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**MONEY**

# Bringing Mom on a job interview? When bulldozer parenting goes too far

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In 2001, a graphic designer in New Jersey refused to sign a non-compete agreement required by her employer.

The woman's father, an attorney, had advised her not to and the decision cost her the job. Years of litigation followed, with the state Supreme Court ultimately ruling that the company had justly fired her.

The incident is a worst-case scenario of what can happen when parents meddle in their adult children's careers, said John Sarno, president of the nonprofit Employers Association of New Jersey.

Almost 20 years later, parents are asserting themselves to an even greater degree by sitting in on job interviews, filling in job applications, badgering employers to give their children raises and promotions, and — in at least one case — bringing a cake to a child's potential employer, according to a survey by a subsidiary of Robert Half, a global human resource consulting firm.

“Sadly, it’s not a new phenomenon,” said Dora Onyschak, the New Jersey metro market manager for Robert Half. “Bulldozer parents and helicopter parents are kind of similar in that really they just want what’s best for their kid so they want to try and help them to be as successful as possible. But that can sometimes blind them to the fact that maybe they’re being too involved or their involvement can be inappropriate or certainly unprofessional when looking for a job.”

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“Helicopter parenting” became part of American lexicon in the early 2000s to describe the practice of hovering over children and monitoring their every move. The behavior has since evolved into that of bulldozer, snowplow or lawnmower parenting — when parents remove obstacles in their children’s lives so they never have to face adversity or failure.

Sarno prefers to call them “advocate parents” and traces their rise to increased diagnoses among children of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, as well as intensified competition to gain admittance to good colleges. Both converge to create anxiety-riddled parents who feel obligated to overly protect their children, he said.

“It’s really about a parent who has had this identity, this role as the advocate through the public school, often through college, and they can’t give up the role when the young adult starts their career,” Sarno said. “I really think it’s about parents that can’t let go.”

Part of that reluctance stems from the 2008 financial crisis and changing social attitudes that have delayed typical markers of adulthood such as marriage and homeownership, said Jacob Goldsmith, director of the emerging-adulthood program at Northwestern University’s Family Institute. Studies show that unlike more prosperous previous generations, half of children born since 1980 will not out-earn their parents.

“It really scares parents,” Goldsmith said. “I think there are a lot of parents looking around and realizing that their kids are not going to make the same money that they did, that their kids are not reaching the milestones they did at the same time and they don’t know what to make of that and they really want to be helpful, so they jump in.”

Fourteen percent of U.S. adults surveyed this year by Morning Consult for The New York Times said they had pulled strings in their professional networks to secure a job for their 18- to 28-year-old child. About 11% of respondents said they would contact their adult child’s employer if the child had an issue at work. Another 16% said they had written all or part of a job or internship application.

Both Goldsmith and Sarno said parental interference in work matters is rare and not unique to millennials, who have been unfairly maligned by some as lazy or entitled.

Most of the parents Goldsmith works with as a therapist exert more subtle control. They will not sit in on job interviews, but they will edit job applications for their children or perform other tasks on their behalf, he said. Instead of teaching, they take action.

“Part of why we as therapists get worried about bulldozer parents is we worry that these kids don’t learn the skills they need to do this stuff themselves,” Goldsmith said. “I see a lot of

emerging adults who struggle to know how to have difficult emotional conversations with their bosses. That's hard, there's no class for that, we often learn that by talking to our parents. But if the parents step in and do it for you, you never learn it."

Children of bulldozer parents often resemble children who have been neglected, he said. Both hit adulthood without a tool kit for dealing with adversity and feel like they have not accomplished anything on their own.

"What I see, and this is a direct result of helicopter parenting, is kids who hit 25 and they've never hit a major roadblock in their life and they are terrified of failure, paralyzed because they feel like life is only successful if you make no mistakes," Goldsmith said. "Kids that were helicopter-parented in many ways look like the kids who never had opportunities... because they're never really doing it themselves."

Most hiring managers are put off by candidates with meddling parents, said Onyschak.

"As an employer, do I then become concerned about the candidate's ability to think independently, do I worry then that they perhaps are not good decision makers?" she said. "It questions their level of independence and maturity and you don't want that to be the reason the person does or does not get the job."

Still, employers like Google, Amazon and LinkedIn have embraced the close relationship between new hires and their parents, launching "Take Your Parents to Work" days to give parents a glimpse of their children's work lives.

Onyschak said she supports parents who provide more hands-off guidance: helping their children practice job interviews, helping them weigh the pros and cons of multiple job offers, looking over cover letters and resumes. But the oversight should stop there, she said.

"We're not hiring the parent, we're hiring the individual, so we want candidates who can think for themselves, who are assertive, who can ask their own questions," Onyschak said.

For parents feeling the urge to become more heavily involved, Goldsmith recommends taking a step back and asking whether they are facilitating — or enabling.

"When you've got a parent who's really tuned in and providing good support and facilitating growth, that kid's going to fly to the moon," he said. "But when you have a parent who responds to anxiety by stepping in and trying to run the kid's life — even if it's not as egregious as showing up at a job interview — you still end up with a kid who doesn't really trust the tools they have to be in the world."

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