

# Helicopter Parenting, Attitudes Towards Sexual Relationships and Self-Esteem Among Young Adults

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## Abstract:

Helicopter parenting, characterized by excessive involvement and control of parents in their child's life, has raised concerns about its developmental impacts. This study investigated how helicopter parenting, characterized by excessive parental involvement and control affects young adults' self-esteem and attitudes toward sexual relationships. Data were collected from 230 participants aged 18-25 using the Helicopter Parenting Instrument, Brief Sexual Attitudes Scale, and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. Results revealed a significant negative relationship between helicopter parenting and self-esteem, with regression analysis showing that helicopter parenting predicted lower self-esteem. This suggests that overparenting may undermine young adults' psychological well-being by hindering autonomy development. However, no significant relationships were found between helicopter parenting and sexual attitudes or between self-esteem and sexual attitudes, indicating that sexual values likely develop independently from both parental control and self-evaluation processes. These findings challenge assumptions about parental influence on sexual development during emerging adulthood and suggest that sexual education might be more effective when focused on peer contexts and media literacy rather than parental communication. The study highlights the need for balanced parenting approaches that support autonomy while maintaining healthy parent-child relationships to promote optimal psychological development in young adults.

**Keywords:** Helicopter parenting, attitudes toward sexual relationships, self-esteem, young adults

Parenting styles are the patterns of behaviour and attitudes parents use to raise their children, often categorized by levels of support (warmth, responsiveness) and demandingness (control, expectations). These styles can shape a child's social skills, emotional regulation, and academic performance, making them a key factor in development. These styles are typically categorized based on two dimensions: support, which encompasses warmth, responsiveness, and acceptance, and demandingness, which includes control, expectations, and discipline. The importance of these styles lies in their potential to shape various aspects of a child's life, such as social competence, emotional regulation, and academic achievement. Research consistently highlights their role in long-term outcomes, from preschool through adulthood, with studies supporting their impact across diverse cultural contexts, including the Czech Republic, India, China, Israel, and Palestine (Pinquart & Kauser, 2018).

Parenting styles play a crucial role in shaping a child's development, shaping psychological, social, and emotional outcomes (Baumrind, 1991). Among the various parenting approaches, helicopter parenting

characterized by excessive control, overprotection, and intrusive involvement in a child's life has gained increasing attention due to its potential long-term effects on young adults. Research suggests that this parenting style may hinder autonomy, self-efficacy, and emotional resilience, leading to difficulties in decision-making, lower self-esteem, and altered attitudes toward intimate relationships (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012). Defined by excessive monitoring and intervention, helicopter parenting contrasts with authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful styles, each of which carries distinct developmental implications (Schiffrin et al., 2014). This study explores how helicopter parenting affects young adults' self-esteem and attitudes toward sexual relationships, two critical domains of emerging adulthood.

Helicopter parenting's overprotectiveness is often linked to reduced independence and self-efficacy. Research by Schiffrin et al. (2014) found that college students with helicopter parents reported lower self-efficacy and life satisfaction, suggesting that excessive control stifles decision-making skills essential for adulthood. Similarly, associations with higher anxiety and lower self-esteem, underscoring emotional dependency as a consequence of overparenting were noted (Segrin et al., 2013). These findings align with psychological frameworks such as Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which posits that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are vital for personal growth (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Helicopter parenting, by limiting autonomy, may impair these needs, particularly self-esteem, a judgment of one's worth influenced by self-efficacy and control (Rosenberg, 1965).

Beyond self-esteem, parenting styles may shape attitudes toward sexual relationships, encompassing views on premarital sex, same-sex relationships, and intimacy (Willoughby et al., 2015). Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) suggests that individuals model behaviours and attitudes from caregivers, implying that restrictive parenting could foster conservative sexual views, while permissive styles might encourage liberalism. However, helicopter parenting's specific impact on sexual attitudes remains underexplored, with most studies focusing on marital attitudes rather than broader sexual perspectives. Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) further suggests that overprotective parenting may lead to insecure attachments, affecting self-esteem and relational confidence, potentially manifesting in cautious or dependent sexual attitudes (Ainsworth, 1989).

