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• What Children Need  
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• Coming to America—Asian Fathers Cross Cultures  
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Web Sites Link Families to Resources

www.smartfamilies.com

Smartfamilies.com provides a library of all the articles from their past magazines, dealing with family issues and advice for family life, parenting, grandparenting, and more. A search engine to find articles and books by topic or title is also available. Here is a brief list of some of the articles that smartfamilies.com provides access to:

- Heroes at Home
- How to Trust Your Teenager
- Questions from Dad
- Loving a Kid at College
- Making Allowances
- Your Child Can Stop a Molester
- Application to Date My Daughter
- Making Shared Custody Work
- Is Control the Goal?
- Raising Special Kids
- Love the One You’re With
- 101 Ways Husbands Say ‘I Love You’

This site also supplies information on how and where to sign up for phone classes that will benefit your family life. Some of the topics of these classes are parenting kids of all ages, jumpstarting marital intimacy, keeping your family out of debt, minimizing anger in the family, fathering, and more. The benefit of phone classes is that they fit into your busy life at your convenience.

Smartfamilies.com has a bookstore of family-help books, videos, and kits. Some of the book titles are as follows:

- The Smart Family Kit
- Power Drives for Kids
- The Complete Smart Mom’s Toolkit
- Kicking Your Kid Out of the Nest
- Raising Money-Wise Kids
- Raising Self-Reliant Children
  in a Self-Indulgent World
- Born to Fly book and kit
- Ready for Responsibility

A search engine for family-help books is also available.

A tour of the Family University is provided online. Additionally, a family chat room is under construction and will soon be open for use.

marriageandfamilies.byedu.edu

The online version of Marriage & Families is undergoing a number of improvements, including a searchable index and links to related articles and resources.

In addition, visitors to our website are able to sign up for their free subscriptions.
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Parenting can be presented as a three-dimensional activity. Research on adolescence suggests that the ideal environment of invitation and influence is created when parents are high on nurturance (rather than being distant, alien or aloof, hostile, or resentful), moderate on setting limits and having rules, and high on reasoning with adolescents (rather than being dictatorial or command oriented) (Jaffe, 1998). So when you as a three-dimensional parent have been those three things... and... nothing seems to "work," the question quickly arises, What now? Even when it seems we have done everything, there is reason for hope that something can be done.

One way to think about this task is to ask, "How do we parent difficult adolescents?" To ask that question may be a clue to the starting point of our problems. Think back to the last time someone assumed something about you or labeled you. It could have been at the office, where you overheard a group of employees referring to you as old "talks a lot," or as "all speed and no direction," or as "knows so much he doesn't know what he doesn't know." You probably didn't think the label fit, and were convinced that those describing you had just revealed themselves as having no insight—and being impudent and unteachable at that. Stephen R. Covey has popularized an idea from C. Terry Warner: To see others as the problem is the problem. That may be overstating the truth some, given that even if we were to cease seeing our teenagers—or coworkers in the office—as the problem, there may still be a problem. But the important point of the Warner-Covey idea is that until we see others in a non-labeling, non-accusatory way, we cannot see the truth about them, and thus we really don't see the starting point for solutions to real problems. If, for example, I decide in advance that you are to blame for something, I am not granting the possibility that someone else may be responsible for the problem. If you are already my chosen target, then I will see in you and in the situation whatever confirms my decision about you.
Thus, once I see you as difficult, or as having no direction, or as being the kind of person who isn't aware of his or her own ignorance, I am looking for proof of that position, not for facts.

Adolescents, in our culture, suffer from preconceived notions regarding what "they" (as a category of persons) are like. Of course, all prejudices may be grounded in real possibilities. It is just that when we proceed from prejudice, we generalize a possibility into a total reality. We would help ourselves by suspending labels in favor of imagining possibilities.

For example, when my associates and I took a character and citizenship education curriculum into the public schools, we were reminded by some professionals that "adolescents only live in the present moment. They are not future oriented." This idea, if absolutely correct, meant we were a bit naïve in trying to teach our curriculum. Two ideas from our curriculum are illustrative:

1. Every act in the present moment is an act for or against the next generation.

2. Consider that your acts in the present moment either enhance or reduce the likelihood of a quality future.

Both these ideas assume a human sensibility of being able to imagine the future. They suggest that teenagers can benefit from doing more than seeing only the present moment. If adolescents are somehow "hard-wired" to be insulated from considering the future, our work would have been in vain. We were about to teach ideas that would probably fail, given "how teenagers are."

What we found, though, was that when we gave adolescents a chance to consider the future—to gauge their current actions by considering future consequences, many of them did just that. Many were willing to consider the consequences of their educational pursuits, their financial decisions, their ways of behaving in relationships. From our work with high school students, we discovered the better truth to tell about adolescents is that if you give them a chance to imagine the future, many do so with insight and understanding. (Wallace & Olson, 1984).

