

Question 1

Am I helping because my child needs help or because I want and/or need to help?

Question 2

What might happen if I didn't help?

Question 3

Is there a life skill my child could learn if I abstain from helping?



PARENTING
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Three Questions Parents Should Ask Before Helping

No matter how young or old our children are, we want to help them in whatever ways we can. That's our job, right? To help. After all, had we lacked our primal instinct for care taking, our babies would have invariably starved to death. Clearly, then, our children *need* our help. But trying to discern when to help and when to let them figure things out themselves is a tough call, especially since the answer changes as they change developmentally. So . . . when is our well-intentioned helping actually hindering our children's personal and emotional growth?

Parenting Paradox talked to a panel of college students to get their thoughts about parental "over-helping." Most students we spoke to believed their parents jumped in to help out of love. However, some felt it was at the price of interfering with their chance to navigate the situation independently. One student from Auburn stated, "It's really important to give kids space to fail and to reflect independently rather than stepping in to prevent a failure in the first place." Hearing similar statements to this one throughout our interviews led us to generate 3 questions parents should ask before jumping in to help.

Question 1: Am I helping because my child needs help or because I want and/or need to help?

Parent Perspective: Some parents LOVE order, they love making lists and color-coding the family calendar. These parents feel discomfort with the lack of order and unpredictability that children bring to a household, thus leading to an excessive need for control. Other parents like things completed "the right way" i.e. "their way," whether it's creating a Pinterest-worthy birthday party for their child or organizing their kid's backpack. All too often, parents complete chores for their children or take over school projects so the final product meets their standard of near perfection.

Be Reassured

We know it can be difficult for parents to watch their kids complete tasks in a manner that is not up to their standards. We also understand that it can be incredibly challenging to witness the distress our child is feeling and not try to fix it. Sometimes, however, sitting back, offering a hug, and allowing our children the space to figure it out is best. Our panels of college students never said, "I wish my parents did everything for me." Instead, they shared the important lessons they learned from their failures and how they apply those lessons now through their journey of this thing called "adulthood."

Paradox Perspective: As parents, we feel like it would just be easier to do the tasks ourselves . . . less conflict, done "the right way" and done in our time frame. But every time we deprive our children of an opportunity to complete a task on their own, we deprive them of the opportunity to gain confidence. So sit patiently while your toddler does it "all by myself" or your teen's clothing choice could be an episode of *What Not to Wear*. Be aware of those occasions when you feel the need to take over or have things look perfect. We know it isn't easy, and we've all had our moments of over-helping. Starting the day with this question in mind, "Am I helping for me or my kid?" can help restore the balance.

Question 2: What might happen if I didn't help?

Parent Perspective: Often in parenting, our minds go to the worst case scenario of what might happen if we didn't help our child. We think in extremes, catastrophize the situation, worry over the impact on our child's "self-esteem." Over the past 40 years research has shown a dramatic decrease of kids' opportunities for independence outside the home. Today's parents want to help prevent mistakes in ways our own parents never fretted over.

Paradox Perspective: Parenting based on the fear of the unknown or overt protecting deprives our children of the opportunity to learn and models anxious behavior. Modeling such anxiety has been consistently proven to increase worrying in children. Next time you're not sure if you should jump in, stop and ask yourself:

- What's the worst thing that could happen if I don't help?
- What's the likelihood that would happen?
- And would my child (and I) be able to handle it?

Question 3: Is there a life skill my child could learn if I abstain from helping?

Parent Perspective : It's almost that time of year again, the dreaded baseball tryouts. You've volunteered to pay for batting lessons, offered to throw with him in the backyard, even pointed out that without a little sweat leading up to tryouts, he may not make the team. Your child fails to pay attention to your sage advice. Then tryouts, and the dreaded phone call, indicating he didn't make the team. You break the news to your child who up until now, has never experienced a major disappointment. And he comes undone. You contemplate calling the league commissioner to challenge the decision. Your spouse tells your kid this league is political, reassuring him he's as good, if not better than the other kids. You text the mom from morning carpool requesting no discussion about baseball for a while. Your goal: Damage control because your child is hurting and you are a compassionate parent. The result: Your child learns early that the victim role feels more comfortable than regret.

Paradox Perspective: For many years the mental health and educational fields focused on self-esteem, "Tell your kid they're great, and they'll be great." Schools stopped giving grades, everyone got a trophy, and we avoided punishment, focusing on rewards and praise instead. Researchers discovered this approach didn't result in the desired outcome. We now know that self-efficacy, the belief that if you work hard, you can achieve your goal, is much more important than self-esteem. When our children don't work hard and don't reach their goals, we need to let them feel the pain so life can teach them the hard lesson.