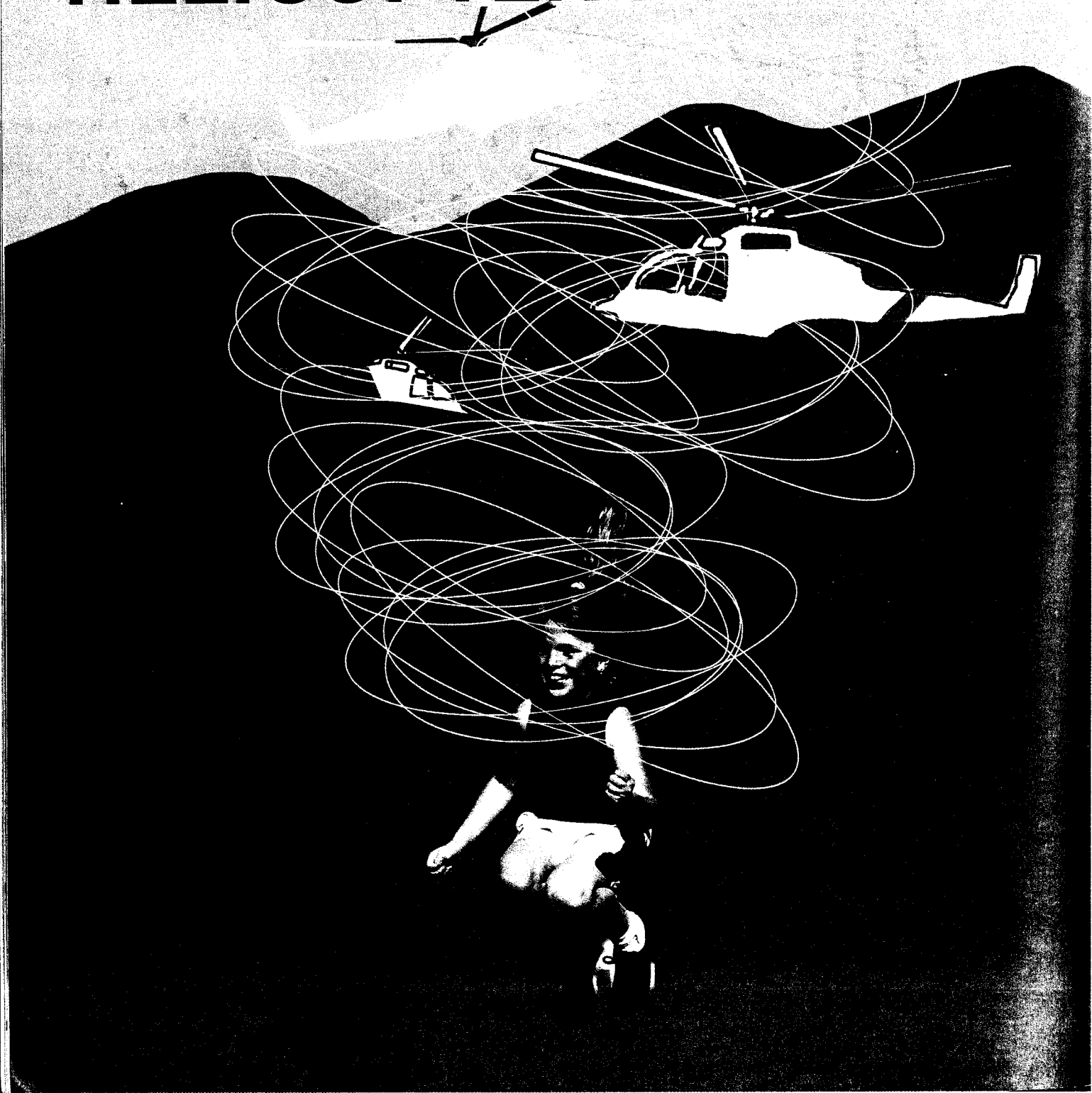
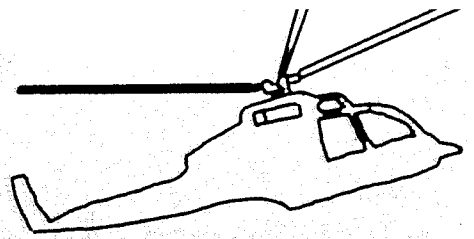