The point is that if we, as parents, label our children, in advance, according to "how teenagers are," then in our subsequent involvement with them, we eclipse certain possibilities of how we might invite and entice them to do good, to live responsibly, to make constructive, rather than destructive choices. At the least, in times of parent-adolescent conflict, we must acknowledge that our children may behave badly, but that their destructive approach to life, while absolutely real, is also absolutely unnecessary. That is, their destructiveness is not because "that's just the way they are—teenagers"—but because they are being destructive, or contentious, or arrogant. There is even the painful possibility that all those attitudes are mirrors of how we have sometimes been. We must assume they (and we) can be otherwise. If we do not do that, we just become part of the problem by assuming "that's just the way they are," and we begin to be illustrations of prejudice and labeling, all the while feeling we are justified and doing the best we can do in a bad situation.
Parents sometimes long to be more skilled than they know how to be. They sometimes think if they were better at a given technique, they could turn their children’s lives around. But there is something more fundamental than technique. It is the first task. It involves the quality of the relationship itself, and that cannot be grounded in mere technique or strategy, but in the heart. This is another way of asking parents to consider their ways regarding how they see and respond to their children. Imagine this scenario:

After a verbal fight with his parents, Nick Kanell withdraws $400.00 from his savings account, buys a nationwide go-anywhere bus pass, and hits the road. When Nick does not show up at dinner, his parents assume he is doing what he has done before—retreated to the house of one of his friends. By the second evening, Nick’s parents call the typical places he has “hidden” before, and discover those friends and their parents have not seen Nick for several days. Now the Kanells are worried. They discover, through their regular on-line banking routine, that Nick has taken money from his savings account on which they are co-signers. At dinner, the parents decide that if Nick wants to run away, FINE! Maybe facing the harsh world alone will teach him something. But that night, unbeknownst to each other, both Mr. and Mrs. Kanell toss and turn. At some point in the night, they sense they should do something.

The next morning at breakfast, the Kanells admit to each other that they have been wrong and that they both feel they must file a missing person’s report on Nick. As they are about to go to the police station, they hear a noise in the garage. Mr. Kanell opens the door to the garage and steps out onto the cement step. Sitting on his backpack is Nick, who looks up sullenly at his father from underneath unkempt hair.

Nick had made the mistake of not boarding an express bus, and as a result had endured a journey where the bus got off the freeway for every little town, stopping about every 45 minutes. After ten or eleven hours of this, he had just stayed at the café in wherever and did not re-board the bus. It is true he at first didn’t care where the bus took him, but it also became true for him that he didn’t know where he was going or what he would do when he got there. He decided, therefore, to hop the next bus going back toward home. His attitude was not one of defeat, but of defiance. During the return journey, he replayed in his mind all the times when his parents had been unfair, condescending, dictatorial, critical, nagging, and self-righteous. He was preparing his ammunition for the confrontational reunion. Now, as he looked up at his father’s frame on the garage step, he could predict exactly what his dad was going to say. “I suppose you realize you’ve worried your mother

[The parents] may not have been particularly skillful, but once they turned their hearts to Nick, the quality of their interaction with him changed.
sick!” Nick always resented that his dad spoke for and defined his mother’s feelings in advance—twisting the knife of guilt in Nick’s stomach. Nick knew his mother would appear on the step at any moment, and become nauseatingly protective. “Oh, poor baby, are you all right?” uttered in a plaintive, wailing tone like some amateur soprano on a hunt for the right note. Nick had them all figured out, all labeled.

Nick was brought back to reality by his father speaking unpredictable words: “Oh, good, Nick, you got here just in time. The clam chowder is just about ready.” Nick now wonders what kind of gimmick this is. What?—no lecture, no reminder that he has again demonstrated he just can’t be trusted? What is this? Nick fires a verbal salvo, “Okay, dad, what are you trying to pull?” His father drops his eyes to the ground, shifts his weight from side to side for a few moments, and, with his hands in his pockets, stutters, “Okay, you’ve got me. The truth is, we haven’t even opened the clam chowder yet.” This was becoming a conversation from the Twilight Zone. Nick couldn’t wrap his mind around it. Something was fishy—and it wasn’t that clam chowder was his favorite soup. His mother appears on the step. “Well, Nick, your father and I have been worried and we were crazy enough to think that if we put on some chowder, you would smell it and be willing to come home.” At that moment, the thought that flashed through Nick’s mind was, “How do you fight with these people?” Nick goes into the house, his mother asks him to open a can of clam chowder, and they sit down to talk.

This may sound like a bizarre incident. Perhaps so. But it is characterized by parents giving up the labels they had attached to their son. The parents have abandoned the patterned, predictable, accusatory, all-knowing responses to their son’s recurring irresponsibility and belligerence. They did not change in order to change their son. Their change was not just a new way to manipulate. They had become consumed by genuine concern. Upon Nick’s return, they did not jettison their compassion and return to a relentless accusatory way of being (“All right, young man, where have you been! How dare you worry us this way . . . etc., etc.”). Rather, they told the truth in love. The researchers would say they were nurturant rather than hostile or distant. Because the parents had transformed their attitude toward Nick, they could say and do the surprising things they did.

This story was told me by Nick (not his real name). Remember, he was well-prepared for another typical confrontation with his parents. He had stockpiled his verbal ammunition and was ready for another firefight. He was experienced. He usually won. The signs of his past victories were usually his father’s anger and his mother’s sobs and tears. Those triumphs, by the way, always had been accompanied by a hollow feeling in Nick, but he had learned to camouflage all external signs of emptiness, even from himself.

One of the casualties of Nick’s parents’ change of heart was that they had also given up the labels of Nick they had come to use in their defensive ness against him. Now they had the freedom to express concern, to apologize for their role in the problems that had characterized their relationship these long, past months. As Nick noted already, he was so surprised by their greeting that what he was prepared for turned into a reality he was unprepared for. Remember Nick’s thought: “How do you fight with these people?” Indeed. His ammunition was worthless. Unusable. Ineffective.

