



# ResearchLink

## Cultural Differences in Parenting Practices: What Asian American Families Can Teach Us

*In the United States, what most people consider good parenting is based on middle class European American behaviors. These behaviors include displays of warmth and closeness balanced with monitoring and control. A new book edited by Dr. Stephen T. Russell, Fitch Nesbitt Endowed Chair, and director of the Frances McClelland Institute for Children, Youth and Families, highlights important parenting differences between European and Asian Americans. At first glance, Asian American parents appear to show less warmth and to be more controlling of their children. Yet their children often do just as well as their European counterparts. Their parenting style may reflect differences in what warmth and control mean in their culture. Such differences suggest that existing ideas about parenting may not fit all populations of youth and their families. Studies of Asian American families shed light on new dimensions of parenting that matter for all families.*

### Research on Parenting Styles and Parent-Adolescent Relationships

How do we know which parenting strategies promote children's well-being, and which lead to poor outcomes? Mainstream thinking about parenting and parent-child relationships has been guided by Western cultural beliefs and images about parenting and family life. These beliefs and images tell us what it means to be parents and what parent-adolescent relationships are supposed to be like.

Scientific research, too, has reflected dominant Western ideas about parents and adolescents. Most studies of family

relationships have been conducted in the United States with a focus on European American (White) families; they have been based on the assumption that the meaning of parenting is similar across cultures. Such thinking hides important differences in what cultures expect of and understand about parenting and parent-adolescent relationships.

### *Authoritative versus Authoritarian Parenting*

For White Americans, the parenting style most related to psychological well-being for adolescents is called *authoritative* parenting.

- Studies on these families stress two key behaviors: **support** (hugging and praising children) and **control** (setting clear expectations and moderate limits). In many Western cultures, such behaviors are evidence that parents are warm and accepting of their children.
- Adolescents whose parents provide high support and moderate control tend to be better off; they cope better with problems, do well in school, and have less delinquency and depression.

Another parenting style is *authoritarian*, in which parents show **low support** (appear very strict) and **high control** (tightly monitor their children).

- According to Western beliefs, these behaviors are seen as likely to damage adolescents' well-being.
- Although authoritative parenting can benefit other ethnic groups, it is not necessarily more beneficial than authoritarian parenting. For example, first-generation Chinese youth from authoritarian homes do just as well in school as those from authoritative homes.



# Cultural Differences in Parenting Practices: What Asian American Families Can Teach Us

## A Strategic Focus for New Research on Parenting

Asian Americans are a strategic focus for new research about the role of culture in parenting and parent-adolescent relationships because:

1. They are among the fastest growing ethnic groups in the United States.
2. In Asian American culture, parents support their children and regulate their behavior, but in very different ways than White American parents.

Compared to White American parents, Asian American parents may appear stricter and lacking in warmth. This strictness reflects Asian immigrant parents' belief that

control is not only necessary, but a key role for parents. To these parents, strictness is an attempt to protect children, not inhibit them. In other words, control and warmth are defined differently for Asian parents, so authoritarian parenting means something different, too.

Also of note is that Asian American ethnic groups often differ in the degree of support and control that parents show. For example, Chinese and Filipino Americans are the two largest Asian American subgroups in the United States. Although they share an Asian cultural origin, they have very distinct identities and histories. As a result, their family life seems similar in some ways but different in others (see "Characteristics of Chinese and Filipino American Culture and Families").



## Characteristics of Chinese and Filipino American Culture and Families

### C U L T U R A L I N F L U E N C E S

Chinese culture is largely influenced by Confucian philosophy. This philosophy emphasizes respect for authority, devotion to parents, emotional restraint, and the importance of education:

- Chinese parenting practices are based on the concepts of *chiao shun* (to train) and *guan* (to govern and to love).
- Parents who want to train their children are very involved in their children's lives; they show high levels of concern for them.
- For Chinese Americans, parenting becomes more difficult in the years following immigration. Physical discipline and other practices typical in China are less accepted in the United States.

Filipino Americans have a long history of Catholic and Spanish influence, followed by U.S. occupation or colonization until the 1970s:

- As a result, Filipino Americans tend to be based more on equality than hierarchy. Family culture allows for affection and closeness, and parents act as protectors of children, particularly daughters.
- Filipino American family relationships are interdependent, and family members depend upon each other for support.
- These relationships are based on the concept of *utang ng loob* (reciprocal relationships). This is a debt of gratitude you have for others. It is often not clear when a debt has been fully paid, so the relationship is ongoing.

### P A R E N T I N G / F A M I L Y P R A C T I C E S

Expectations for Chinese American children are high:

- Adolescents are responsible for many family functions, including caring for siblings and family members, cleaning the home, and cooking meals.
- A child's duty to the family is an accepted norm in Chinese American households.

Chinese parents are not necessarily driven to control their children; instead, they are expected to teach their children how to maintain harmony with others.