# GROUNDING HELICOPTER PARENTS



As more and more schools struggle with helicopter parents, school counselors can lead the charge to help parents let their kids stand on their own two feet. BY SUE MIZE

We all have to deal with them – helicopter parents. You know who I’m talking about, the ones who hover and swoop whenever Taylor or Chris has a problem. I think you’ll agree it’s time to ground these parents and retrain them. And their first lesson has to be about valuing failure. Yes, I said valuing failure. I’ll explain this later, but first an example.

Adam, a second-grader, was referred to me because he was a daily disruption to the class. Wanting all the attention, he resented it when the teacher called on other children and showed his disgust by becoming violent. After several violent outbursts, Adam was suspended from school. On his return, I met with his mother and learned that she had not told him he had been suspended. “It wouldn’t be good for his self-esteem,” she said. In vain, I explained to her that the suspension couldn’t serve as a corrective action unless Adam saw the connection between his violent behavior and his exclusion from the classroom.

As I continued working with Mom, I discovered more of her peculiar parenting practices. At the close of a counseling session with Adam and his mother, I asked him to sign a behavior contract. Adam printed the first letter

of his name, and as he did so his mother hovered over her smart, capable, second-grader and cheered him on.

“Very good, Adam,” Mommy gushed. With the appearance of the second letter, Mommy crowed, “Awesome!” What in the world is she going to do when he finishes his whole name, turn cartwheels down the hall? I wanted to shout at her, “Stop! Don’t you know even first-graders can print their names, and they don’t need a gushing mom hovering over them to do it?”

But I didn’t shout at her. Instead, I sat there in stunned silence gathering my thoughts, and that’s when I had an epiphany. In a flash I saw Adam’s loving mother as his destroyer. Her tools of destruction were unrelenting praise for his ordinary skills and deadly denial of, dare I use the word, his weaknesses.

### In the Beginning

How did Adam’s mother come to have these preposterous parenting practices? If I’m going to point fingers, and I am, I’ll have to start with myself and others of my generation in the mental health profession. In the 1960s and ’70s, we started the self-esteem movement. In spreading the gospel of self-

esteem, we told parents to heap praise on their children, which was and is a good thing to do. But now we’ve gone way too far with that concept. Just last week I heard a consultant imploring teachers, and I quote, “Praise until you puke.” Frankly, that comment almost made me puke, and I sat there asking myself, “What have we done?” I guess we forgot to tell parents and teachers that if all we do is praise, we won’t build self-esteem, we’ll undermine it. And that’s exactly what we’re doing now.

We’ve become so focused on praise that we’ve decided that allowing children to know they’ve failed is unthinkable. This kind of thinking is leading to ridiculous and detrimental practices. For example, in some elementary schools the kids compete in games of skill, but no winners are declared. Instead, all the teams are declared winners, and all the kids get ribbons. The administrators think they are doing what’s right for kids, but their actions are demotivating and debilitating.

It’s time to sound an alarm. I’d like to advise school counselors to fling open administrators’ office doors, barge in and scream, “We must start teaching parents to allow kids to fail!”

Of course, this kind of splenic outburst is probably not the best approach.

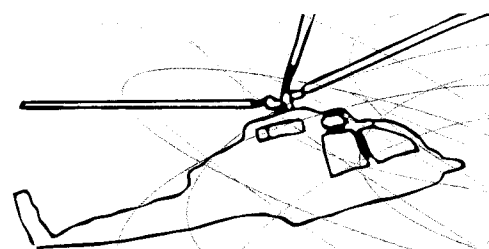
So, let's step back, take a deep breath and ask ourselves a few questions. First question, what are helicopter parents most afraid of? Answer: That their children will fail. How do we help parents face their fear of failure with courage? Answer: By helping them see that qualities such as courage, resilience, intestinal fortitude, guts and *ganas* (Spanish for desire) are born out of failure, and their children won't succeed without these qualities.