I do not know additional details. I suspect they really did sit down to hastily prepared clam chowder at 10:30 A.M. I do not have the parents’ report of this incident. I am guessing that the incident in the garage was not the end of their relationship problems with Nick. But I believe it was the beginning of their solutions. My best evidence is that as Nick told me the story (at least three years after the fact), he was without bitterness or self-justification. He told me the story to illustrate, not what his parents had done to him, but how he had used their resentful, accusing manner to justify himself. He had to give up his labels as much as they had to give up theirs. It is true that their compassion and concern upon his return was a powerful invitation to see them in a new way. They may not have been particularly skillful, but once they turned their hearts to Nick, the quality of their interaction with him changed.
This is what it means to be nurturant rather than hostile. It is possible for parents to be so. To be compassionate is no guarantee that a belligerent son will change his attitude. Be that as it may, being nurturant is still the first and best invitation to someone else to change. It is in nurturant that we no longer are seeking to protect our image, justify ourselves, or “make them see” what we “know” is best for them. It is the first step any parent can and must take if they wish to rebuild a relationship with a rebellious teenager—who really isn’t “just that way,” however real the consequences of such resentments may be. To paraphrase Vaclav Havel: “When a person tries to act in accordance with his conscience, when he is compassionate, and tells the truth in love, even when being compassionate is degraded, it won’t necessarily lead anywhere, but it might. There’s one thing, however, that will never lead anywhere, and that is speculating that such behavior will lead somewhere” (Havel, 1990, xvi). (I presented that as a paraphrase of Havel, because he was speaking of being a citizen of conscience in a society that punished one for being conscientious. He spoke it at a press conference after the fall of the Iron Curtain, which meant he was no longer a political prisoner in his native land of Czechoslovakia.)

The parenting version of that thought is that, when we love our children, when we ache regarding their rebellions or how they place themselves in jeopardy physically, morally, or legally, we can simultaneously hold to a nurturing spirit and to the limits we have set that we believe will save them. Whether our children accept our nurturance or spit on it, it is never a reason to abandon our efforts. Being compassionate is probably a matter of conscience—a matter of being true to our moral sense regarding how to treat others. It is requisite that we stay on compassionate ground, even when our children, knowingly or as clever destructors, provoke us to abandon our compassion and respond to them in resentment. When we do respond in resentment (when we abandon our nurturant way of being), we usually come across exactly as they are accusing us—in a dictatorial, morally superior, resentful manner.

It may be that the difference between being demeaning or emotionally distant is not so much a lack of skill as it is an abandoning of our deepest feelings of love for a son or daughter who, confronted by our nurturance, may give up their huffy impatience with us. It is unlikely, if we are doing to them what they, in their rebellion, are doing to us, that they will do anything other than retreat more deeply into their own resentments and justifications. If all we ever do in response to those children we are afraid we are losing is be compassionate, telling the truth in love, we are doing the most important thing, we are being the most important kind of person we can be.

By the way, my own take on what Havel meant—by saying that speculating about whether our behavior will lead anywhere won’t lead anywhere—is this: Since both being a citizen and being a compassionate parent are grounded in conscience, they are grounded in our deepest moral feelings. We cannot be manipulative about that. We can only be true to such feelings and learn from how others respond to them. Typically, being true to such feelings includes being committed to and for the other person—aching for their success, often more than they do themselves. But at least we are doing something from which we can learn what else might be right to do, and being self-forgetful about our own image and being concerned for others is a feature of what we are doing.

One of those right things is to consider the spirit and content of the limits we set and the consequences we implement. The setting of limits and consequences is another dimension of parenting research that is relevant for our discussion of how to interact with “difficult” teenagers.

In the research spawned by our character and citizenship curriculum were adolescents’ reports of the discipline they received at home. Students reported parents as either “not strict at all,” as “moderately strict,” or as “extremely strict.” Those students who reported parents as “not strict at all” were twice as likely to participate in premarital sexual relationships as those who reported a moderate amount of rules. The next most “at-risk” category of discipline at home, at least with respect to whether or not the adolescent engaged in self-destructive behaviors, was, “extremely strict.” We did not measure the relationship between nurturance and strictness of discipline. But it appears that parents who are reported to have no rules create, in our relatively permissive
It is requisite that we stay on compassionate ground, even when our children, knowingly or as clever destructors, provoke us to abandon our compassion and respond to them in resentment.

society, the most at-risk atmosphere for adolescent growth and development. Of course, there are two explanations for these results. Since we do not have a context that allows us to unequivocally define a cause, these results could either reflect that adolescent at-risk behaviors are the consequence of parental disciplinary practices, or that parental disciplinary practices are the consequence of adolescent at-risk behaviors. For example, adolescents demonstrate lack of responsibility in honoring parental curfews, completing homework, doing their share of home chores, etc., and so the strictness of the parents follows. Or, extremely restrictive parental rules (and defensive, we-are-always-right attitudes) provoke rebellion in the adolescent. In either event, the best case scenario is that a moderate amount of rules correlates with more responsible behavior than either many or few rules. When moderate rules are linked with a nurturant home atmosphere, the general outcome should be mutually beneficial to parents and adolescents.

The third dimension of parental influence is also likely best carried out in a nurturing environment with a moderate number of rules or principles. It involves reasoning with teenagers rather than being dictatorial. This means examining causes and consequences, principles and practices, logical
starting points and likely outcomes. In fact, the more a parent reasons with a teenager about such things as responsibilities and rules, the more likely the discussions will include the "why" of parental involvement in their lives—and the more likely the teenager will respect and be responsive to the rules.