Likewise, Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) provides a broader lens, positing that development results from interactions across microsystems (e.g., family) and macrosystems (e.g., culture). Helicopter parenting, as a microsystem influence, may interact with peers, media, and societal norms to shape sexual attitudes and self-esteem. Recent studies indicate high acceptance of premarital sex (87%) and same-sex relationships among Australians (Visser, 2014), contrasting with more conservative views linked to restrictive parenting (Willoughby et al., 2015). In India, research found that helicopter parenting associated with lower self-esteem and emotional difficulties, suggesting cultural variations in its impact (Sood & Singh, 2021).

Despite this, gaps remain. Research often overlooks how helicopter parenting influences diverse sexual attitudes beyond marriage, and its interplay with self-esteem in young adulthood is underexamined. This study addresses these gaps by examining: (1) how helicopter parenting affects attitudes toward sexual relationships, (2) its impact on self-esteem, and (3) whether levels of helicopter parenting influence in these outcomes. Hypotheses include no significant relationship between helicopter parenting and self-esteem (H01), no relationship between Helicopter parenting and sexual attitudes (H02), helicopter parenting does not have a significant impact on the level of attitude towards sexual relationships (H03), helicopter parenting does not have a significant impact on the level of self-esteem. Findings aim to inform parenting practices and interventions for healthier developmental outcomes.

## Methodology

### Study Design

This study employs a correlational design to investigate the relationships between helicopter parenting, attitudes towards sexual relationships, and self-esteem among young adults. A correlational approach is appropriate for this research, as it allows for the exploration of associations between these variables as required.

### Data collection and measures

The population comprised young adults aged 18-25 who lived with biological parents during adolescence. A purposive sample of 300 participants was targeted, with 230 completing the study (76.7% response rate). Inclusion criteria ensured participants had parental influence during formative years, while those with adoptive parents, with single parent, with severe mental health histories were excluded to minimize confounding variables.

Data were collected online via Google Forms. Participants received a link with study aims, instructions, and informed consent details. Three validated instruments were used, Helicopter Parenting Instrument (HPI) (Odenweller et al., 2014) which measures overparenting behaviours (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.78$ ; construct validity = 0.62–0.69), Brief Sexual Attitudes Scale (BSAS) (Hendrick et al., 2006) which assesses sexual attitudes across permissiveness, birth control, communion, and instrumentality ( $\alpha = 0.73$ –0.95;  $p < .001$  correlations with relational variables), Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) (Rosenberg, 1965): Evaluates self-esteem ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ; test-retest  $r = 0.85$ –0.88; strong validity with related constructs).

Responses were anonymous, and participants could withdraw anytime.

### Data analysis

The data collected for this study on helicopter parenting, attitudes towards sexual relationships, and self-esteem among young adults were analysed using a series of statistical tests. The JAMOV 2.5.6 statistical software package was utilized to perform all analyses, ensuring consistency and reliability in the results. A Pearson correlation test was employed to examine the magnitude and direction of the relationships between the variables. Additionally, linear regression analysis was conducted to evaluate the impact of helicopter parenting on self-esteem.

## Results

### Descriptive statistics

From table 1, descriptive statistics for the study variables ( $N = 230$ ) reveal important characteristics of the data distribution. For Helicopter Parenting (HPI), the mean score was 44.9 ( $SD = 7.97$ ), with median and mode both at 45.0, indicating a symmetrical normal distribution. This is confirmed by the non-significant Shapiro-Wilk test ( $W = 0.993$ ,  $p = 0.402$ ), suggesting the data meets normality assumptions. The Brief Sexual Attitudes Scale (BSAS) showed a mean of 33.3 ( $SD = 8.39$ ) with median 34.0 and mode 45.0. The significant Shapiro-Wilk result ( $W = 0.954$ ,  $p < .001$ ) indicates non-normal distribution, likely due to the mode being higher than the mean/median, suggesting some positive skewness. Self-esteem scores demonstrated a mean of 27.0 ( $SD = 4.96$ ) with median 27.0 and mode 28.0. The marginal Shapiro-Wilk  $p$ -value ( $W = 0.989$ ,  $p = 0.068$ ) suggests the data is approximately normally distributed, though with slight deviation.