You reap what you sow. Children who have been over-protected by helicopter parents aren't prepared for college, the workforce or life. At worse, some kids quit trying altogether, and some of them become substance abusers. At best, the ones who try and want to go on to college continue relying on their parents. They need Mom's

help in writing their college admission essay, they rely on her to call their dorm room and wake them in time to go to class, and they depend on her to clean their dorm rooms.

When these kids apply for jobs their parents call the job interviewer and tell her why she should hire their son or daughter. After getting a job, these adult children of helicopter parents can't operate under their own steam. Like deflated hot-air balloons, someone must constantly build a fire under them. This is a problem of such magnitude that corporations have had to create a position called "motivational officer," whose sole purpose is keeping employees pumped up so they can do their jobs. One motivational officer says she is ready at a moment's notice to throw confetti and cheer when an employee accomplishes even a minor task.

It's no wonder the TV show, "American Idol," is so popular. We love watching Simon give contestants



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## Start a G.I.R.L.S. Group in Your School

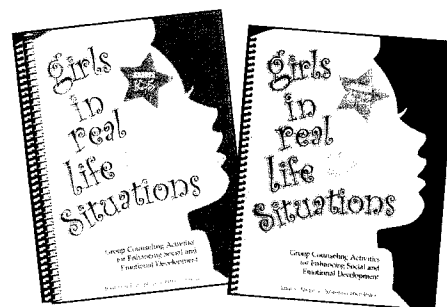
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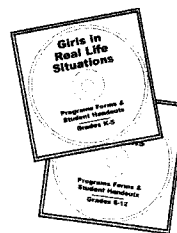
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RESILIENCE,  
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negative feedback, like telling them their performance sounded like a train wreck or that it was a nightmare. And we admire the contestants when they handle his criticism with aplomb. In essence "American Idol" gives contestants a chance to improve their singing skills and their survival skills.

As educators, we can learn a lesson from "Idol," and that lesson is this. In addition to teaching academics, we should also teach life skills: guts and ganas.

### Plan to Retrain Parents

The vision we want parents to see is this – them trading their helicopter for a hang glider for their kids. They should see themselves teaching their children to ride the air currents whether they are being lifted up or pushed down. When their children learn this, it will be the parents' pleasure to see them jump off into life and skillfully manage the ups and downs of

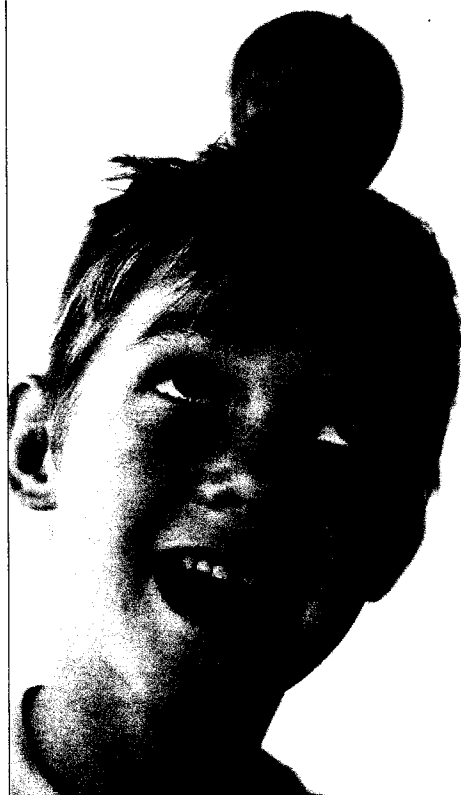
living. Guillaume Apollinaire's poem gives us the poetic vision.

*"Come to the edge," he said.  
They said, "We are afraid."  
"Come to the edge," he said.  
They came.  
He pushed them.  
And they flew.*

With this vision in mind, write a mission statement and then an implementation plan.

