

FAMILY

Managing Cultural Conflict

A Guide for Immigrant Parents Who Have "American" Children

By Judy Tso

The most confusing and difficult conflict between parents who are immigrants and their American-born children (or children who emigrated at a young age) originates from the fact that although everyone is in the same family, the two generations do not share the same cultural history. Typically parents and children are raised in the same society and therefore have the same cultural norms. However with immigration, parents and children do not have the same cultural experience.

As a child of parents who emigrated from Taiwan after fleeing from China, I have long explored what I experienced as a child and why I found my parents to be so bewildering. I did not understand my parent's behavior and values because I had no cultural reference point for them. My parents rarely explained their Chinese upbringing or the values they held. As a result, I often felt my parents seemed like aliens from another planet!

It took two years of living in China and my work as an anthropologist and personal coach to make sense of the misunderstandings I faced. I know what it is like to be the child of immigrant parents and hope this perspective will help Asian parents better understand and relate to their children. You can prevent difficulties for your child if you seek to understand the cultural

Now let's contrast that with the beliefs of American parents:

- * Parents are to be respected as well.
- * Children also know what they need and can express their needs to parents.

- * Children also get to have a voice and share their own ideas and wishes. Parents demonstrate that they can also listen to the children's ideas as well.

- * Parents share their own feelings and emotions with children.

- * Parents show love in many ways which include showing physical affection, saying I love you, and praising and appreciating their children.

- * Parents are not always right. They sometimes are wrong and admit to it to demonstrate that even parents can be wrong.

- * If children do well in school, that's worthy of praise and celebration.

- * Children are to be told the stories about their parents, grandparents and family so they know about their history. Even painful stories are shared. Parents don't limit themselves to telling stories only to make a point when disciplining a child.

When these different sets of beliefs come together, it isn't surprising that conflict arises. Through everyday interaction with Americans, you children are learning American culture and

you of the suffering they face or they may have tried to explain it to you and you dismissed them. You may not have a budget for lots of clothes.

However, what if you compromise and find some money once in a while to give to your child for a special piece of clothing?

In Asia, Children should be quiet and listen. In America, children should freely express their ideas and have their own thoughts.

In America, children are encouraged to have and express their own thoughts and feelings. In school, your children are taught to have independent thoughts, but when they come home, you may expect them to obey your wishes. This often goes directly against the message that children get from school. For your child to succeed in America, it is good for them to think independently. You may have certain rules you want your child to follow, but you also want to demonstrate to them that you support their ideas as well and listen to what they have to say. Occasionally, it may mean letting them have their way.

It also means that as they grow up, you give them the space to form their own identity without pressure from you. In America, children are expected to develop their own ideas for a career

what your children have to say.

Ask children about their experience of the mainstream culture

Ask your children to explain what they experience at school or with friends. You probably have little idea about the challenges they face everyday. Even though you may be busy, create time for conversations. The more you know about their life, the more you will be able to recognize when your wishes directly contradict their experiences, and you will know when you need to seek compromise.

Tell your children what it is you need

Asian parents typically do not talk about their feelings and they may not fully explain their expectations. Because relationships between immigrant parents and their American children are much more complex, it becomes important for Asian parents to deliberately explain their ideas and expectations. Do not assume your children understand you because they do not have the knowledge of Asian culture you have. Clearly communicate what you need from your children.

Don't be overprotective.

It may well backfire. Let me give you an example: my cousin emigrated from Taiwan a few years ago. She has

contacts between what you were taught and what your child is learning in American society.

For the purposes of comparison, this article assumes two extreme positions parents can adopt. At one end are the parents who want to preserve Asian values and beliefs. These parents attempt to teach children Asian values and they adopt the traditional hierarchical relationship.

At the other end are parents who really want their child to assimilate. These parents may not teach the native language at home or teach Asian values, customs, or traditions.

The first half of the article addresses parents who are attempting to enforce traditional Asian values. The later half offers parenting tips for both tradition-oriented parents and the less traditional. Finally, the last tip offers specific guidance for less traditional parents who want to help their child to assimilate.

