

Helicopter Parents: Supporting Those Who Support Our Students

Karoline Park | Alpha Gamma Delta Fraternity | @GoKarolPark

We all know the feeling when we pick up our office phone and on the other end is the disgruntled, angry, or upset parent of one of our students. In some form or another, we have all encountered the “helicopter” parent, or in some situations the “bulldozer” parent. Ten to twenty years ago, the style of parenting was different, and many young adults received independence from their parents at an early age. Today, some parents live life for their children. From helping them fill out college applications to attending job interviews with them, parents are more eager now than ever to be involved in their children’s lives. As professionals who regularly interact with students, and subsequently their parents, how do we help those who support our students?

In fraternity/sorority life, key stakeholders play a large part in the day-to-day interactions with students and those around them. From advisors to upper administration to inter/national officers, there are a lot of people who interact and influence our students but none more than their parents or guardians. In the article, “The 3 Different Kinds of Helicopter Parents” published by *Psychology Today*, Amy Morin (2018) discusses a survey conducted by Michigan State University that found 32 percent of large companies have received a complaint from their employees’ parents at one point or another. From where fraternity/sorority life professionals sit, 32 percent might sound low and for others it might be high, but in the end, there will always be concerned parents who will contact us about their child’s fraternal experience.

As professionals from many different backgrounds and institutions, our office or work teams constantly interact with concerned and upset parents. Regardless of your professional role or parental status, it is important to understand where our largest stakeholders are coming from, what their concerns are, and how we can help them. At the end of the day, it can be reasonably assumed our teams strive for positive interactions, no matter the circumstances because it is important to care for those who care for the people we serve. Creating positive interactions with upset parents or guardians is never easy, but there are a few things we can employ and keep in mind to help guide ourselves through these difficult interactions. They include:

1. **Parents have legitimate worries:** As a society, we are more aware about mental health concerns in young people, as well as campus violence and safety issues. Being aware of these issues in order to address them as professionals is a good thing and is something that should be used when working with and understanding concerned parents and guardians.

2. **Integrity is everything:** When working with parents, holding integrity to a high standard is crucial. We ask so many to give trust and blind faith to our profession to help them through a situation or a crisis, so it would be counterproductive to be anything other than honest and trustworthy. Integrity builds relationships and it breaks down barriers.
3. **Patience is valuable:** When it comes to working with and assisting parents, patience is valuable. While their concerns might not be the first thing on our to-do list, their child's wellbeing and happiness is on theirs. Questions can be lengthy and complaints can be bountiful, but it's on us to exercise the patience we would ask for in return.
4. **Meet them at their level:** Not all parents were members of a fraternity or sorority during their time in college, and some parents did not attend college at all. Helping them understand the community we serve is crucial to building a fruitful and respectful relationship. Even parents who were a member of a fraternity or a sorority need someone to meet them at their level. Times have changed and so have our organizations. Meeting them at their level is an easy way to create a relationship and provide education on the evolution of our functional area.
5. **Advocate for open and honest dialogue with their student:** Sometimes we have the answers and sometimes we don't. In some circumstances, it is best for the parent to have the conversation they want to have with us with their student. While some information cannot be freely given, it is important to encourage them to seek additional information from their student. Opening those channels of communication can be difficult, yet supporting and coaching the parent to do so can create a beneficial dialogue about how to support their student from all angles.
6. **Make them feel heard:** Listening for ten minutes could mean the world to a parent or family member of a student. Sometimes the tone is not the best or their sense of urgency can cause anxiety. However, giving a parent time to air out their worries can open the channels of communication and start a dialogue benefitting both parties. Showing respect and sincere concern for their issues and coupling it with giving of your time can truly secure a strong relationship for future interactions.

While this list conveys only a few ways to help, there are still many more avenues to take when assisting a "helicopter" parent or guardian. These interactions can be tough and they can push us, but what does not break us makes us stronger professionals. Fraternity/sorority life

professionals may encounter many types of parents throughout their careers, yet one thing remains true: Helping those who help our students will help our functional area succeed. All stakeholders are important and buy-in is necessary. Without the support of our student's parents and families we would surely see less members in our organizations. Respectful partnerships are the true foundational element of our field and, now more than ever, molding those out of difficult and challenging situations will only make fraternity and sorority life stronger.

Karoline Park currently serves as the Harm Prevention Specialist at Alpha Gamma Delta's International Headquarters where she assists collegians, alumnae, and parents in the areas of crisis response, risk reduction, and prevention planning. Before starting at Alpha Gamma Delta, Karoline completed her master's degree in student affairs and higher education at Indiana State University and her undergraduate degree in history and political science at Franklin College. Karoline is a dedicated volunteer for her organization, Zeta Tau Alpha, where she serves as the General Advisor for the Zeta Tau Alpha chapter at Indiana State University. When she is not working, Karoline enjoys spending time with her sisters, friends and family, reading a good book or being outdoors!

References

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