Reasoning is a means of showing the value of being rational, of showing how certain decisions lead to certain consequences, or of discussing why some ways of living are inherently destructive. The big picture of reasoning, however, is as a means of examining the meaning of human experience. Humans are meaning-makers. Adolescents are searching for meaning—from the specifics of an incident at school to the more general questions about the purpose of life. This search for meaning may include questions regarding relevance, understanding, belonging, success, value, worth, and competence. Parents who offer starting points of meaning are doing more than helping students understand the why of family boundaries, consequences, chores, homework, helping others, or showing respect to teachers and grandmother. These specific contexts contribute to a deeper sense of what it means to be human, what it means to be a family member, and what it means to live a life of high quality. It also places the parent as a major influence regarding how a teenager chooses to make his or her way in the world. Surveys of teenagers regarding who influences them the most usually produce parents as the prime influence, followed closely by peer groups. Parents who reason about the value of school, of giving your best, are showing an interest in the well-being and the future of their children. Parents who give up on being of influence could be underestimating the possibilities. For example, in our citizenship work in the public schools, parental involvement in school performance turned out to be a major influence on some kinds of adolescent decision-making. Teenagers who reported parents as very interested in their grades or in their personal achievements were twice as likely to report sexual abstinence as those students who say that parents do not feel grades or achievements are important. Of course, a teenager who is already rebellious may see discussions about grades as another form of parental nagging and meddling. Just because a teenager may resent your inquiries regarding their school performance, however, does not disqualify parental attempts as having value. Of course, to be involved in a nurturant way, while operating consistently on correct principles (and rules as necessary), helps color parental reasoning regarding issues of decisions such as responsible school behavior.

Reasoning about responsible behavior often can include questions that invite the teen to consider future consequences of current choices. Looking
at the future is not the only way to reason about issues, but it is a typical and usually beneficial activity. Imagine an issue that is important to you, but seems to be resisted by your son or daughter. Consider asking them one or two of the following questions:
1. I know you think I am a nag about this, so consider this possibility: If I weren’t here to bug you about it, what would be the consequence to you of whatever choice you make?
2. If your younger sister started doing what you are now doing, how would that help or hinder her future?
3. If your best friend asked you to consider what I am asking you to consider, how would you answer him?
4. You may think I am being relentless about this because I want to be the enemy, but pretend for a minute I am interested in you having a quality future. How would you then explain my position?
5. I don’t know all the good and bad consequences of this decision you are considering, but how have you thought it out? What have you imagined about the outcomes so far?
6. What does taking this path mean to you? Explain it to me as best you can.

These questions are simply meant to be conversation starters, in a context of care and concern, where people can reasonably consider reasons for a given choice, action, decision, or direction. They are invitations, not to be hostile or defensive, but to come and reason together. If the response to such questions is still resentment and rebellion, then perhaps the best response is to declare your sorrow and retreat for the moment: “Chad, I think you see me as the enemy on this, and I don’t know what to do about that. I just see some threats on your horizon and would like to know if you see them too, or if you think I am just off base.” If that comment brings a non-defensive response (“I do see risk here, Dad, but I think you don’t have enough confidence in my good sense.”), then the best follow-up is to seek more information: “O.K. I may be blind to how you are thinking about it. Tell me about the risks you see.” If that fosters additional disclosure (“Well, Dad, there is no sure thing here, but I believe I can handle it”), then it might be appropriate to keep going: “Tell me what your good sense is helping you make of that. You have spent more time thinking about it than I have.”

These are merely examples of non-defensive starting points for considering how and whether anyone has reasoned about the causes and consequences of some act. Notice that humility and meekness (but not indulgence or weakness) are features of being non-defensive. These parents are no longer focused on their image, on the idea of “being perfect,” but on the idea of giving their best, and of seeking to understand. They are self-forgetful in their endeavors in behalf of their children.

A young man had once run away from home. The father and this 16-year-old son had quarreled over the boy’s quitting high school. The father had stressed the value and necessity of school, but to no avail. After a week or so, the father appeared on the doorstep of the family who was harboring his son. The mother in that home was surprised to see the boy’s father, and at first mumbled a bit, pondering whether to deny that the boy was there. The father made it easy: “Look, I know Roy is here. I just want to talk to him.” Roy came out on the porch. “How are things?” his dad asked. “Okay.” His father sat down and, after a pause, said, “I have been wondering how you’ve been doing, and I’ve been doing some thinking. I want to make something clear, and I want to understand how you feel about what I am going to say.” The boy only nodded. Dad continued: “I still believe school is the best thing for you. It is best for your future. It keeps doors of opportunity open. BUT... If you still would rather go to work than go back to school, I will help you get the best job we can find. If you ever want to come back, you are welcome at home. If you were to come back home and go back to school, then the rules would be the same—do your part with the chores, do homework before play, honor the no drinking and no drugs rules, and be home by curfew. If you were to come back home and get a full-time job, then you would pay rent, do your own laundry, keep your portion of the house clean, and honor the curfew and no drinking/no drugs rules. If that continues until you are eighteen, then we can talk
again about the conditions of you being at home. I want a home where your younger brothers and sisters understand that we work together to make life work. Their job is to be in school, give their best, and help make the home a comfortable, clean place to be. I expect that of you, too, unless you want to go to work. Then your job is not school, but your job. And if you are employed, we would replace general chores with rent.*

Such a declaration from a father may seem one-sided. Perhaps so. But it is nurturing, non-defensive, affirming of rules, explaining of reasons, and offering a possibility. It implicitly says to the boy, “You matter to me—even though we disagree.” It is also an offer for the boy to be reasonable and disclosing, but is not demanding of either. In fact, in the actual occurrence of this father’s visit, the boy did not take the father up on the invitation to return and allow his father to help in school or help him find a job. But the father did a right thing. He, like all of us, had no guarantee of the outcome of his offer. But when we believe something is right to do, we must do it, irrespective of the outcome. We long for and pray for an outcome that will turn our children to responsible, wise, non-rebellious decisions, but we cannot dictate those outcomes.

