# Tiger Mom 2.0: (Over)parenting for a digital future?
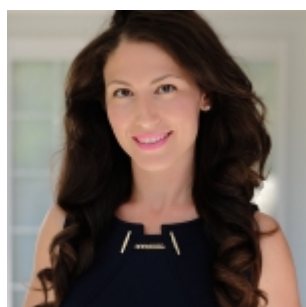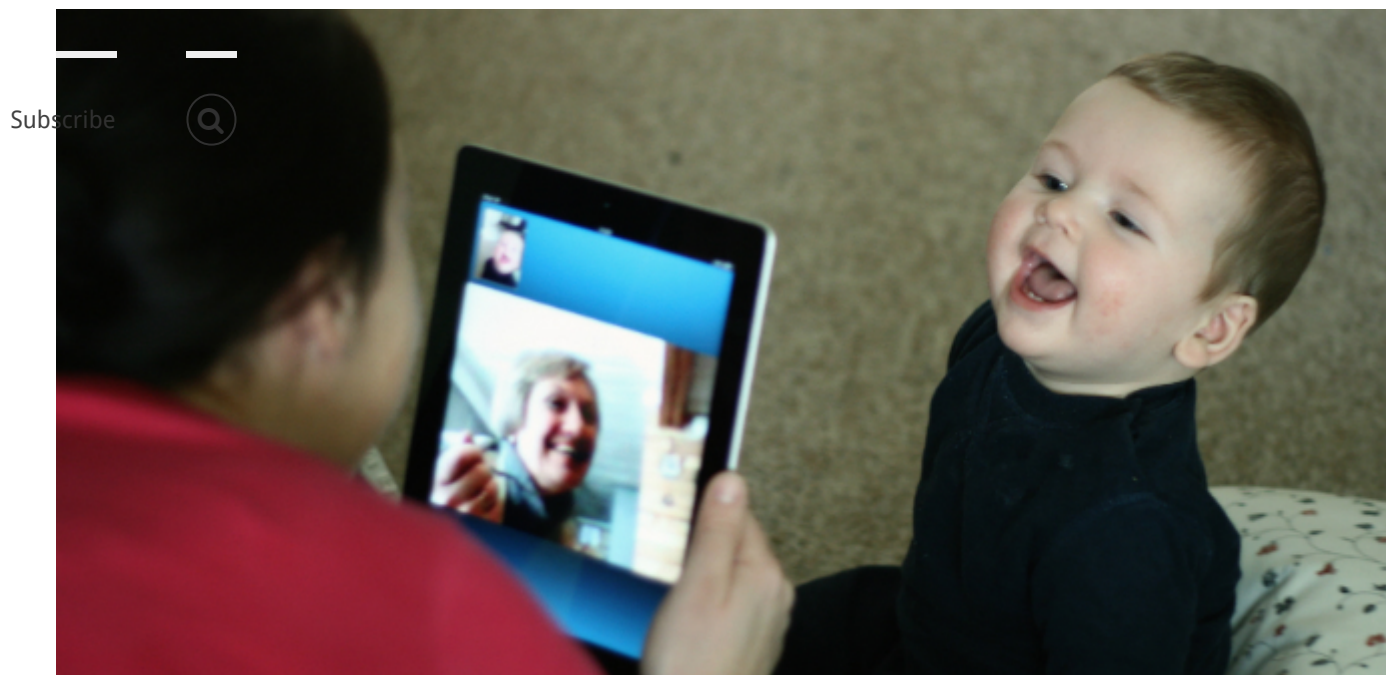
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*In this Digital Age, are we setting up our children to fail? Following the 'helicopter parenting' concept of the 1990s Miriam Rahali looks into new pressures on parents (and children). As social media outlets allow parents to 'overshare', Miriam suggests that the anxiety of yesterday's helicopter parents—who held unattainable standards for their children— have extended to the digital sphere at a time when 90% of new mothers are Millennials.  Miriam is a PhD student in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. [Header image credit: P. Gaggles, CC BY-SA 2.0]*

As a child, I was painfully aware of 'helicopter parents'. This was due not to any intellectual curiosity, but to the fact that I was a byproduct of such (well-intentioned) micro-managers. I was born in 1985, and 'overparenting' took off in the 1990s, manifesting as a combination of excessive anxiety and unrealistic expectations.