The school's mission could go something like this. "We are dedicated to the mission of helping helicopter parents replace their overprotective hovering with the practice of faith, courage, guts and ganas."

Now comes the fun part – implementation. Your implementation process will involve all faculty in a coordinated schoolwide, yearlong effort. This effort puts school counselors and teachers in the control tower and allows them to use academic subject matter to safely land helicopter



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or as a stand alone card  
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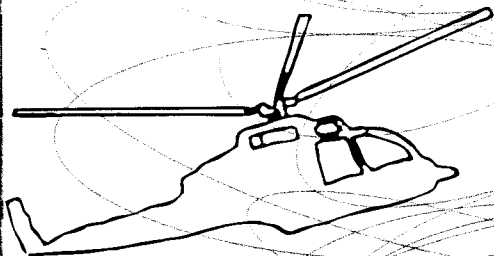
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**ASK EACH FAMILY MEMBER TO ANSWER THE QUESTION, "WHAT WOULD I TRY IF I KNEW I COULDN'T FAIL?" THIS QUESTION WILL HELP FAMILY MEMBERS UNDERSTAND THAT FEAR OF FAILURE IS THE BIGGEST THING STANDING IN THEIR WAY OF GETTING WHAT THEY WANT.**

parents. School counselors do this through classroom guidance lessons and small groups on perseverance, courage and rising above adversity. Teachers do this by assigning for homework a short, nightly discussion with their parents.

For example, English teachers can ask students to memorize a poem such as William Ernest Henley's "Invictus," recite it to their parents and get their parents' opinions on the poem's message. The last verse of "Invictus" goes like this:

*It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate,  
I am the captain of my soul.*

My dad's generation, now referred to as the greatest generation, memorized this poem. And the qualities this poem instilled in them helped them survive the 1929 depression and World War II.

English teachers can also assign a nightly quote to be discussed at home around the dinner table and reported on the next day in class. Here are some possible quotes to use as dinner-table topics:

"A wounded deer leaps the highest."  
– Emily Dickinson, poet

"The world breaks everyone, and afterward many are strong at the broken places." – Ernest Hemingway, novelist

"Real courage is when you know you're licked before you begin, but

you begin anyway and see it through no matter what." Harper Lee, author of "To Kill a Mockingbird"

After reading the quotes, parents and kids answer questions such as the following: Do you agree or disagree with these quotes, and why? What do these quotes mean to you? How can you apply each of these quotes to your daily life?

English teachers can also assign books that have themes of guts and *ganas*. One excellent choice is a new book, "The Glass Castle" by Jeannette Wells. This is a true story of a young girl who grew up literally eating out of school garbage cans to keep from starving to death. Wells' parents could definitely be in the running for worst parents of the decade and should have been arrested for neglect. However, in spite of her neglectful parents or perhaps because of them, Wells discovered her guts and *ganas* and became a famous author, regular contributor to MSNBC.com and the master of her fate.

Wells is proof that Abigail Adams, wife of the second president, was right when she said, "Great necessities call out great virtues." Here are other quotes school counselors and history teachers can provide as dinner table topics.

Facing defeat, John Paul Jones said, "I have not yet begun to fight." The assignment with this quote is to tell stories about when you were facing

defeat but fought on to victory or failed but recovered and became stronger as a result.

Have students and parents react to this quote, also by John Paul Jones. "If fear is cultivated it will become stronger, if faith is cultivated it will achieve mastery." Ask family members to discuss what each would like to have more faith in and how they will cultivate that faith. We hope parents will cultivate faith that their children can fail, recover and succeed.

### **Involving Home and School**

Here's a quote by Queen Elizabeth I, "I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king and of a king of England too." Discuss this in a classroom guidance lesson, and ask students to share what they think it means. Then assign them to discuss it with their family members that evening, having each family member paraphrase the quote and replace Elizabeth's weakness with one of their own weaknesses, identify their own strength and name one of their ancestors who had a similar strength.

Science teachers can also contribute to retraining helicopter parents with quotes from famous scientists. Here's one from Thomas Edison. "I have not failed. I have just found 10,000 ways that won't work."