A widow discovered two of her children had gotten involved in drugs. After minimal interventions by her and brushes with the juvenile justice system, the mother pondered what would be right to do. She went to the boys and explained that she had searched the country for the best treatment programs and, given that they were still legal minors, she had the authority to require them to go there and “get clean.” She indicated that she only had enough money for a certain number of months for them to be there. If they came out free of the habit, they would have a new starting point. If they went back to drugs, she could no longer help them financially. She left the two in the facility with the older boy pleading with her not to leave him there. She was compassionately firm—even in sorrow that she would be separated from them. She visited regularly. The first sign of getting anywhere at all with the harder, older boy was when, two months later, he apologized to her for being the one who had introduced his younger brother to drug use. Acknowledging his role in undermining his brother’s well-being was a small affirmation of her hope. Up to that point, she had been the target of the older boy’s resentment and bitterness. His humility about fostering his younger brother’s destruction could have been feigned. In this case, it was not. By the end of the treatment period she had funds for, the mother reported that her boys returned clean. As to the permanence of their change, “only time will tell.” But we do what we do as parents because we believe we should do what can be done. Of course, we pray the change will be permanent. But that eventuality is in the hands of the adolescents themselves. Doing what is right and possible to invite them to change is in our hands.

Given the ideas of being nurturing, moderate in rules, and reasoning as parents, so what? How are we to proceed when our children seem to run the other way or in other ways reject our love, our principles, our rationality? It is clear that when we abandon nurturance in favor of resentment, hostility, or aloofness, we remove ourselves from being a positive influence. It is typical that if we establish many, many rules about everyday life instead of articulate a few principles that guide family relationships, we can provoke resistance and rebellion. And, if we choose to be dictators rather than “reasoners,” we similarly push our adolescents away from us at the very time they are reasoning extensively about what is meaningful about life and about their own place in the world. The choice of whether we will be an inviting influence in the lives of our teenagers is ours. The choice of whether they will respond to our invitations is theirs. We have no justification in giving up just because they happen to be running the other way. We continue to invite and entice to do good by being nurturing, principled, and reasonable. We engage in doing small things with the hope that something great—the saving of our children—will be the outcome. Our lot and obligation is to never give up.

How might we summarize the possibilities, then, of how to respond to the difficulties teenagers help create for themselves and for our families?

1. When confronted by difficulties with our youth, avoid diagnosing or labeling them in ways that shut off our own responsible attempts to
understand their world and invite them back to the fold. We give up our pre-conceived labels and look for possibilities.

2. Ultimately, influence with the rebellious or resistant rests in the relationship, not in the skills or techniques we invoke. Nurturance, principles, and reasoning are more fundamental to influence than skills or techniques. This is because if we implement whatever skills or techniques we have while being resentful, extremely rule-oriented, or dictatorial, we have become part of the problem. (Incidentally, when we are part of the problem, we will often deny it or be blind to the possibility that our hearts are not right. Tell-tale signs of our being blind to our role in the problem are in whether we are being defensive or constantly justifying ourselves.)

3. Our purpose or meaning for engaging teens is because we are committed to their best interests, and not to our own image or authority. (Our approach for adolescents is most effective when we are in it for them instead of for us.)

4. The research dimensions of parental influence haven't changed in decades. We favor nurturance over resentment or aloofness, being principle-centered over rule-driven, being rational and reasoning over being dictatorial.

5. Being an example means to strive in all humility and honesty, and not to preserve some false notions of perfection and image.

6. We have no guarantees, no warranties regarding how adolescents will respond, and yet we have confidence our influence can be responded to and that resentments can be given up. 

Terrance D. Olson is a professor of Marriage, Family, and Human Development in the School of Family Life at Brigham Young University. He has published extensively on how the moral and ethical domain is related to quality family relationships. He developed a high school character and citizenship curriculum used in federal efforts to reduce self-destructive choices in adolescents. Terry and Karen have raised six children.

References


We engage in doing small things with the hope that something great—the saving of our children—will be the outcome. Our lot and obligation is to never give up.
Thoughts and Reflections of Craig H. Hart

From the time he was a university student—taking a child development class to learn something about the baby he and his wife, Kerstine, had just had—until now, Professor Craig H. Hart has been studying children, parents, and families from both an academic and a personal perspective. His research has included time spent systematically observing children interact with peers on numerous playgrounds, including the BYU Child and Family Studies Laboratory (a preschool). He has published numerous studies from parent-child interaction data gathered in China, Russia, Australia, Japan, and various parts of the United States. An internationally recognized scholar and the father of four children, Professor Hart is chair of Marriage, Family, and Human Development at Brigham Young University. Marriage & Families recently discussed parenting and families with Professor Hart, from which the following observations are drawn. (The next issue of Marriage & Families will feature the second part of this discussion, with a particular emphasis on issues of discipline and schooling.)

There is a myth prevalent among some scholars that parents don’t matter. The past 24 years of study and observation have convinced me otherwise. As one example, a growing body of scientific evidence indicates that children’s success or failure in life can often be traced to how well they get along with peers—and that parents can provide the foundation for how well children adjust to their peer groups in ways that no one else can. (I appreciated the opportunity of discussing research along this line that debunks the myth that parents don’t matter in the August 2000 Marriage & Families [available online at marriageandfamilies.byu.edu].)

