agree that high standards have an important role in the real world. Research done on 25,000 working-age individuals proved the benefits of perfectionism in the job industry; "Our results affirm that perfectionism meaningfully and consistently predicts several "beneficial" workplace outcomes. For example, perfectionists *are* more motivated on the job, work longer hours, and can be more engaged at work" (Swider et al). High standards have the ability to promote motivation to become better, higher-achieving adults. There is a perception that perfectionism has a time and place, and can be a useful quality to possess. This holds true especially in medical health care professions, such as surgeons or pharmacists. As reported by Mike Peters and Jenny King in a leading general medicine journal, doctors are expected to have "attention to detail, a deep sense of responsibility, and maintenance of high standards. It could be asked, "Would patients want anything less?" (Peters). It is fair to conclude that perfectionism in it of itself is not innately harmful. However, it is important to be able to discern between when this trait is functional versus destructive.

A significant distinction needs to be made to clarify when perfectionism crosses the boundary into maladaptive perfectionism. Maladaptive perfectionism is a less common phrase, but its meaning is incredibly relevant to the obsession of success and achievement found in unhealthy family environments. The report I referenced to before, published in the *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, describes the difference between the two concepts: "Setting high

personal standards may, as such, be adaptive because endorsing high personal standards is unrelated to negative adjustment outcomes. In contrast, negative self-evaluations that arise from a rigid and inflexible adherence to these personal standards may be more maladaptive because they strongly predict both depression and anxiety” (Soens et al). This is to say that perfectionism is only healthy when an individual is able to accept and move on from the times wherein they fail to meet their high personal standards. Unfortunately, maladaptive perfectionism is all too common and unrecognized by parents. When this mindset is transferred from high personal standards to high standards for their child, it becomes a function of psychological control that is damaging to a child’s self-esteem and well-being. Furthermore, children who experience high psychological control from their parents “seem more likely to develop a self-critical, achievement-oriented, and harshly evaluative view of themselves” (Soenens et al). The characteristics that evolve in children of perfectionist parents are high predictors of depression and anxiety, suggesting that these subtle mechanisms of psychological control contribute to the production of unhappy and resentful adults.

Victims of mechanisms of control such as Life360 have another central path that tends to take them through adulthood: dependence. The invasion of privacy commandeered by Life360 that produces resentful adults results in the production of dependent adults as well. A study that followed thousands of teenagers into their 60s “...found adults whose parents intruded on their privacy in childhood or encouraged dependence were unhappier and had lower mental wellbeing” (qtd. In “Controlling Parents”). The indicator that distinguishes whether a child will become resentful or dependent is the presence of parental anxiety about adolescent distancing. It has been repeated for years; “they grow up too fast!”, “you’ll always be my baby!”, “I wish they were just kids again.” This culture of coddling today’s youth is rooted in parent’s anxiety about

their children's increasing autonomy. Soens and the three other others in the research report on parental psychological control established the relationship between the feelings associated with a child growing up and the resulting exertion of control;

...some parents interpret their children's increasing autonomy as a forerunner of an impending separation process. For these parents, the child's movement toward autonomy would represent a threat to the relationship with the child or, in other words, a threat of loss...Reactions to this threat may include anxiety associated with being apart from the child as well as sadness and anger about the inability to remain in close proximity of the child (Hock, McBride, & Gnezda, 1989). These reactions may constitute an additional source of psychological control. (Soenens et al)

The reluctance certain parents display about the increasing independence of their children poses a threat to their overall development. Richard Weissbourd also has an opinion on how parents may be destructive when exhibiting overinvolvement: "Such parents also have a great deal of trouble separating from their kids in adolescence and nurturing their children's independence, with damaging consequences for children's emotional and moral development" (Weissbourd). This type of psychological control is present in parent behavior through means of guilt-induction, conditional approval, lack of privacy, overinvolvement in a child's daily life, and possessive parents who unduly emphasize affective bonds with the child, fostering dependency (Soenens et al). Guilt-induction is when a parent may intentionally guilt and be demeaning towards their children in order to manipulate them into doing what the parent originally wanted. Imagine you're sixteen years old, and you want to go to the shopping mall with your friends for a few hours. You politely ask your mom for permission, but without skipping a beat she says you're far too young, you'd get lost, or for one reason or another it's an extremely unsafe situation for you to be in. You would try to contest any reason she provides you with, until she starts getting more upset, saying that you never spend time with the family, that you're selfish, and you never stop to

think about all the things she does for you. She may even attempt to guilt you by apologizing for being such a terrible mother, somehow manipulating you to believe that these words came out of your mouth. Of course none of this is true, but she does everything in her power to make you believe that it is. That essentially, you would not be loved unless you did what your parents have asked you to. This also feeds into the concept of conditional approval; that your parents love you, but only under the condition that you do everything they want from you. Both of these versions of control exist because of a parent's anxieties and fears about their child's growing independence. Parents who utilize this type of control may very well have good intentions, but do not realize the dramatic impact such control has on their child's quality of life in adulthood. This type of parenting often goes beyond being supportive and intervenes with the decision making of emerging adults (qtd. in "Helicopter Parents"). The road to dependence involves the difficult adjustment to milestones throughout adulthood, such as college, having a job, and dealing with other relevant responsibilities. A child who experiences this type of psychological control has clear deficits when attempting to function as an adult, and is the ultimate contributor of an adulthood of dependence.

