
Bicultural Parenting from A Southeast Asian Parent's Perspectives

Tales from the Garden, #14

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excerpt from: "Helping Youth Succeed: Bicultural Parenting for Southeast Asian Families" Curriculum



PART 1: Eastern Values and Beliefs

To understand Southeast Asian parenting and child-rearing practices, we must first understand the cultural values and beliefs that influence parents, especially regarding family life and interpersonal relationships.

Traditionally, Southeast Asians tend to have a large extended family, usually up to three or four generations living together (Vandeusen et al., 1980). Nuclear families typically have four to eight children, depending on socioeconomic status and ethnic group.

In Southeast Asian cultures, the family is an individual's religious, economic, political, and social core. It is the first loyalty and primary obligation (Morrow, 1989). The family obligation means that members must care for each other. For example, grandparents and older siblings care for the young and adult children care for their aging parents. Family relations and functions are clearly and elaborately defined. Mutual two way obligations connect families, helping them with tasks such as parenting and creating strong bonds.

Southeast Asian children are taught early in life about the importance of relationships and obligations within the family and society. As children mature, they develop a moral obligation and primary loyalty to the family. Parents teach children to do things that enhance the family name. For example, "children are taught to suppress aggressive behavior, overt expressions of negative emotions, and personal grievances; they must inhibit strong feelings and exercise self control In order to maintain 'family harmony'" (Morrow, 1989, p. 280). Chan (1986) talks about the "pride and shame" principle which means that an individual's actions reflect on the whole family. Those who are successful in school or work enhance the family pride, whereas bad behavior can bring shame to the extended family.

A Vietnamese proverb says, "The fish which is not preserved in salt will be rotten; the child who does not obey his parents will be corrupted in every way." This proverb explains Southeast Asian parents' attitudes toward discipline. In general, "Asian parents are significantly more controlling, restrictive, and protective of their children than are Anglo parents" (Chan, 1986, p. 42).

Education and the pursuit of knowledge are valued, since knowledge is crucial for wisdom and goodness. Elders and scholars are highly respected because of their experience, knowledge, and Wisdom. Most Southeast Asian parents want their children to receive a good education, although this has traditionally been more true for sons than for daughters. When children complete degree programs, they gain respect, not only for themselves, but for the whole family. The practice of ancestor worship and the respect given to tradition and history all reflect the value associated with wisdom and the elderly (Suzuki, 1980).

Hughes (1990) states that the primary responsibilities for Hmong parents are "providing for children and teaching children how to fulfill their roles within the Hmong kinship system" (pg 54). Similarly, Wood (1983) says that Cambodian parents' roles are to be moral guides to their children, overseers of a suitable marriage, and providers for the future welfare of their children. In traditional Southeast Asian families the father's role is primarily to provide material support for the family, while the mother's role is primarily to take care of the children. Grandparents and older Siblings also help raise the children.

PART 2: Gender Roles in the Family

The traditional family is structured by age and gender. Males are usually dominant and authoritarian. The father is considered to be superior in all matters. Communication from father to mother and parents to children tends to be one way and top down. When parents speak, children are expected to listen without questioning. Any questioning or "talking back" is considered disrespectful. The father does not usually start a conversation with his children. He tends to be distant, so when he does intervene, he is more effective in controlling children's misbehavior. Husband and wife usually interact through indirect communication, inferences, and unstated feelings (Morrow, 1989).

Women in traditional Southeast Asian cultures are considered subordinate. A girl is taught to obey her father; when she marries, she is taught to obey her husband; and when she has children, she is taught to obey her eldest son in case of her husband's death. She has a more subtle authority with her children, and often mediates between children and their father (Seabloom, 1991). Because of her less punitive parenting approach, her relationship with her children is often closer (Morrow, 1989).

Traditionally, girls and boys have different roles and are treated differently in Southeast Asian cultures. In traditional Hmong and Lao villages, girls care for younger siblings as early as age 5; by age 12 they have complete responsibility for younger siblings, in addition to helping with household chores. Child care responsibilities are an important factor in keeping girls from attending school. Boys, in contrast, "play and hunt for birds and other animals" (Phanjaruniti, 1994, p. 13). Cambodian boys are just as likely as girls to be responsible for younger siblings (Wood 1983); however, education was still considered more important for boys until recent years.