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics of study variable**

Descriptives	N	Mean	Median	Mode	Standard Deviation	Shapiro-Wilk W	Shapiro-Wilk p
HPI Scoring	230	44.9	45.0	45.0	7.97	0.993	0.402
BSAS Scoring	230	33.3	34.0	45.0	8.39	0.954	<.001
Self-esteem	230	27.0	27.0	27.0	4.96	0.989	0.068

## Correlational Analysis

The Spearman's rank-order correlation analysis revealed several key findings regarding the relationships between helicopter parenting (HPI), sexual attitudes (BSAS), and self-esteem. First, there was no significant correlation between HPI and BSAS scores ( $\rho = -0.004$ ,  $p = .957$ ), indicating that young adults' experiences of helicopter parenting were unrelated to their attitudes toward sexual relationships. Second, a significant negative correlation emerged between HPI and self-esteem ( $\rho = -0.207$ ,  $p = .002$ ), suggesting that higher levels of helicopter parenting were associated with moderately lower self-esteem. Finally, self-esteem showed no significant association with sexual attitudes ( $\rho = 0.012$ ,  $p = .862$ ). These results demonstrate that while helicopter parenting appears to have a small but meaningful negative relationship with self-esteem, it does not influence young adults' sexual attitudes. Furthermore, self-esteem operates independently of sexual attitudes in this population. The findings highlight the psychological consequences of helicopter parenting while showing that sexual attitudes may be shaped by other factors beyond parenting style and self-evaluation.

**Table 2. Results of Spearman's rank order correlation between Helicopter Parenting, Sexual attitudes, Self-esteem**

	1	2	3
1. Helicopter Parenting	—	—	—
2. Sexual Attitudes	-0.004	—	—
3. Self-esteem	-0.207**	0.012	—

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

## Regression analysis

The linear regression analysis examining helicopter parenting (HPI) as a predictor of sexual attitudes (BSAS) revealed non-significant results. As shown in Table 3, HPI scores showed virtually no predictive relationship with BSAS scores ( $b = 0.001$ ,  $SE = 0.070$ ,  $t = 0.021$ ,  $p = .984$ ), indicating that variations in helicopter parenting were unrelated to young adults' attitudes toward sexual relationships. The intercept was significant ( $b = 33.223$ ,  $p < .001$ ), representing the expected BSAS score when HPI is zero. Table 3 demonstrates exceptionally poor model fit, with an  $R^2$  value approaching zero ( $1.84e-6$ ) and a negative adjusted  $R^2$  ( $-0.004$ ), confirming that HPI explains none of the variance in sexual attitudes. These findings align with the earlier correlation analysis and suggest that other factors beyond helicopter parenting likely influence young adults' sexual attitudes. The results underscore the importance of investigating alternative predictors in future research on this topic.

**Table 3 Model Coefficients – Sexual Attitudes**

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	33.22292	3.1774	10.4560	< .001
HPI Scoring	0.00143	0.0697	0.0205	0.984

Note.  $R^2 = 0.00000184$

The regression analysis revealed a statistically significant negative relationship between helicopter parenting and self-esteem. As shown in Table 4, higher HPI scores significantly predicted lower self-esteem ( $\beta = -0.144$ ,  $SE = 0.040$ ,  $t(228) = -3.60$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that for every one-point increase in helicopter parenting, self-esteem scores decreased by approximately 0.144 points. The intercept was significant ( $\beta = 33.471$ ,  $p < .001$ ), representing the expected self-esteem score when HPI is zero.

Table 4 also shows the model explained a small but meaningful portion of variance in self-esteem ( $R = 0.232$ ,  $R^2 = 0.0538$ ), suggesting that about 5.4% of the variability in self-esteem scores can be attributed to helicopter parenting. While the effect size is modest, the results confirm that helicopter parenting has a measurable negative impact on young adults' self-esteem.

These findings align with and extend the previous correlation results ( $\rho = -0.207$ ,  $p = .002$ ), providing stronger evidence for a directional relationship where helicopter parenting may contribute to diminished self-esteem. The results support theories suggesting that overparenting can undermine young adults' confidence and self-perception. Future research could explore mediators of this relationship, such as autonomy support or coping skills.

**Table 4 Model Coefficients – Self-esteem**

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	33.471	1.8269	18.32	< .001
HPI Scoring	-0.144	0.0401	-3.60	< .001

Note.  $R^2 = 0.0538$

## Discussion

The descriptive statistics presented in Table 1 provide essential insights into the distribution characteristics of the three primary variables: Helicopter Parenting (HPI), Brief Sexual Attitudes Scale (BSAS), and Self-esteem across the sample of 230 participants.