Peer group behavior that stems, in part, from the quality of parenting that children receive is important for life-long adjustment.1 Children who are more socially competent are more capable of regulating their impulses and emotions. They tend to be more friendly and cooperative, and they are more adept at joining in a group of their peers. To illustrate, several years ago, we were observing children at the Louisiana State University Child Development Laboratory, and we noticed a child who was carefully watching other children play with a farm set. After a few moments, he started playing with a wooden dowel next to this group. When there was a break in the action, this child started marching the wooden dowel across the floor toward the group, telling them, “This is Farmer
Jones,” and asking them, “Which tractor would you like him to drive?” He was immediately accepted into the ongoing play.

On the same day, we observed another less socially competent child trying to gain entry into this same group. He did so by calling attention to himself by saying irrelevant things like, “Hey, I’m wearing a black shirt today.” He even tried to get the children to do something else after telling them that he didn’t like playing with farm toys. The peer group basically ignored him.

Not surprisingly, our studies on early peer interaction show that a number of family factors contribute to the development of children’s social skills—or to the lack thereof. Some of these factors include the type of parenting children receive, the level of marital satisfaction in the home, and the nature of sibling relationships. For example, we recently completed a study in Russia showing that physical and relational aggression directed toward peers at school occurred less frequently when fathers were more patient, responsive, and playful, and when mothers were less coercive in their interactions with their children. Further, when low marital conflict was combined with measures of positive parenting in our statistical model, even less aggressive behavior was observed in the peer group at school.

Differing Temperaments

There are very clear differences in children’s behavioral styles that can be observed beginning in early childhood. Various studies have identified a multitude of differing temperament types. From that, some researchers have boiled the types down into three broad classifications that I think are very descriptive. First, there is the category of “reactivity-negative emotionality,” which is manifest as irritability, anger, inflexibility, and frequent distress. Second, there is “self-regulation,” which is seen in emotional control, low distractibility, and persistence in completing tasks. Third, there is "approach-inhibition," which involves an inclination to approach new situations and people or to be wary and withdrawn.

In addition, genetic predispositions can create differences in children within the same family, as most every parent has experienced. For example, some children are more impulsive and more inclined to thrill-seeking than others, which means parents have to work harder to help them discover ways to manage their impulsiveness. That can be challenging to those parents who believe their children should all be alike, but researchers have now identified an actual genetic marker—DRD4—that has been modestly associated with impulsive, novelty-seeking behavior. However, individuals can choose to override these types of biological proclivities, if they are willing to work at it. And, recent research has demonstrated that appropriate parenting can help diminish negative predispositions and enhance child characteristics that are less than complete.2

The relevance of this research to day-to-day parenting involves recognizing that children reared in the same home will likely display different interests, personalities, and behavior because of unique biological blueprints provided by parents, coupled with the predispositions, talents, and desires children bring into this world with them. I believe that some of these
characteristics stem from spiritual predispositions. God referred to Cain, for example, as "the father of lies, . . . for thou was also [a liar] before the world (Moses 5:24). Alternatively, there were many "noble and great ones" who "were good" from before the world (Abr. 3:22-23). Research is uncovering how different child characteristics lend themselves to parents reacting differently to each child. In fact, studies are now showing how parent-child interactions are dynamic and transactional in nature, with parents and children influencing each other in myriads of ways across development.

As parents work to adapt to the individual nature of each of their children, it would be well to remember the words of Brigham Young, who encouraged parents to "study their [children's] dispositions and their temperaments and deal with them accordingly." Another leader of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Neal A. Maxwell said, "Of course our genes, circumstances, and environments matter very much, and they shape us significantly. Yet there remains an inner zone in which we are sovereign unless we abdicate. In this zone lies the essence of our individuality and our personal accountability."

How People Parent

Decades ago, researcher Diana Baumrind identified three distinct styles of parenting that are still applicable in our scientific study of parenting today:

- Coercive
- Permissive
- Authoritative

Most people can readily identify the styles of coercive and permissive parenting, but authoritative parenting is a term that may not be familiar to some. And yet for most children, parents who adapt a carefully tailored balance of three authoritative parenting principles—what I call love, limits, and latitude—can teach them correct behavior and help them develop sound social skills.

Now, authoritative parenting should not be confused with
authoritarian—or coercive—parenting. Authoritarian parenting denotes spanking, yelling, withdrawing love, guilt tripping, and other arbitrary forms of punishment meted out in response to a child's behavior, often in the heat of the moment. It is not a parenting style that focuses on teaching and preparing children. The focus, instead, is on regulation and control strategies that are often manifest in harsh and punitive ways. Although these may result in immediate compliance, research indicates that they often result in more defiance and child emotional and behavioral problems later on, particularly for children with biological proclivities towards anxiety and hostility. Some of my colleagues in the School of Family Life have recently published studies examining parental overcontrol, another form of coercion that is manifest in directive, overprotective parenting. This form of parenting appears to lend itself to children with socially inhibited temperaments becoming even more withdrawn from peers.

With authoritative parenting, there is still regulation and the parent is still the authority. But this style of parenting grows out of what the adolescent research literature suggests as the three things that we are finding younger children basically need as well: an emotional connection with parents (love), regulation (limits), and autonomy (latitude). The major advantage of authoritative parenting is that it is adaptable to each child's unique strengths and weaknesses. It is not prescriptive. Children, for example, may require heavier doses of limit setting in some areas and more latitude in others, depending on their temperaments, developmental stages, and child-rearing circumstances.