In some rural Lao ethnic groups and in Hmong culture, sons inherit the parents' land and wealth and take care of their parents when they are old. Parents, therefore, tend to invest more in their sons than their daughters and give them more opportunities to develop their skills (Phanjaruniti, 1994). However, in some Lao families the sons leave their parents' homes to live with their wives' families (Kubow, 1977); in these cases, the youngest daughters inherit most of the parents' land and property.

Girls are held to different standards as they mature. According to Kibria (1993), only Vietnamese women who have no families smoke cigarettes or drink beer: "Women are devoted to families, don't talk too loudly, are more honest, more isolated back at home" (p. 121-22). There is a cultural emphasis on women's sexual purity for marriage; for this reason, young women are chaperoned and follow strict rules of association. Traditionally, girls marry earlier in Southeast Asia than in the United States.

PART 3: Parent-Child Relations: Growing Up

Although there is variation within each cultural group, we do know something about typical child-rearing practices in Southeast Asian families. Overall, as Kubow (1977) writes about the Lao and Hmong she studied, children are "cherished, pampered, and appreciated," integrated into everyday life and activities, indulged for the first five years or so, and only gradually expected to comply with more adult standards of behavior:

The child learns of him/herself, interpersonal family relationships, extrafamilial relations, the village, the province, the state, the world, not through sit-down lessons but through the process, observation of, and living through daily life itself; for the very essence of the culture permeates the attitude and way in which everyday activities and relationships are approached and carried on (Kubow, 1977, Introduction).

Cambodian Families

In Cambodia, households are large, with the extended family of sisters and their husbands, along with sisters' children and parents, all living together. Children are indulged when very young: "Children are treated with much permissiveness, and are the recipients of a great deal of physical affection" (Wood, 1983, p. 10). At around age 3, parents begin to guide behavior and use discipline. Disobedience is the most common reason for discipline, and verbal admonition is the most common form of controlling behavior.

Although women are the primary caregivers for their children, Wood (1983) reports that child rearing is shared by Cambodian parents. Most women she interviewed reported that their husbands helped with bathing children, feeding, disciplining, holding, etc. Boys care for younger siblings as often as girls. Children are expected to care for and respect their parents. Sons are the primary caregivers of the parents; however, sons and daughters were reported to be equally valued by Cambodian parents (Wood, 1983).

Hmong Families

For Hmong villagers, the primary caregiver for a child is the mother for the first three months; then grandparents or elder siblings care for children, since the mother has to return to work outside in the fields. The father starts to become involved in child rearing when a child is three to four months old. His main role is that of provider; as children get older, he does more of the teaching and disciplining. Fathers make the decisions on major issues. Hmong grandmothers have a major role in child care, and may take care of several grandchildren at once. There is a ceremony in Hmong culture of adopting a child ritually, used to elicit extra support from other adults, especially in the case of a chronically ill child or when parents have special needs. The broader community helps support parents in raising young children during stressful periods (Phanjaruniti, 1994).

Storytelling is a part of traditional Hmong culture and usually occurs after dinner. A few people in each village may specialize in storytelling. All parents also use proverbs and moral sayings to teach morality when an appropriate situation arises. Hmong stories emphasize "being a good person, being patient, respecting parents and elders, being attentive, diligent, faithful, honest, and truthful" and not stealing things (Phanjaruniti, 1994, p. 28). Both Hmong children and parents enjoy role playing.

Hmong mothers discipline daughters and fathers discipline sons. According to Hughes (1990), Hmong discipline their children by positive role modeling and by explaining to them what they did wrong, why it was wrong, and what the consequences are of misbehavior. "Good" behavior for children means obeying parents and elders; "bad" behavior means stealing, being lazy, smoking, drinking, not being respectful, or always going out. Hmong instruct their children in religion, medicine, manners, and good behavior (Hughes, 1990). Physical punishment for young children is rare (Kubow, 1977).

Lao Families

Urban Lao families may have three to four children; villagers tend to have larger families. Grandparents live with their children and grandchildren, and grandmothers care for grandchildren and neighbor children. As with the Hmong, Lao mothers are the primary caregivers for the first three months until they must return to work. The father's main role is that of provider. Lao villagers have an adoption ceremony similar to that of the Hmong to elicit community support in raising a child with special needs (Phanjaruniti, 1994).