The crowning achievement of (American) helicopter parents is their child's admission to an Ivy League university, and surely enough, I received my letter of acceptance to Columbia College (at the age of *15*). However, as my peers and I came of age, teachers and child development researchers began to notice the adverse effects of parental bubble-wrapping. Although the overparenting trend seemingly climaxed in 2009 – as media outlets began publishing stories on its potential perils – I would argue that as of today, the trend has not disappeared, but rather, it has evolved. The 'helicopter parent' has been recast in response to socio-technological changes. The term still includes anxiety and achievement pressure, but is now compounded by an *online* dimension.

**It takes a (virtual) village**

The same children who were subject to overparenting in the 1990s are now having children of their own. In the US, Millennials (those born between 1980 and 2000) account for almost 90% of new mothers. As members of the most educated generation, Millennials proactively seek advice to

'better' their parenting skills, as evidenced by the sheer volume of blog posts, articles, books and television shows dedicated to helping parents make more informed decisions.

The excessive anxiety of yesterday's helicopter parents has only been amplified in the Digital Age. I have a two-year-old daughter, and while I am thankful that answers to my most-pressing questions are (literally) at my fingertips, I have repeatedly found myself logging on to my computer to troubleshoot one problem, only to frustratingly walk away having self-diagnosed a myriad of others.

Parents of all generations have wondered what kind of adult their child will become, but Millennial parents need to take this question a step further, asking how their children's interactions with new technology and contemporary media content will impact or shape the types of adults they will become. While I may be uncertain about the benefits of raising a digital-savvy *toddler,* (my daughter cannot yet read or write, but she owns, and operates, a tablet), I recognise that 'literacy' now depends on technology and textuality. I am therefore far more anxious about the inherent risks in my daughter's *failure to acquire* the new digital skills that today's children must master in order to be able to thrive tomorrow.

**Mommie dearest**

The second characteristic of (former) helicopter parents is their adherence to unrealistic achievement goals. Today, such ideals have mutated, so much so that the pursuit of 'perfection' has become the *status quo*. Due to the proliferation of social media, parents may now be heavily involved in the online representation of themselves and their children. This raises important questions not only in regards to sharenting, but also the mediated construction of 'reality' – especially when it comes to presenting an image of the perfect family. In several instances, normalising perfection is no longer a parental hobby; it's a *career*.

In many ways, the construction of the 'Millennial parent' has been gendered, insofar as women are – to a much greater extent than men – still required to work on and transform the self and the family, and present their actions as freely *chosen* (without consideration of the structural inequalities and contexts that construe many of these 'choices').

Mommy blogs first emerged as a mainstream obsession in the mid-2000s, and now an estimated 3.9 million moms in the US identify as bloggers. When I go online, I am constantly bombarded with images of perfection that ultimately serve as a measuring stick by which I can compare, reflect on and improve my own parenting skills.

In *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, Amy Chua uses 'Tiger Mom' to refer to a strict or demanding mother who pushes her children to be successful. She applies this term to Asian women, but I maintain that the latest version of the Tiger Mom (Tiger Mom 2.0) knows no borders – her territorial domain is online. Whereas my mom had to wait 15 years for my college acceptance letter (which served as validation of *her* hard work), the Tiger Moms of 2017 receive instant recognition by posting a photo of their daughter using a tablet to learn how to code, or a video of their son performing Rachmaninoff. The 'development' of children can now be posted and tracked online, and can thus be compared with the norm, the ideal and every other child in their parent's social network.

**Normalising unrealistic expectations**

The Information Age has ushered in an era of hyper self-reflexivity and competition. It's one thing to construct an image as the Perfect Wife or Perfect Mother, but crafting the Perfect Child warrants a very different conversation about current cultural fears and anxieties. Raising children in a digital environment where unrealistic expectations are normalised is likely to shape their lives in such a way that is detrimental to their social, physical, psychological and emotional wellbeing. Presenting a carefully constructed, airbrushed vision of success can leave 'subpar' parents feeling jealous or

even ashamed. More importantly, and perhaps more dangerously, it can lead to *children* feeling inadequate when they almost inevitably fall short of an unattainable ideal.

*This post gives the views of the authors and does not represent the position of the LSE Parenting for a Digital Future blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science*

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