

The curse of the helicopter parent

TEXT & PHOTO: BARBARA GEIER

So, going back to school or, in fact, starting school in the first place. During the past few weeks, hundreds of thousands of children started primary school. Do you remember your first day? I do. The dress (colourful, kind of square-shaped pattern, which looked better than it sounds), the hair (a fringe, horror!), the German tradition of carrying a 'Schultüte' (school bag), an oversized, decorated cardboard cornet filled with all kinds of little presents (mostly sweets) that you are given on your first day of school. Then, of course, making sure to get a seat next to my best friend from kindergarten. The excitement. I remember all that. It was a good day. I liked it. That is my memory.

What I do not remember is my mother being particularly nervous or obsessing about the whole thing. Well, maybe she was without showing it but what she definitely and luckily was not, neither on the first nor on any of the following days, is what is nowadays called a helicopter parent, apparently the curse of primary school teachers in particular. I read some hilarious stories recently about German parents (mothers mostly) – and I am pretty sure similar things apply to many other countries – who go to incredible lengths to make sure that their child is – well, what actually? I am not so sure of that. Of course, you want your little ones that you have just sent off and out into the big, wild world of schooling to be ok and happy and feel fine. But is it really necessary to hang around on the school's premises once you have dropped off your son to observe what is going on there during the rest of the day, including hiding behind the bushes on the school yard during break time to make

sure no harm is done to him? That is one of the stories I read and that was told by a primary school teacher who called this her best helicopter parent moment: "When I approached her one break time, she made herself very small behind the bushes, hoping not to be seen. I almost felt sorry for her in that instant." Well, understandably so, I fear this woman has issues...

Or how about the so-called 'premium parking spaces' another teacher reports of: the best, i.e. closest, spots to park when picking up your child so that the precious little thing does not have to walk too far. Apparently, mothers and fathers fight for them on a daily basis. If you want one of those, you need to be there at least 30 minutes before school is out, and one mother, so the story goes, always leaves her engine on when it is getting chilly so that her son does not have to get into a cold car. Ahh-hhhh!!!! Ok, anything else? Yes, sure, how about this: kids in their first year of primary school, equipped with their own mobile phones who receive WhatsApp messages from their parents during class. More? No problem. There is, in fact, so much material that two editors of the German online magazine *Spiegel.de* have just published their second book of collected stories. Ok then, another one, so that I lose all faith in the human race: one teacher was called to the school's office because a mother was on the phone, asking how many times her son had been sneezing during the first two hours of school. Thank God I never became a teacher. I would be in prison by now.

As amusing as all of this is on the one hand, as downright annoying and also



worrying I find it on the other. I feel it is those parents who need to go back to school and learn how to behave, dare I say it, sensibly. Apparently, they do not trust anyone or anything. Not teachers, not doctors and least of all their own intuition. God, am I happy that I was born in a time that was not so paranoid about bringing up children. With a mother who was full-time working without ever making a fuss about it and without neither my sister nor myself ever feeling in any way deprived. Because, dear parents, most of the worries circling around in your heads are in no way reflected in real life. Just let your kids go to school. And stay out of the bushes.

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