

Parenting Across Cultures

Amy Chuo, Yale Law School Professor coined the phrase "Tiger Mom" in her book, "Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother", 2011.

It sparked a debate of parenting across cultures. Our focus here is mainstream American parenting and Asian parenting. Other groups such as Hispanic, Jewish, European and German parenting, hopefully can be discussed and shared in the future.

Asian parenting

Asian here means people from East, South and Southeast countries who are greatly influenced by the Chinese tradition. Broadly speaking, their parenting is strict. Academic achievement, extracurricular activities are highly valued. Sometimes it is done with little regard for the individual social and emotional well being. According to Asian study scholars, the most contributing ideas for academic achievement come from Confucianism. Confucius' teaching emphasized filial piety, family values, hard work, persistence, honesty and the dedication of self towards the collective whole. Ancient Asian countries such as China, Japan and Korea viewed the annual public exam as the goal for every family. For the poor families, this was the only path to social mobility. Ancient scholars received high social status well above wealthy landowners, businessmen and merchants.

Another significant factor that shaped the Asian attitude towards life is the wet-rice paddy culture. The agricultural traditions of these countries put great emphasis on work ethic, persistence and endurance.

Scientific literatures have indicated that such attitudes are observed in many Asian students even in modern days.

For example, a lengthy questionnaire was given to Asian and non-Asian students, most Asian students completed all the questions. Yet, most other students have a much lower percentage of completion. (Erling Boe, University of Pennsylvania.) A similar study involved Japanese and American 1st graders.

A difficult puzzle was given to individual students. When timed, the Japanese children lasted approximately 40% longer in trying to solve the puzzle. (Priscilla Blinco.) Thus among Asian parents, we see the strong imprint of Cultural legacies that dominate the way they raise their children. Their strong traditions allow their children to learn and make sense of the world in a consistent and predictable manner.

Mainstream American parenting

Between 1934 to 1945, Johanna Haarer, a German physician and psychologist proposed a harsh Nazi parenting guideline. It stated that the goal of motherhood was to prepare children for submission to the Nazi community. The Nazi wanted children to be tough, unemotional and empathetic with weak attachment to others. American and the Western European civilizations

witnessed the physical and moral impact of WWII and the cruelty of the Nazi regime. The social attitude reacted with horror to the Nazi influence. They needed a drastic renewal of parenting outlook.

In the 1950's, a child psychiatrist John Bowlby formulated the "Attachment Theory". (Tavistock Clinic, London.) It proposed a movement towards a "child centered" approach. The attachment theory has shaped the contemporary Western way of parenting. The individual "self" and the emotional world for a child is the priority. It focuses on freedom of opinion and choices.

In the 1970's, American parents constructed the "healthy self-esteem" movement. They were encouraged to constantly give positive feedback to children. Phrases such as "Great job", "You are so smart", "You are the best" or "You are so special" were the preferred remarks for children regardless of their performances. Furthermore, parents are urged to protect their kids from disappointment and failure. For decades, Americans have been a little obsessed with the concept of self-esteem. This obsession has influenced the education institutes and child care facilities in the way they deal with children too.

Cultural legacies are powerful forces. They have deep roots that persist through generations. Even when economic, social and demographic conditions no longer exist, tradition will still play an important role in directing attitudes and behavior. (Gladwell: Outliers: The Story of Success)

Our parenting style is affected by our own upbringing. Parenting is diverse. There is not a one-size-fits all. However, the more we know, the better we are. Thus, it is important to have an open mind to learn from each other. Striking a balance is all that matters.