

Asian American Adolescents: The Challenges of Navigating Two Cultures

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Demographics

Asian Americans made up about 4% of the US population in 2000. The estimates for 2004 are that Asian Americans constitute about 12% of the population of California, and 29% of the population of Santa Clara County. In 2000, Asian Americans made up 30% of the population of San Jose, and 44% of the population of Cupertino. (www.bayareacensus.ca.gov; www.census.gov)

Culture

Asian Cultural Values	Western European Cultural Values
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Group/Family orientation▪ Interpersonal harmony▪ Moderation▪ Compromise▪ Respect▪ Non-assertiveness▪ Non-aggression▪ Respect for life and nature▪ Acceptance of one's fate	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Individualism▪ Autonomy▪ Directness/openness▪ Future orientation▪ Competition/Survival of fittest▪ Mastery of environment

(see e.g., Lee 1997, Chung 1997)

Adolescence

In Western cultures, where there is an emphasis on the individual, independence and choice, adolescence is a major developmental stage. According to developmental psychologists, the central task of adolescence is achieving a sense of identity and a subjective sense of continuity and sameness that provides a foundation of adulthood. **Who am I? Where do I belong?** In most Asian cultures, there is no developmental stage comparable to that of adolescence as one's sense of identity is derived from the family group identity and one's position in the family.

Asian American adolescents face the additional challenge of having to integrate different and sometimes conflicting values of Asian and American culture.

Acculturation: How individuals and families adapt to living in another culture

	Enculturation HIGH	Enculturation LOW
Acculturation HIGH	Integration (Bicultural)	Assimilation
Acculturation LOW	Separation	Marginalization

(Berry et al. 1992; Phinney 1990)

Marginalization is associated with greater stress and psychological problems.
Integration (bicultural) appears to be associated with higher academic achievement.

Family conflict, especially intergenerational conflict, is likely when different members of the family adapt in different ways or at different rates, for example if grandparents follow a strategy of separation, parents integration and children assimilation.

Major areas of intergenerational conflict (from research with Asian American young adults)

- Family (e.g., how much time to spend with family, desire for greater autonomy, communication with parents)
- Education/career (e.g. choice of college, of major, of career)
- Social (e.g., how much time to spend with friends, when to start dating, whom to date, whom to marry)

Academic Achievement

Many studies show that Asian American students who are bilingual/bicultural do very well in school.

Emotional Health

Some Asian families may not be familiar with the concept of emotional health or psychological well-being.

A 1998 report by the Commonwealth Fund found that 30% of Asian American girls in grades 5-12 reported depressive symptoms.

Research studies show that while Asian American college students tend to do better academically than other groups, they report experiencing more stress (depression and anxiety) and more family conflict than other ethnic groups.

Parenting Styles (Baumrind, 1991)

- Authoritarian: parents are demanding and low in responsiveness. They provide well-ordered and structured environments with clearly stated rules; expect their orders to be obeyed without explanation; are obedience- and status-oriented.
- Authoritative: parents are both demanding and responsive. "They monitor and impart clear standards for their children's conduct. They are assertive, but not intrusive and restrictive. Their disciplinary methods are supportive, rather than punitive. They want their children to be assertive as well as socially responsible, and self-regulated as well as cooperative."
- Permissive or Indulgent: parents are high in responsiveness and low in demandingness. "They are nontraditional and lenient, do not require mature behavior, allow considerable self-regulation, and avoid confrontation."
- Uninvolved: parents are low in both responsiveness and demandingness.

Research shows that children thrive best with an authoritative parenting style, in academic achievement, social skills, self-esteem, and absence of problem behaviors. For Caucasian-American children, an authoritarian parenting style is associated with moderate performance in school, low level of problem behaviors, but lower self-esteem and more depression (Baumrind 1991).

Traditional Asian culture encourages an authoritarian parenting style. Asian-American high school students whose parents had an authoritarian or authoritative parenting style do well in school; however, Asian American students whose parents had an authoritative parenting style had less psychological distress, fewer behavioral problems, and better psychosocial development than Asian American students who had parents with an authoritarian parenting style. (Steinberg et al, 1992).