

The Boy With One Name

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A few weeks ago, I was loading equipment into my car after soccer practice when an angry mom approached me with what she felt was a serious complaint: “My son is not *Tommy* or *Tom*,” she hissed through gritted teeth, “His name is *Thomas*”.

I’m no Biblical scholar, but I’m pretty sure this is one of the Seven Signs of the Apocalypse. Contrary to popular opinion, plague and famine won’t signal the end of civilization. The onset of the End of Days will arrive when packs of Helicopter Moms flying precariously close to the ground demand that their sons be called by one and only one name.

The rational part of my brain understands that I’m overreacting. One controlling mom isn’t the end of the world. Still, it feels like the end of something. Slowly but surely, it feels like adults are eliminating every fun part of being a kid.

At different times throughout my life, I have had a variety of nicknames. I’ve been called Hirsch, Timmy, Little Hirsch (the youngest of four boys in my family), T, Hacker or simply Hack. I prefer some nicknames more than others. ‘Timmy’ is like nails on a chalkboard to my ears, but I’ve always kind of liked ‘Hirsch’.

Yet the truth is that one’s own personal feelings about the nicknames we’re given are never very important. One of my childhood friends could have called me Booger or Pinhead and I would have been happy. Because one of the sacred tenets of childhood is that when someone gives you a nickname, it means that you are part of the group. You are among friends. You belong.

One of the proudest moments of my childhood was the night my basketball coach started to call me Hacker. Tim was an insecure little punk

who couldn't make a foul shot if his life depended on it. Hacker was a relentless defender that would happily run into a wall for a loose ball. Tim was a lazy student who spent a considerable amount of time wishing he was dating Farrah Fawcett. Hacker was an important part of our team.

Young Thomas is an important part of our soccer team and his mom seems like a nice enough lady. There is a rumbling, hyper-caffeinated quality about her that I don't completely understand, but I think she clearly loves her son a lot. Still, I'm confused by her parenting decisions. What compels a woman to insert herself so deeply into the social interaction of her 8 year old son? More importantly, how much friendship, laughter, and fun will her son be denied with his mother constantly hovering overhead and dictating that he can only be identified by one acceptable name?

I don't want to sound like the grizzled old coach who views parents as a necessary evil associated with coaching kids. For every obnoxious youth sports parent I've met over the years, I've met 50 fantastic parents— loving moms and dads who sacrifice a considerable amount of time and money to give their child a great life.

It's also worth noting that many parents I meet make questionable decisions that I support or, at the very least, pretend to ignore. If a parent insists on tying their 9 year old child's cleats for them, or zipping up their jacket "the right way", or cutting up their chicken for them at the dinner table, I think that's more than a little weird. It makes the child appear helpless and spoiled, and it makes the parent appear to be servants.

I might wonder aloud here if a kid's mom will still be cutting up his chicken for him at his high school prom. Will she extend that privilege to his date? Will the kid's dad rush into his dorm room to make sure his sneakers are tied "the right way" before he heads off to his first keg party? I worry about a generation of children whose creativity and independence is stunted by over-attentive parents, and I worry about the physical and emotional health of their moms and dads. It takes tremendous energy for a parent to flap their wings furiously and hover over their child's shoulders 24 hours a day- it's no surprise that today's parent is hooked up to a constant IV drip of caffiene.

But you'll never catch me sharing those opinions out loud in front of children. A huge part of my job as a coach is to support the parents of my players. Parents and coaches are both influential figures in a child's life. If two authority figures challenge each other in front of a child, it compromises the respect that the kid has for all authority figures.

The Boy With One Name feels different. It seems clear that Thomas likes to be called Tommy and that's the most important thing to me. Thanks but no thanks, Helicopter Mom, I'll call your son whatever I want.