Despite the possibility of severe negative consequences, there are individuals who would mention the ability of modern technology to connect people and mediate relationships. It permits the existence of long distance relationships with family, friends, and significant others, and creates the opportunity to maintain these relationships over long periods of time. This can be convenient, especially in times of emergency that require the rapid connection with 911 or response lines of the like. There is an immeasurable and impossibly long list of pros of modern technology. There are also parents who would become defensive at the concept of this discussion, arguing that parents who don't supervise their children may come under suspicion of

neglect (Calarco). This fear may draw parents into harmful applications of this technology that don't necessarily market itself as such. Worried about the idea of raising latch-key kids, these individuals marvel in the safety and surveillance that Life360 promises. We've all heard the famous quote, "Making the decision to have a child is momentous. *It is to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body*" (Elizabeth Stone). If you could keep track of your heart and never have to wonder or worry about its safety and well being, wouldn't you do it?

The short answer is this: there is a world of difference between neglect and allowing your child to lead their own life. "Arkangel" is the title of an episode in season four of the popular science-fiction series, *Black Mirror*. This specific episode depicts a mother who has concerns about protecting her young daughter, and combats her anxiety by means of the newest monitoring technology. The technology is in the form of an implanted chip, which allows the parent to monitor the location of their child, as well as see through their eyes, allowing them to know exactly when, where, and what they're doing. The chip is connected to a smartphone device, which permits the mother to pixelate, or censor, images that may be causing her daughter distress. For our purposes, a parallel needs to be drawn between the television series' technology and Life360. Obviously, this episode in a fictional television series is a much more extreme example, with much more extreme consequences (SPOILER ALERT: It ends with the daughter, now teenage, beating her mother to death with the paired device while the monitoring technology censors it; she had no idea how far she went). The situation may have been exaggerated for audience appeal, but the concepts present throughout the episode are strong examples of how overinvolvement and overprotection can have devastating consequences. For example, the script goes into detail about the dangers of coddling a child, without their consent no less, and exposes

the true invasion of privacy it should be considered. One is actually able to identify how the daughter in the show begins to change her opinion about her mother due to this technology, and begins to resent her. Forcing a child to download Life360 onto their smartphone is just short of manually installing a chip into their brain. Admittedly, in an emergency situation, Life360 may prove beneficial. However, the only feature it realistically needs to have in an emergency situation is location sharing. This is already a feature built into all iPhones, referred to as “Find My iPhone”. This renders all other tracking apps useless, including Life360. It does not make teenagers and adolescents feel safe, but rather trapped; and this may very well lead to their involvement in more unsafe situations. It needs to become common knowledge that strict parents breed sneaky children. A few of my highschool friends and I had the app on our phones, so we all constantly tried to find ways around it. One common strategy was to leave our phones at a friends house, then go off and do what we originally planned to do. This meant that while our parents thought we were safe at someone’s house, we were really off in a potentially dangerous situation, now without a means to contact anyone in an emergency. Therefore, I believe that when thoroughly scrutinized, Life360 poses more threats to a child’s safety than anything else. Even when used as it’s meant to, this application is destructive to a child’s sense of independence and the growth of their overall autonomy.

So, how does one manage to cultivate a healthy bond between a parent and child? The first thing to do is establish trust and respect with the child. Functions of control such as Life360 destroy rather than foster trust, which is imperative to a healthy relationship between parents and children. A child needs to feel comfortable in order to be honest with their parents, but this communication is inhibited when parents rely on the methods of psychological control previously noted. It has been made clear that Life360 is an embodiment of both a parents' fear of

a child's increasing independence, and a need to have control over their child's life. Although it is just short of having an implanted tracking device in your brain, it retains the same effects on a child that a nonconsensual, surgically installed GPS chip would. To cultivate a healthy relationship, parents need to recognize this smartphone application as destructive, both to a child themselves as well as the relationship a parent has with that child. By eliminating this mechanism of control, it minimizes the possibility of growing into an adulthood of either resentment or dependence. In addition to boycotting Life360, parents need to build healthy channels of communication in which a child may feel comfortable to interact with and confide in a parent. This includes admitting their wrongdoings associated with impossibly high standards, guilt-induction, robbery of privacy, and so on. In an environment where a child feels accepted, supported, and loved, an authentic and functional relationship is able to grow between them and their parents.

In conclusion, the bond between a parent and child deteriorates due to certain mechanisms of psychological control. This control may be unintentional, but regardless of intentions, it paves the road for children to become fixated in either an adulthood of resentment or dependence. Resentful children had parents who invaded their privacy, destroyed their trust through mechanisms like Life360, and made them feel powerless in their own endeavors. Dependent children are maladjusted in adulthood, struggling to make their own decisions and become autonomous citizens. Parents need to not only recognize what behaviors exert unintentional control, but also understand why they are controlling and harmful to the growth and independence of their children. If society as a whole becomes better at identifying parenting methods and behaviors that slowly erode the connection children have with their parents, we can begin to learn replacement behaviors that will produce happy, well-adjusted adults.

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