- For example, emotional expression is considered harmful to one's health and relationships, and children are encouraged to avoid it.
- Such practices create the context for "saving face." This value or behavior is related to shame because it rewards conformity to society's expectations for propriety and harmony.

Filipino American children feel strong obligations to support the family:

- They provide daily help to maintain the household and take care of siblings.
- Both husband and wife share financial and family decision-making.
- Like Chinese Americans, Filipino American women are the primary caretakers of children.

Families also use *hiya*, which refers to "shame" or "sense of propriety," as a means of creating conformity.

- *Hiya* occurs when one fails to meet expectations or acts in ways that meet with disapproval from family members or others.
- Parents also teach *pakikisama*. This refers to getting along with others—even if it conflicts with one's own desires—to create group harmony.

## Cultural Differences in What Defines “Good” Parenting

A group of researchers looked at whether Western parenting practices were valued in similar ways in Asian American cultures. The purpose was to understand whether White and Asian Americans had different understandings of what parental support and control mean. They asked three broad questions:

### 1. Do support and control mean the same thing for different cultural groups?

The researchers examined survey questions about support and control using data from a large national study (the *National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health*). White, Chinese, and Filipino American youth reported on closeness to their parents and freedom from parents to make decisions. Did support and control mean the same things for White and Asian American adolescents? White and Filipino American youth had very similar responses to the questions; Chinese American youth’s responses were often very different. These differences suggest that Chinese American youth think of support and control differently than White or Filipino Americans.

### 2. Does parental sacrifice mean the same thing as parental support for Asian youth?

In Asian cultures, parents often show their love for children through “instrumental” support; that is, they make sacrifices. For example, many immigrant parents left their home country where they had higher paying jobs for better opportunities in the United States. They hope to increase educational chances and upward movement for their children. They not only make sure their children’s daily needs are met, but they provide resources to ensure their children succeed in school. Using data from a survey study of more than 900 high school students, the researchers compared Filipino and Chinese American adolescents. Both groups reported that parents showed acceptance and care through instrumental support rather than verbal expressions (e.g., “I love you”). In other words, parental sacrifice was central to what parental support meant to them.

### 3. How do Chinese and Filipino youth define what parental support and control mean?

In a focus group study, 40 Chinese and Filipino adolescents were asked what a good relationship with their parents meant to them. Many youth said they “just knew” that parents care from the things their parents did. This finding shows that less obvious behaviors may be central to their



understanding of good relationships and parental support. In addition, there were several other key findings:

- Many Asian girls struggled with the conflict between U.S. images of mother-daughter closeness and Asian cultural values of respect for authority.
- For Chinese American boys, fathers were providers, authority figures, and role models. For Chinese American girls, closeness and affection were not realistic between fathers and daughters; many felt they had to keep secrets from their immigrant fathers to protect them.
- In contrast, for Filipino Americans, boys described fathers as friends as well as providers; girls described fathers as affectionate and felt that fathers make an effort to talk with them.
- Both groups of boys described their mothers’ instrumental activities such as cooking and housework as showing care. But Filipino American boys also described maternal support as including trust and affection.
- For Chinese American girls, relationships with mothers were based on respect and honor for elders, and obligation to family. Filipinas consistently described their mother’s caring behavior as strict; to reduce that strictness, they spoke about needing to develop trust with their mothers by being open.

*“Our research is not suggesting that somehow Asian American parenting is radically different from White American parents,” says Dr. Stephen T. Russell, Fitch Nesbitt Endowed Chair, director of the Frances McClelland Institute for Children, Youth and Families at The University of Arizona, and the lead author of the book. “We’re trying to show that parenting that leads to optimal development for adolescents can differ by culture in important ways.”*

## Implications of Findings

1. Professionals who work with Asian youth need to be sensitive to cultural differences in parents’ behaviors and expectations. How Asian parents support and monitor their children may differ from White parents because those concepts mean different things to them. For example, Chinese American adolescents report lower parental warmth perhaps because their parents show “care” differently than Western parents.
2. When studying parenting practices, other factors besides warmth and control are important to consider, such as parental sacrifice. Parents in most cultures make sacrifices for their children, yet this dimension is not highlighted in studies of White families. Yet in Asian American cultures, both parents and children highly value instrumental support; that is, meeting children’s daily needs and helping them succeed in school.
3. Ethnic minority children actively deal with and interact with multiple cultures. They could be taught how to manage dual contexts effectively

by understanding both ethnic and dominant cultural norms of parenting.

4. Knowing cultural differences in parenting styles is crucial for policy makers. What we expect of families and the policies we create for them may not fit well with ethnic minority populations whose parenting styles differ from the dominant model.

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THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA



Frances  
McClelland Institute  
Children, Youth, and Families

P.O. Box 210078 • Tucson, AZ 85721-0078

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