This type of parenting fosters a positive emotional connection with children, provides for regulation that places fair and consistent limits on behavior, and allows for reasonable autonomy in decision making. Authoritative parenting has been documented to create a positive emotional climate that helps children be more open to parental input and direction. Such children are better adjusted to school, less aggressive and delinquent, less likely to abuse drugs, more friendly and accepted by peers, more capable of moral reasoning, and more self-controlled.

Connecting with Your Kids

Children need a healthy dose of love from and connection with parents and other family members who care about them. Expressing that love and finding those ways to connect is the foundation of authoritative parenting. Parents lovingly connect with their children by showing affection, praising what they do, reading to them, and assuring them of the relationship during moments of correction. All of this, obviously, takes energy, inspiration, dedication, and, above all, time.

Parents should learn to be appropriately playful with their children. That requires parents to recognize the social cues of their children and to follow the lead of the children as they play. I used to play "run around the shed" with my boys when they were young, where we'd run around one way and meet in the middle and scare each other, and then run around the other way. But there comes a point when a parent has to realize that children are being over-stimulated and the activity needs to be toned down, or perhaps the children have outgrown a favorite activity. Research suggests that parents who model appropriate "social cue reading" in playful interactions and conversations have children who are more likely to accurately read their social environments and perform favorably in interactions with peers.
Parents should also help their children with homework, show an interest in their activities, and attend their sporting and musical events. Those kinds of things may seem obvious to some, but they are very important. Gordon B. Hinckley spoke volumes in these few words of counsel to parents: “Be kind to your children. Be companionable with them.” On another occasion he stated, “Every child is entitled to grow up in a home where there is warm and secure companionship, where there is love in the family relationship, where appreciation for one another is taught and exemplified.”

There are people who say you really shouldn’t be friends with your children—that you’re the parent! Keep in mind Ezra Taft Benson’s admonition for parents to “be a real friend to your children.” We know from research that children who have good relationships with their fathers and their mothers—which involves parents responding promptly and appropriately to their cues—are more secure in their attachments with their parents. And, because they have that secure base to work from, they’re usually better adjusted in their peer groups. The trick for parents is figuring out how and when to balance connection with responsibilities to be “the parent” in their limit-setting roles.

Helping Children Live with Limits
While love is the foundation of authoritative parenting, children also need appropriate limits. Spencer W. Kimball taught that “setting limits to what a child can do means to that child that you love and respect him.” What is appropriate in setting limits depends on a given child’s disposition and maturity. In that way, parenting is like riding a horse, with some children needing tighter reins and some needing looser. There are children who respond well to limits and those who become defiant. So, knowing when to let up on the reins and when to tighten your grip takes a lot of creativity and inspiration.

Many limits can be implicit. For instance, children who grow up with parents who strive to eat dinner as a family, always wear their seatbelts, and never curse may not need explicit rules about such matters.

When parents do create explicit limits, it helps if they distinguish between mountains and molehills—and not make the number of rules overwhelming. If rollerblading on the new hardwood floors is a mountain (which is understandable), then it’s good to have a rule in place, as well as logical consequences. (I like the idea of “logical conse-
quences” because they help the child to see that the punishment fits the crime, so to speak.) Following through with consequences is important. The child should know that if he skates through the kitchen, the rollerblades are going to be put away for a couple of days, at which point he can try again and see if he can get it right.

Our research shows that it is also important that, when possible, parents provide reasons for rules in advance. If you’re taking young children to the library, let them know before you get there that other people are reading and that they can stay as long as they are quiet and respectful of others. Children will be far more responsive when parents don’t react arbitrarily to their misbehavior. Studies show that this type of predisposing can ward off misbehavior in young children 60 to 70 percent of the time.

For older children, reasoning and reproof are often necessary. However it can come across as preaching and may provoke opposition and testiness. Rather than telling teens what to do, I have personally found that playing a consultant role often works better. Consider saying things like, “I can certainly understand your frustration.” Or, “Given the options we’ve talked about, what do you think you should do?” Or, “What do you want to have happen here?” Or, “I’m confused about why you want to drop Algebra. You seemed so excited about a career in electrical engineering.” These kinds of approaches can often
help teenagers come up with their own solutions in more autonomous ways.

Again, it’s important to remember that every child is different—and will respond differently. One of our teens never required curfews. He knew when he should be home, and he came home. With another one of our teens, we found that curfews mainly aroused resentment and hostility. For a period of time, we found it was better to let him set his own times, which we discovered were generally reasonable. But we also helped him understand that there were three rules when he left the house: He needed to let us know who he was with, where he was going, and when he’d be back. Otherwise, I would go out looking for him. There are other children, of course, who might take advantage of that, and that’s why parents need to enforce boundaries and not become permissive.

Some time ago, we had an instance in our family where one of our children decided to break with family tradition and not do any chores on Saturday. My wife calmly reminded this child that if there was going to be a late night with friends, the chores had to be done first. Ten minutes were provided to allow for some decision-making time, and the stove timer was set. Nine minutes and forty-five seconds later, the vacuum was humming.

Of course, there are instances of misbehavior that require punishment. In all of this, James E. Faust reminds us that “child rearing is so individualistic. Every child is different and unique. What works with one may not work with another. I do not know who is wise enough to say what discipline is too harsh or what is too lenient except the parents of the children themselves, who love them most. It is a matter of prayerful discernment for the parents. Certainly the overarching and underlying principle is that the discipline of children must be motivated more by love than by punishment.”