HPI scores show a symmetrical distribution, with mean (44.9), median, and mode (both 45.0) closely aligned, supported by a non-significant Shapiro-Wilk test ( $W = 0.993$ ,  $p = 0.402$ ), confirming normality. This aligns with prior research (LeMoyne & Buchanan, 2011; Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012), while the standard deviation ( $SD = 7.97$ ) indicates moderate variability. In contrast, BSAS scores exhibit a non-normal distribution (mean = 33.3, median = 34.0, mode = 45.0) with significant skewness ( $W = 0.954$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and high variability ( $SD = 8.39$ ), reflecting diverse sexual attitudes influenced by cultural and social factors (Hendrick et al., 2006; Lefkowitz et al., 2014). Self-esteem scores display near-normality



(mean = median = mode = 27.0;  $W = 0.989$ ,  $p = 0.068$ ) and moderate variability ( $SD = 4.96$ ), consistent with normative data (Rosenberg, 1989; Robins et al., 2001).

Table 2's Spearman correlations highlight variable interrelationships. Helicopter parenting and sexual attitudes show no significant association ( $\rho = -0.004$ ,  $p = .957$ ), contradicting theories linking overparenting to restricted sexual autonomy (Segrin et al., 2012). Instead, sexual attitudes may be shaped more by peers, media, or education (Lefkowitz & Espinosa-Hernandez, 2007). A significant negative correlation emerges between helicopter parenting and self-esteem ( $\rho = -0.207$ ,  $p = .002$ ), aligning with Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and prior findings (Schiffrin et al., 2014). The small-to-moderate effect suggests helicopter parenting is one of many factors affecting self-esteem. No link between self-esteem and sexual attitudes ( $\rho = 0.012$ ,  $p = .862$ ) contrasts with earlier studies (Goodson et al., 2006), possibly due to broader societal decoupling of sexuality and self-worth.

Table 3's regression analysis confirms helicopter parenting's negligible predictive power for sexual attitudes ( $b = 0.00143$ ,  $p = 0.984$ ;  $R^2 = 1.84e-6$ ). This reinforces their independence, challenging theories that parental control delays sexual development (Bradley-Geist & Olson-Buchanan, 2014). Instead, sexual attitudes likely stem from non-parental influences like peers or media (Morgan et al., 2010), suggesting sexual education programs should prioritize these contexts.

Table 4's regression reveals helicopter parenting significantly predicts lower self-esteem ( $\beta = -0.144$ ,  $p < .001$ ), explaining 5.4% of variance ( $R^2 = 0.0538$ ). This small but meaningful effect supports Self-Determination Theory, as overparenting may undermine autonomy and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It also aligns with Erikson's framework, where excessive parental interference could disrupt identity formation (Arnett, 2000). The findings underscore the need for parental education on balancing support and autonomy, as well as targeted interventions for young adults' self-esteem.

### Implications and future research

This study has several significant implications for understanding the dynamics between helicopter parenting, self-esteem, and sexual attitudes among young adults. First, the finding that helicopter parenting negatively predicts self-esteem ( $\beta = -0.144$ ,  $p < .001$ ) has important implications for parental education and intervention programs. Parents should be informed about how overinvolvement, despite well-intentioned motives, may undermine their adult children's psychological well-being by hindering autonomy development. University counseling centers and student affairs offices would benefit from incorporating these insights into their support services, particularly for first-year students navigating the transition to greater independence. Programs that facilitate healthy parent-child boundaries while maintaining supportive relationships could help mitigate negative effects on self-esteem. Second, the lack of relationship between helicopter parenting and sexual attitudes challenges assumptions about parental influence on sexual development during emerging adulthood. This suggests that sexual education programs might be more effective when focused on peer contexts, media literacy, and formal educational settings rather than exclusively targeting parental communication patterns. Third, the independence of self-esteem and sexual attitudes indicates that interventions addressing these constructs should be approached separately rather than assuming improvement in one will automatically affect the other. Mental health professionals working with young adults should recognize that building self-esteem may not necessarily alter sexual attitudes and vice versa, necessitating targeted approaches for each domain when both are concerns. Finally, the 5.4% variance in self-esteem explained by helicopter parenting highlights

the multifaceted nature of self-esteem development, suggesting that comprehensive well-being initiatives should address multiple influences rather than focusing exclusively on parenting dynamics.