How Asian parents view their role versus how American parents view their role:

What traditional Asian parents believe about their role and their relationship with children:

- * Parents are to be respected and obeyed.

- * Parents know what is best for the child and what the child needs.

- * Parents are the ones to talk, children are to listen.

- * Parents do not talk about their own feelings and emotions.

- * Parents show love by working hard to support children economically, not by talking.

- * Parents are always right.

- * Children should do well in school. It is expected of them.

- * There is no need to talk about history. It is past.

values. It is more likely that your children share the beliefs of American parents rather than your beliefs. As a result Asian parents expect one thing from children and children expect another thing from parents.

Now, let's look closer at some of the beliefs held by Asian parents:

Parents know what is best versus Children might know what is best.

Parents believe they know what is best for children. The problem is that immigrant parents may not always know what is best for their children in America. This is because what may be culturally appropriate in China or Vietnam, is not appropriate here.

The reality is that Asian-born parents can't know what it's like to grow up in America. Asian (immigrant) parents can't know what it's like to go to an American school and may not be well connected to many parts of American culture.

You may sometimes need to ask your children what they think is best given their understanding of American culture. Because your children are experiencing the world in a radically different way than you did growing up, giving them instructions that are informed by your cultural experience may not be appropriate or realistic.

Let's look at an example. Your child wants a pair of Nike brand shoes. In the United States, we are obsessed with fashion. You may believe that clothes are not important, but the person's character is important. However, your child knows that different types of clothes convey different meanings. If your child dresses in a way that is perceived negatively by the other children, your child may be taunted, beaten up etc.

Your children may be afraid to tell

and not to pursue them as they reach adulthood.

In Asia, parents often do not openly offer praise for doing well in school. In America, children get rewarded for good grades.

Should you praise your kids for their school achievement? Yes, absolutely. You may expect your child to do well in school and may think praise is unnecessary. However praise and recognition are expected in American culture. If your child does well and you do not show your happiness and appreciation, your child may wonder why you don't care. Your child will feel loved if you acknowledge their hard work. They expect that acknowledgement because they see that other children receive it. Denying praise can send the wrong message.

Tips for managing and preventing conflict

Respect your child

What if they don't respect you? If ordering them to show respect has stopped working, try another approach. In America, there is often a belief that respect needs to be earned. If your children no longer respect you, then you may need to figure out how to earn their respect back. If they say you never listen to their ideas, then maybe you should sit down and try to listen to them. Try showing them the kind of respect you expect from them. When parents change their behavior, they inspire children to change as well.

Talk, Communicate, Converse

This may go against the very nature of your cultural norms. Your children have been taught by the American mainstream culture that it is normal for parents and children to have discussions. Try engaging your child in a two-way dialogue. Be ready to listen to

a 6-year-old daughter (let's call her Sandy) who is in the first grade. Everyday, my cousin drops off a lunch of Chinese home cooking to Sandy at school. My cousin is afraid her daughter will not like the American food. Not only is my cousin being overprotective and spoiling Sandy, but she is making it difficult for Sandy to learn to eat American food. Sandy will be exposed to American food her entire life and she needs to like it. My cousin may be making it more difficult for Sandy to adjust to her school life. Ultimately, it is Sandy who will suffer.

The reverse situation: You are too hands off

You may have decided not to tell your children about your culture because you want them to assimilate. You may not even teach them your language in the hopes that they will assimilate more easily. However, it is important to pass on cultural knowledge. Being strictly traditional can backfire but backing off and refusing to teach them about Asian culture can backfire too. Your children do need to know something about their cultural heritage. It is important to your child's identity formation.

Remember to share your stories of growing up because you are the greatest source of Asian cultural knowledge for your children.

When sharing your stories, pretend your child is a Caucasian American that knows nothing about Asia. From that perspective, explain your beliefs, values and ideas to your children. If you take this perspective, it is likely you will be most clear and explicit and you will not leave out basic principles they need to have explained.

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