Lao also use storytelling and proverbs to teach morality: "Lao emphasize 'being good' so that the child will aspire to study and work at a high level" (Phanjaruniti, 1994, p. 28). Children are not expected to perform as adults, but are allowed to learn by observing. There is a lack of overt guidance by parents; children are instead allowed to associate with elders and gradually pick up personal and social skills. The "child discovers for him/herself the relationships of cooperation, compromise, and consideration. Self reliance becomes well-developed" (Kubow, 1977, p. 25). Discipline follows Buddhist philosophy; shame rather than physical punishment is used for admonition. Respect is taught from an early age. The home environment is one of "family protection, permissiveness, and deference to seniority" (Kubow, 1977, p. 25).

Vietnamese Families

Vietnamese families may consist of three or four generations; daughters join their husbands' families when they marry. Although Vietnamese families are generally smaller than Cambodian or Hmong families, Vietnamese believe that children make a person wealthy, because they will care for their parents when they are elderly. Men are heads of households; women are in charge of cooking, household budget, and the education of children. Traditionally, men never stay home to care for children.

The mother is a child's first teacher, and she teaches her children right and wrong from the very beginning. According to Dung (1984), in this way children learn to acknowledge their own mistakes and may even decide how much punishment they deserve. For example, a child might report, "I fight with a neighbor's child, I should receive two strokes of the rod" (p. 12). The father then administers the punishment. In this way a child learns to accept the consequences of his or her own actions.

Children learn the basics of family life early on, including what is expected of them and how to behave. Family loyalty comes first; elder siblings are responsible for younger siblings. Both boys and girls are strictly disciplined and do not make their own decisions, even when older (Dung, 1984). Physical punishment is rarely used with young children (Kubow, 1977).

PART 4: Issues Confronting Southeast Asian Parents in the United States

Diversity in Southeast Asian Groups

Southeast Asia consists of many diverse ethnic groups. Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam are very different countries, each with distinctive ethnic groups, languages, and traditions. There are variations within cultural groups as well; for example, some Lao are from cities, while other Lao grew up in rural villages. Some individuals who come to the United States had contact with the West in their homeland, while most were farmers with virtually no experience of the West prior to resettlement. Some refugees had higher education prior to resettlement, while most had very little exposure to a formal education in their homelands. Many have suffered very traumatic experiences, while others come with less severe though still serious losses.

There are also differences in the resettlement experience. Some refugees have lived in the United States many years, while others are still arriving. Some came to the United States with their families, while others came by themselves or were joined by family members later. Some refugees have moved several times within the United States, perhaps to join relatives or to find a better environment.

Any curriculum that tries to generalize about Southeast Asians must also acknowledge individual and cultural variations. Despite important differences, however, there are common processes and experiences that cross national, cultural, and individual boundaries. Southeast Asians share similar assumptions and philosophies about people, relationships, and families. They also share some lack of familiarity with U.S. customs and language.

Adolescence as a Developmental Stage

Although many urban Southeast Asians, such as Vietnamese from Saigon, view adolescence as a distinct stage of life, the meanings attached to adolescence in American culture are foreign to most Southeast Asian parents (Tobin and Friedman, 1984). The transition from childhood to adulthood happens much more quickly in Southeast Asia than is typical in the United States. In Southeast Asia, by the time children reach age 6 or 7 they typically assume specific household responsibilities. These responsibilities expand as children grow older. By age 12 or 13, a Southeast Asian adolescent is expected to be making a significant contribution to the household within gender-specific roles. In many traditional families, when a child reaches 14 to 17, he or she is likely to get married and take on adult responsibilities with the family business or farm.

In the United States, Southeast Asian parents are faced with five to seven years of parenting their adolescents with little knowledge or experience to draw upon. Some researchers say this is the main reason for conflict between Southeast Asian parents and their adolescents (Mcinnis, Petracchi, and Morgenbesser, 1990; Tobin and Friedman, 1984; Xiong, 1997).

Acculturation and Adjustment

To understand parents, we must understand the context that shapes their behaviors and actions. To understand the difficulties Southeast Asian parents face in the United States, we must understand how refugees adjust and adapt.

