**Lighthouse Parents Have More Confident Kids, adapted from Russell Shaw, *The Atlantic*, September 22, 2024**

When my son was a toddler, he liked to run in our driveway until he fell. He would then turn to me to see if he was hurt. If my face betrayed worry or if I audibly gasped, he would wail. If I maintained equanimity, he would brush himself off and get back to running. Learning that I could so powerfully influence his mental state was a revelation. Here was this human being who was counting on me to make sense of the world—not just how to tie his shoes or recite the ABCs, but how to feel.

Years later, when he was in middle school, this lesson came back to me. One night while doing homework, my son told me about a classmate who had been unkind to him. My first instinct was to rush to fix it—email the parents, call the school, demand action. (Calling his teachers would have been complicated, given my role as the head of the school.) But instead of reacting, I paused. "That sounds hard. What did you do?"

"I decided not to hang out with him for a while," my son replied. "I'm going to try playing soccer at lunch instead."

"That's a great solution," I said, and he went back to his homework.

These otherwise ordinary parenting moments crystallized for me an important truth: Sometimes, the best thing a parent can do is nothing at all.

What if the ways in which we are parenting are making life harder on our kids and harder on us? What if by doing less, parents would foster better outcomes for children and parents alike?

I've spent the past 30 years working in schools, and I've watched thousands of parents engage with educators and with their children. Too often, I watch parents overfunctioning—depriving their kids of the confidence that comes from struggling and persevering, and exhausting themselves in the process. Although this has been true throughout my career, it's growing more acute. Most Americans now believe that young people will not be better off than their parents. They see greater competition for fewer resources—be it college admissions, jobs, or housing. Parents are scrambling to ensure that their kids are the ones who will be able to get ahead.

We're biologically wired to prevent our children's suffering, and it can be excruciating to watch them struggle. A parent's first instinct is often to remove obstacles from their child's path, obstacles that feel overwhelming to them but are easily navigable by us. This urge has led to pop-culture mythology around pushy parenting styles, including the "Helicopter Parent," who flies in to rescue a child in crisis, and the "Snowplow Parent," who flattens any obstacle in their child's way. A young person who grows accustomed to having a parent intervene on his behalf begins to believe that he's not capable of acting on his own, feeding both anxiety and dependence.

I want to make a case for the Lighthouse Parent, a term that the pediatrician Kenneth Ginsburg and others have used. A Lighthouse Parent stands as a steady, reliable guide, providing safety and clarity without controlling every aspect of their child's journey.

Like a lighthouse that helps sailors avoid crashing into rocks, Lighthouse Parents provide firm boundaries and emotional support while allowing their children the freedom to navigate their own challenges. They demonstrate that they trust their kids to handle difficult situations independently. The key is learning when to step back and let them find their own way.

As children grow, parents must move from the role of boss to that of consultant.

Yes, parenting can be stressful. But when we trust our children to navigate their own course—with us as steady and supportive guides—we lighten our own load and empower them to thrive.