

## **Growing Up Asian in America: Balancing Emotional Health and Success** **Hoai-Thu Truong, Ph.D. & Vickie Chang, Ph.D.**

Asian American high school and college students report more stress, depression and having thoughts of suicide than their European American peers. When you break down the Asian American college students into Asian born and American born groups, the Asian born group is fine, but the American born group has the high levels of depression and thoughts of death (especially Asian American female college students).

### **What can parents do?**

#### **The myth of tiger parenting**

Research shows that “Tiger mom” is not a common form of parenting among families with Asian heritage (neither in the US, nor in China). Furthermore, Chinese American children raised by tiger parents do not do as well as children of parents with a supportive style of parenting. A supportive style of parenting includes parents expressing affection, monitoring the whereabouts of their children, being transparent, involving their children in decision making, and fostering autonomy. Children raised by supportive parents had highest level of academic achievement (GPA and how far they go in their education), higher levels of emotional well-being, better parent-child relationship, and higher sense of family obligations than children raised with other parenting styles (Kim et al, 2013).

#### **Family conflict**

Family conflict is a major source of stress for Asian American teens and college students. The main areas of conflict involve: family (how much time to spend with or help out family), school (how much time to spend studying, major, college and career choices, and social (how much time to spend with friends, who friends are, whom to date, marry). Family conflict is sometimes intense and very personal. It may help to look at conflict as differences in acculturation strategy, difference in culture and assumptions of what is needed to succeed, and due to the critical developmental stage of adolescence.

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

Identify with:	Asian Culture <b>HIGH</b>	Asian Culture <b>LOW</b>
US culture <b>HIGH</b>	Integration (Bicultural)	Assimilation
US culture <b>LOW</b>	Separation	Marginalization

Integration (bicultural) is associated with higher academic achievement and emotional well being. 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.

#### **Cultural Values**

- Traditional Asian cultures value: group or family affiliation, interdependence, interpersonal harmony, respect, filial piety, moderation, non assertiveness
- Western cultures value: individualism, independence, directness/openness, choice
- These cultural values are reflected in many areas of life, including how children are raised, in expectations at school and at work: e.g., parent making decisions for child versus teaching child how to make choices.

## **Adolescence**

In Western cultures, where there is an emphasis on the individual, independence and choice, adolescence is a major developmental stage. The main task of adolescence is achieving a sense of identity that provides a foundation of adulthood. **Who am I? Where do I belong?** It involves differentiating oneself from parents, most easily achieved through conflict. 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.

**Mismatch between parents' and children's experience** can lead to feelings of alienation, confusion, self-criticism.

- Children mimic their parents' emotions & behavior.
- We all hear exaggerated versions of our parents' voices in our heads for the rest of our lives.
- How we understand and experience others and ourselves begins at home.
- The most important relationship of all is your relationship with yourself. How do you talk to yourself when you fail or struggle?

## **Tend and befriend instinct**

Our capacity to feel affection is part of our biology. Caring and warmth is as powerful a survival need as nutrition. We all long to feel safe and loved. Offer your child caring through physical touch, emotional warmth, and verbal validation. Say "I love you," give hugs, and take delight in who your child is.

**Relationships are critical to physical and emotional health.** Relationships are developed and sustained by the ability to 1) identify, express, manage emotions, 2) recognize needs and speak up, 3) kindness and appreciation. To help your children develop relationship skills, talk to them daily.

- Ask about relationships with peers, teachers.
- Listen, reflect, support.
- Meet your child where he/she is at.
- Share about yourself appropriately as your child ages.
- Ask "how" – How/why did you do that? What was hard about it? How did you figure it out?
- Talk about difficult topics. Silence is a type of communication.

## **Talk about emotions**

Each emotion has a purpose. Emotions motivate behavior and give us valuable information about ourselves and others. Question erroneous beliefs about emotions such as...

- Having emotions is a sign of weakness/failure.
- Expressing certain emotions disrupts interpersonal harmony.
- Certain emotions are bad.
- I don't deserve to be happy.

## **Growing a whole person**

Living purely by intellect is limiting. Our bodies and our instincts keep us grounded and on the right path morally, relationally, and professionally. We all need social connections. Make time for emotional, social, and physical self-care, which take as much time and practice as academics.

- Take breaks, without feeling guilty. Always working leads to burnout.
- Exercise, diet, sleep, and stress impact physical health and the brain.
- Allow time for doing nothing. This is where creativity, playfulness, and joy happen.

- Make time for socializing one-on-one and in groups.

### **Parenting Resources**

- Ten Principles on Raising Asian-American Teens by Dr. Evelyn Lee. Available for download in English, Chinese and Vietnamese. [www.evelynlee-mentalhealth.org/ten\\_principles.asp](http://www.evelynlee-mentalhealth.org/ten_principles.asp)
- How to talk so kids will listen & listen so kids will talk by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish
- How to talk so teens will listen & listen so teens will talk by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish
- Don't shoot the dog by Karen Pryor
- for parents of younger children: [www.handinhandparenting.com](http://www.handinhandparenting.com) and [www.circleofsecurity.org](http://www.circleofsecurity.org)
- Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley
- Mindset by Carol Dweck
- How children succeed by Paul Tough
- Raising an emotionally intelligent child by John Gottman
- The whole brain child by Daniel Siegel
- Raising happiness by Christine Carter