Refugee families have often suffered multiple losses (Parker, 1996), and come with few material and psychological resources. They have lost some or all of their original support systems.

They often dwell in isolated, substandard housing in poor areas, and face substantial language and cultural barriers.

Unemployment and underemployment are highly stressful to people who are used to hard work and self-sufficiency. Loss of social status, work roles and self-esteem can result from downward mobility and lack of financial security (Ben Porath, 1987). Long hours spent at low-paying jobs mean less time and energy to adequately supervise children.

Southeast Asians may face physical and mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress and depression. According to Scheinfeld (1993), "refugee parents have experienced widespread fatigue and depression resulting from relentless economic pressures and cultural alienation. Thus, their abilities to deal with the complexities of raising children in a foreign culture are weakened. Often they lack the energy to discipline their children consistently" (p. 6). Some parents turn to drinking or gambling, which erodes family stability even more. In addition, according to Scheinfeld, cultural patterns regarding parental authority, child rearing, and child conduct were supported by the extended family, the local community, and the Buddhist temple back at home; these important parenting supports are diminished or absent in the American setting.

Generation Gap

Although the U.S. media have often portrayed Asians and Asian youth as the model minority, this concept is misleading (Chang, 1995). In fact, Chang points out, class division is more of a factor in this perceived success; immigrants who arrived before 1976 were typically from well-educated, advantaged families, while those arriving after 1976 generally came from less advantaged families. Although some Southeast Asian children are high achievers in school, a significant number of these children are at risk as well.

Breakdown in Southeast Asian families can result in children running away, failing to attend school, engaging in unplanned sexual activity, committing criminal activities, using drugs, and joining gangs at early ages (Scheinfeld, 1993). Scheinfeld lists three factors that contribute to intergenerational tensions for Southeast Asian families:

- The culture emphasizes absolute parental knowledge and child deference to that knowledge.
- Traditional standards for child behavior are radically different from those of U.S. culture.
- Many parents lack information concerning American culture and society.

Other researchers believe that family problems result from the acculturation gap between parents and adolescents, which seems to widen as the child becomes more Americanized. Kim, Chu, and Lee (1987) found that conflicts tend to occur when refugee adolescents are exposed to American schools, friends, and television and learn the English language and about American culture faster than their parents. Parents thus become dependent on their adolescents to communicate and do business, leading to an unsatisfactory role reversal.

Family values in the United States contrast with those of Southeast Asians. U.S. families typically encourage individualism and self-reliance, emphasize two-way communication between family members, and allow open expression of feelings (Morrow, 1989). In addition, the availability of health insurance, unemployment benefits, social security, psychologists, and many other services and professionals outside of the family diminishes the emphasis on family obligations.

As children become Americanized, parents believe they are losing their traditions and culture and developing an identity in opposition to parents' expectations. Detzner (1992) found "the young embracing individualism and materialism eagerly, while elders consistently emphasize the retention of culture and the importance of family" (p. 100). Adults want continuity with the past, but are less able to enforce traditional roles and family-oriented values (Detzner, 1992).

Refugee youth may turn to peers to "replace" family as they grow more and more culturally distant from their parents: "Immigrant youth may begin to distrust their parents as they observe that their parents lack power and competence in the new society" (Spencer and Dornbusch, 1990, p. 138). This over reliance on peers can lead to gang affiliations.

PART 5: Issues Confronting Southeast Asian Youth in the United States

The Stresses of Adolescents

Southeast Asian refugee adolescents face stressors common to all refugees in addition to stressors common to all adolescents. These youth simultaneously face pressures of accelerated acculturation, pressures to maintain their cultural identity and traditions at home, and pressures associated with identity and individuality (Ben-Porath, 1987). Identity issues are critically important at this stage. As Tobin and Friedman (1984) write, "The greatest threat to identity in refugee adolescents...is not the feeling of belonging to two cultures but the feeling of belonging to none" (p.43).

Added stressors stem from acculturation that outpaces that of their parents, physical and psychological disorders, breakdown of the family and/or serious family problems, and separation from family members. Some also experience conflicts surrounding adoption into or foster care by American families (Tobin and Friedman, 1984).

