

Chinese parenting practices

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Introduction

The process of adapting to a new environment impacts on the homeostasis of immigrant Chinese families. Families have to contend with significant social and cultural transformations, which impact on the way the family defines itself. Differences can arise between immigrant children and their parents as the children adopt some of the expectations, values and behaviour of their New Zealand classmates, while their parents want to ensure continuity in adhering to traditional Chinese values and beliefs. This can be described as cultural polarisation between the family generations, reflecting a clash between the Chinese worldview held by parents and the Western worldview that is more espoused by their children. Parents may respond to this transitional issue by attempting to make their children work hard, but this response will not necessarily solve these transitional problems. When there is a clash of cultural values between immigrant children and their parents, a cultural broker or counsellor may be needed to facilitate communication between family members, in order to break the cycle of blame and to help the family with some of the transitional

tasks. According to media reports, schools need to liaise more with the Chinese community (*NZ Herald*, 1994).

This article sets out to highlight differences between Chinese and Western parenting practices in order to assist helping professionals to conciliate value orientations between parents and their children. Intergenerational difficulties in New Zealand Chinese families are identified, and consideration of these issues for counsellors and others working with Chinese students are given. Chinese parenting practices are discussed under the following eight headings: Parental praise, Communication, Family values, Authority, Respect for elders, Characteristics of Chinese immigrant children, Parental expectations and Parental control.

1. Parental praise

In general, New Zealand society values more the effort put into gaining good grades than the outcome, and parents may praise their children lavishly for this effort. In contrast, Chinese society values the outcome more than the effort, and Chinese parents tend not to praise their children for their efforts. Instead, they communicate their confidence in their children's abilities by

expressing higher expectations of them. Chinese New Zealand children raised amidst the New Zealand culture, who have learned from influences outside the home to associate verbal praise with parental approval, can interpret the higher expectations of their own parents as, "It's not good enough". The conflict between parental expectations, reinforced by the students' sense of filial duty and the reality of language difficulties and college life generally, has made for a situation of extreme powerlessness for many immigrant children (Richardson, 1994).

2. Communication

In a hierarchical society, such as the Chinese society, cultural traditions and customs restrict or impede communication, and parents encourage one-way communication. Children are restrained in exhibiting strong emotions, they are expected to display unquestioning obedience to family authority, and there is submergence of individuality in the interests of family welfare. Outspokenness is avoided, for fear of retaliation from the community at large (Richardson, 1994). It is traditionally very difficult for parents to listen to their children. But when families go through the stress of immigration, adjustments to this process of communication are required.

3. Family values

The strong duty of the individual to the family and the importance of individual success that reflects on the family (Kong, 1985) is the responsibility of each family member, and to let the family down causes great shame to the whole family. Because the concept of guilt belongs to the individual and not the family, it has no place and is replaced with shame (Hu, 1975; Shon & Jar, 1996).

4. Authority

The role of the Chinese father as head of the household is patriarchal and his authority is absolute. The mother has a subservient, nurturing, secondary role. Roles and rules of behaviour and conduct are formalised in the family to a greater extent than in most other cultures. Power and control is firmly lodged with parents even into adolescence (Baruth & Manning, 1991).

5. Respect for elders

Most elderly Chinese people continue to receive considerable respect. Old age equates with prestige and honour. Respect is evident in the language used when addressing the elderly, and in behaviour such as bringing elderly relatives to restaurants to enjoy a good meal during weekends and holidays. While upward mobility and extensive acculturation of the younger generation has widened the cultural gap between the generations, respect for

parents and elders is still of prime importance. There is a Chinese expression which says: "Storing crops is for the prevention of hunger, raising children is for the preparation of old age". So there is an expectation from parents that their children will take care of them as they age.

6. Characteristic traits of Chinese immigrant children

- They tend to be quiet, reticent and aloof.
- They tend to be dependent, conforming and obedient.
- They place family welfare above individual desires.
- They tend to have a bilingual background.
- They show respect and reverence towards elders.
- They are reared by parents and extended family.
- They are controlled by a strong family structure
- They may bring shame on the family by not conforming to expectations.

7. Parental expectations

Even when Chinese families have been living in a Western society like New Zealand for some time, parents continue to stress the importance of group harmony and maintaining face to their children. This is different from the individualism favoured by their New Zealand classmates. Chinese parents still expect their children to

accept one-way communication, restrain strong emotions and obey authority without question. Older people and teachers are expected to be greeted politely. Inappropriate greetings by young people on special occasions such as New Year, birthdays, weddings or funerals are considered to bring bad luck to the recipient's family. If this occurs, the child's family are adjudged to have reared their child improperly and will suffer loss of face as a result.

Certain protocols exist around mealtimes. For example, no family member begins to eat until permission is given to the family members by the head of the household, and children must tell their elders, including older siblings, that they intend to begin eating before commencing their meal. It is important that chopsticks are held in the correct manner and the meal is taken in silence. A Chinese expression says: "No talking while you eat and while you sleep".

8. Parental control

Parents may try to control their children physically and financially, if parental expectations are not met. In terms of physical control, children who are not performing well will be obliged to stay at home and study harder rather than be allowed to go out and socialise with their peers. Parents attempt to shield their chil-

dren from sports and activities considered distracting or dangerous. These include rugby, alcohol and smoking, fast cars, fights and parties. Young people are often forbidden to date while studying and to date a person from a different background is seldom permitted. However, rules about dating may be enforced more strictly on girls than they are on boys. Chinese parents forbid pre-marital sexual relationships, and parental approval is required before marriage.

Chinese children are financially dependent on their parents. Unlike their Western counterparts, they may not earn pocket money while studying. However, they may demand expensive items or money for entertainment – the material indicators of belonging within their new context (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999). As well as putting financial pressure on the family, this can create internal conflict for the child, who may feel torn between wanting to conform to traditional beliefs and values and wanting to adopt the freedoms of Western culture. Strained family relations can result if children question the authority of their parents by attempting to argue or negotiate with them.

Children's responses to conflict

Children may respond to a conflict situation by changing their behaviour, by continuing to confront their parents

until a compromise is reached, or by deceiving them. When deceitful behaviour is uncovered, tighter parental controls may be implemented, and the situation worsens. Unable to express feelings of anger or frustration to his or her parents, the disappointed child may join forces with another in a similar situation. Children may support each other in the view that their parents are too tough, stubborn or rigid. Together, they may rebel in an attempt to express their strong feelings one way or another. Chinese children are unlikely to approach school counsellors for help. This may be because they may be unfamiliar with the concept of counselling, or may not believe that it can help.

Conclusion

Not all Chinese families in New Zealand experience intergenerational conflict or a clash of cultural values. However, when this does occur, family counselling in the appropriate language can help with bridging the generational gap and with cultural mediation. School counsellors wanting to work with Chinese students need to gain an understanding of their client's family background by gaining insight into the following:

- The length of time the family has been in New Zealand
- The rate and stage of acculturation experienced by each family member
- Ways in which the family communicates

- How the counsellor can create a safe environment to facilitate two-way conversation between parents and child
- Consideration of differences that exist between the worldview of the counsellor and that of the client and family
- The extent to which the family understands the New Zealand education system and New Zealand employment criteria
- How to help parents understand that as well as academic results, character development and communication skills are also considered important in New Zealand educational institutions and workplaces.

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