Future research should expand upon this study's findings in several key directions. First, longitudinal designs would significantly enhance our understanding of the causal relationships between helicopter parenting and self-esteem by tracking how these variables influence each other over time throughout emerging adulthood. Such designs could reveal whether the negative effects of helicopter parenting on self-esteem are temporary or persist long-term, and whether certain developmental periods show heightened vulnerability. Second, researchers should examine potential mediating variables in the relationship between helicopter parenting and self-esteem, such as perceived autonomy, competence, and relatedness as proposed by Self-Determination Theory. This would clarify the specific psychological mechanisms through which overparenting influences self-worth. Additionally, exploring behavioral sexual outcomes rather than attitudes might reveal connections not captured in the current study. Third, researchers should examine potential moderating variables such as gender, cultural background, family structure, and attachment styles, which may influence how helicopter parenting affects self-esteem and potentially sexual attitudes. Fourth, mixed-methods approaches incorporating qualitative interviews would provide deeper insight into young adults' subjective experiences of helicopter parenting and how they perceive its influence on their self-concept and sexual development. Finally, intervention studies testing programs designed to promote healthy parent-child boundaries while maintaining supportive relationships could provide valuable practical applications of these findings, particularly if they demonstrate improvements in young adults' self-esteem outcomes.

### Limitations of the study

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the cross-sectional design prevents establishing causal relationships between the variables; while helicopter parenting significantly predicted lower self-esteem, the direction of influence cannot be definitively determined without longitudinal data. Young adults with lower self-esteem might elicit more protective parenting behaviors, creating a bidirectional effect not captured in this analysis. Second, the reliance on self-report measures from young adults introduces potential reporting biases, particularly regarding perceptions of parental behaviors. Future studies would benefit from obtaining data directly from parents or using observational methods to triangulate findings. Third, despite the adequate sample size ( $N = 230$ ), demographic information about the sample's diversity in terms of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, family structure, and cultural background was not provided, limiting the generalizability of findings across different populations. Cultural variations in parenting norms and expectations could significantly influence how helicopter parenting affects young adults' outcomes. Fourth, the study examined helicopter parenting as a unidimensional construct, potentially overlooking important distinctions between different types of overparenting behaviors (e.g., controlling versus nurturing) that might have differential effects on self-esteem and sexual attitudes. Fifth, the measures used, particularly the composite BSAS score, may have obscured potential relationships that might exist between helicopter parenting and specific dimensions of sexual attitudes. Finally, the variance explained in self-esteem (5.4%) indicates that numerous other important factors influencing self-esteem were not included in the model, suggesting that a more comprehensive approach incorporating peer relationships, academic factors, and broader social influences would provide a more complete understanding of self-esteem development in young adults.

## Conclusion

This study examined the relationships between helicopter parenting, sexual attitudes, and self-esteem among 230 young adults aged 18-25. The findings revealed a significant negative correlation between helicopter parenting and self-esteem ( $\rho = -0.207$ ,  $p = .002$ ), with regression analysis confirming that helicopter parenting predicted lower self-esteem ( $\beta = -0.144$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and explained 5.4% of its variance. This supports theories suggesting that overparenting undermines autonomy and competence, negatively affecting young adults' self-perception. Conversely, no significant relationships were found between helicopter parenting and sexual attitudes ( $\rho = -0.004$ ,  $p = .957$ ) or between self-esteem and sexual attitudes ( $\rho = 0.012$ ,  $p = .862$ ), indicating that sexual values likely develop independently from both parental control behaviors and self-evaluation processes. These results suggest that while helicopter parenting has measurable negative effects on psychological well-being, its influence is limited to specific domains and represents just one of many factors shaping development during emerging adulthood. The findings emphasize the need for parental education programs promoting balanced autonomy support, targeted interventions for young adults experiencing diminished self-esteem, and recognition that sexual education may be more effective when focused on peer contexts and media literacy rather than parental communication patterns. Future research should employ longitudinal designs, explore mediating mechanisms, examine specific dimensions of sexual attitudes rather than composite scores, and investigate cultural variations in these relationships.

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