Many students face considerable pressure from parents regarding their academic work because "academic failure threaten[s the] family's fundamental rationale or purpose for migrating to the U.S...[T]he burden of the migration process rests on [the adolescents'] shoulders, especially on their ability to do well in school" (Kibria, 1993, p. 156). One study found that 87 percent of Southeast Asian parents surveyed used family honor and pride to motivate their children to do well in school. Even deceased ancestors are used to motivate: "The shame of the ancestors [is] perhaps the heaviest burden, because ancestor spirits who are restless and displeased can cause all kinds of havoc for the living" (Context, 1996, p. 5).

Most Southeast Asian children face harassment in school-being called names, having coats and other items stolen from them, getting mugged and beaten up, or worse. Other problems in school include age-grade matching and mainstreaming, limited English-as-a-second-language services, lack of prior educational skills, and major gaps in schooling (Kibria, 1993). Those who come to the United States before adolescence may be able to learn English relatively quickly; those who arrive during adolescence may find language learning more difficult, and their schooling may be affected.

Gang involvement is most typical for youth who are unable to do well in school, who arrive in the United States alone, who were placed in foster homes, or who live with nonparent relatives. According to Spencer and Dornbusch (1990), these young refugees, particularly those unaccompanied by family, relied on antisocial strategies to escape from their homeland and to survive in camps, and gangs offer a continuation of "previously adaptive behaviors" such as fighting, cheating, and stealing. Even refugee youth with families may rely more and more on peers for emotional support and guidance as they feel increasingly alienated from their parents and first culture and as they struggle to form their own identity (Spencer and Dornbusch, 1990).

Developmental Stress and Minority Adolescents

Adolescents of all cultures face developmental tasks that include physiological, emotional, cognitive, and social adjustments. Elliott and Feldman (1990) list these: "becoming emotionally and behaviorally autonomous, dealing with emerging sexuality, acquiring interpersonal skills for dealing with members of the opposite sex and preparing for mate selection, acquiring education and other experiences needed for adult work roles, and resolving issues of identity and values" (p.12).

Youth who are considered members of a minority group in the United States also must deal with the social injustices of racism and discrimination: "By adolescence, minority youth must confront white culture and its values" (Spencer and Dornbusch, 1990, p. 123). Identity formation is one of the most important tasks of an adolescent, but as Spencer and Dornbusch write, 'the task of developing a positive identity as a member of a minority group may be difficult (p. 130).

Resilience: Survival in the Face of Difficulties

Refugees experience much loss and grief. They have lost property, investments, and business as well as family ties and friendships. Refugees have also lost their familiar cultural setting, aspects of self-identity, social support, social roles, and status. Many refugees have experienced both psychological and physical traumas—starvation, torture, forced separation, prolonged waiting in uncertainty, and leaving loved ones behind (Williams and Westermeyer, 1983). These many adverse conditions can undermine Southeast Asians' roles as parents and create hardships for adolescents.

Despite these difficulties, refugees often show great resilience — "the ability to thrive, mature, and increase competence in the face of adverse circumstances or obstacles" (Gordon in Context, 1996, p. 1). Some of this resilience refugees demonstrate by their sheer survival: "The backgrounds of refugees... show the presence of problem-solving skills in planning for and securing the best survival outcome for the family," and the "confidence that comes with overcoming great difficulties" (Context, 1996, pp. 1-2). Many refugees have excellent adaptation skills gained from years of warfare, refugee camps, and adjustment to life in the United States. Southeast Asian families have many additional strengths, including a strong devotion to family and community, a respect for hard work, a reverence for education, generally good health, and a strong sense of spirituality, resourcefulness, and flexibility. Southeast Asian communities in the United States often have a well-developed network of community-based service providers to help meet their needs, and low community crime rates. There are an increasing number of successful role models from within Southeast Asian communities (Parker, 1996).

Context (1996) quotes a study by Caplan, Whitmore, and Choy that found that Southeast Asian youth who were high achievers in American schools had certain factors in common, including families with "high expectations, guidance in learning self-discipline, a favorable identity in a culture that values hard work and achievement, and a strong sense of the future" (p. 6). It is clear that family support is an enduring part of Southeast Asian culture, and critical to the success of Southeast Asian youth. This curriculum is designed to build upon this valuable support system by giving parents and adolescents a means to enhance communication and increase their chances for success in U.S. culture.

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