Albert Einstein said, "A person who never made a mistake never tried anything new."

Ask each family member to answer the question, "What would I try if I knew I couldn't fail?" This question will help family members understand that fear of failure is the biggest thing standing in their way of getting what they want. Then they'll know that the first thing they have to do is manage their fear. Recommend that parents read Susan Jeffers' book, "Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway." Jeffers' book helps us realize that fear is a fact of life, but it doesn't have to be a barrier to success.

We know what Madam Curie would say to us if we complained to her about our fear of failure. She would

say, "Life is not easy for any of us. But what of that? We must have perseverance."

Of course, there are many sports stories P.E. teachers can use to teach guts and *ganas*. One of my favorites is about Bill Russell, legendary center for the Boston Celtics. Russell scored himself after every game and, on a scale of one to a 100, he never gave himself higher than a 65. Having the guts to acknowledge his weaknesses and the *ganas* to do better made Russell one of basketball's all-time greats. Thank goodness he was born in 1934 before the self-esteem movement went awry and made him think identifying weaknesses was a bad thing.

Movies are ripe for the picking when it comes to quotes to use in the schoolwide effort. One of my favorite quotes is by actor John Wayne. "Courage is being scared to death and saddling up anyway."

Before your students share with the class a summary of their family's discussion, make a rule about sharing. The rule is this, "Each presentation will be no longer than a minute, and after each presentation the class will applaud wildly no matter what is said, and nobody will take issue with anything that is said." It's important that kids and parents come to their own conclusions.

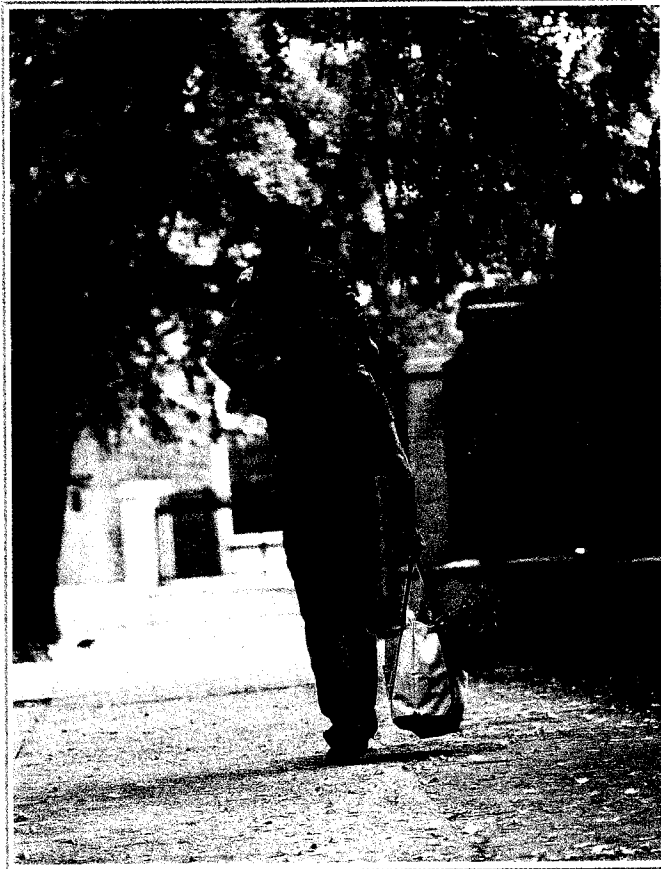
Trust the process. Parents and kids will verbalize what they believe deep in their hearts. And in speaking with heart instead of with fear, kids develop an adult way of thinking, and parents become full partners with the school in preparing kids for success.

Helicopter parents are grounded, but their role is not diminished. It's transformed. Their transformed ground mission? Guiding kids as they soar, crash and soar again. ☐

*Sue Mize is a marriage and family therapist and leadership consultant. Visit her Web site, Reel Workouts, at [www.suemize.com](http://www.suemize.com), or e-mail her at [suem54@aol.com](mailto:suem54@aol.com).*

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