Allowing for Autonomy

Children are no different from adults in wanting to be involved in making the decisions that affect them. And from the time children are toddlers, parents can let them make reasonable decisions within established boundaries. For example, young children can
help choose what clothes they’ll wear. Older children can have a say in how they accomplish their chores. Teens can be allowed to make decisions about movies and shows they want to watch—as long as they fall within family guidelines. Giving children some say in decision making helps them experience what it’s like to be in the “driver’s seat” and prepares them to make farther-reaching decisions later on in life.

Giving children latitude means negotiating and compromising on rules when appropriate. Some rules can be adjusted under certain conditions. Suppose a family rule is that children can play only after chores are done, but a cousin stops by unexpectedly for a short visit? If the parents won’t budge, they may create a lot of resentment in their children. Instead, the parents and children might decide to consider that day exceptional and work out an alternate plan. Being willing to negotiate with children and compromise when flexibility is possible—and reasonable—gives them more control over their lives and prepares them for real-world negotiation and compromise.

Heber J. Grant, his daughter recalled that “In matters of small importance, father seldom said ‘no’ to us. Consequently, when he did say ‘No,’ we knew he meant it. His training allowed us to make our decisions whenever possible.”

Research backs up the need to allow children latitude. Children who experience an appropriate amount of autonomy tend to be better at sharing power and understanding others’ viewpoints. They have fewer disputes with their parents and are more respectful of adults in general. They better manage their activities. And, in their relationships with peers, they place more emphasis on persuasion and negotiation to get their way.

The “Perfect” Parent

There are no standard, set recipes for being a parent. There are principles, and I think that love, limits, and latitude are solid principles to apply to our parenting. But the strategies that tie in with these are really subject to the inspiration that comes from really studying each individual child’s temperament and determining what will work best for him or her. We have one daughter who used to willingly go to bed when I would say, “Would you like to turn off the light, or would you like Daddy to?” But we also have a daughter who, if I gave her a choice like that, would say, “I don’t want to go to bed.” It helps to realize that raising children is a fluid, dynamic process. What works one week might not work the next. There may be new reasons a misbehavior is occurring. It usually takes time and prayerful inspiration to get to the bottom of a problem to figure out what to try next.

I often joke that I was a much better parent before I had my first child. Authoritative parenting takes time, patience, creativity, faith, and inspiration. And no parent handles every situation perfectly. When we fall short as parents, we need to apologize to our children and try to do better. And despite the challenges, we need to take comfort in knowing that the good things we try to do as parents really do matter.

References
3 Brigham Young (1998), Discourses of Brigham Young, ed. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book), 207.
COMING TO
AMERICA
Asian Fathers Cross Cultures

By David Shwalb, Robert Bubb, Amber Daveline, Catherine Humpherys, Kristin Evans, Melissa Erickson, Aliah Hall, Tamera Hunter, Paula Kilgore, Nathaniel Lemon, Russell MacKay, Rebecca Mathews, Joe Ostenson, Brett A. Wilkey

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The United States of America has been called a "melting pot," settled first by Native Americans and later by a mixture of immigrants from many countries. To this day, each culture brings its own ideas, beliefs, and traditions, which are often misunderstood by those who came before. Yet by examining other cultures, we learn more about our own thoughts, ideals, and values. One important window for cultural understanding is found in examining the roles of parents. 

Even though there are many ideas and beliefs about how to raise children, most people would say that being a good parent is a universal concern. From our own varied experiences, we thought that first-generation immigrants to the United States might be especially sensitized to the cultural differences in their approaches to parenting. In narrowing our focus, we decided to research the question, "What are the issues Asian fathers contend with when they raise a child in America?"

To answer this question we conducted interviews with Asian-born fathers who had raised their children in the United States, and we also interviewed Asian-born adult children about their fathers.

Fathers and adult children from Japan, the People's Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan, Korea, India, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam took part in our interviews, in the cities of Provo, Orem, and Salt Lake City, Utah. Their occupations included students, teachers, scientists, businessmen, shopkeepers, and others. All the immigrants had two things in common: they had each experienced Asian-style fathering, and they had decided to live in the United States for an extended period of time. Most had already lived in the United States for several years and about half intended to stay permanently in this country. Our interviews took place at fathers' homes or workplaces and lasted for about an hour.

We talked with ten individuals (fathers or adult children) from each cultural group and asked their views about American fathering, their children's education and morality, and personal changes they had made after moving to the United States. Other questions were: How are Asian-born fathers different from American-born fathers? How are they similar? How has biculturalism affected your children's development? What are your hopes for your children? How are religion and morality related to fathering in Asia and in America? How do you, as an Asian-born father, express love for your child?

These are the types of questions few fathers normally think about, but by asking these questions we hoped to gain a perspective on the influences of foreign cultures and traditions on fathering and becoming acculturated to American society. For comparison purposes, we also interviewed twelve American fathers and adult children.

Fathering is universal, but the techniques of good fathering in one culture may not prove worthwhile in a different culture. How can researching Asian fathers increase the understanding of other fathers in the United States? Gaining insight into other cultures always provides more knowledge about one's own culture. All parents can learn more about parenting skills when they broaden their own knowledge base. If, for example, U.S. parents learn which Asian values or methods of childrearing result in raising happy and productive children, they might incorporate these previously unknown methods into their own parenting repertoire. And so U.S. parents need to examine parents in and from other cultures, and then decide whether or not alternative parenting styles would help them to nurture their children productively into adulthood. By studying Asian immigrant groups, we hoped to widen our cultural perspective on fathering, children, and families. At the same time, we wanted to further our own multicultural perspective on what is "American" about fathers in the United States.

The Moral Dimension of Fathering

The "moral dimension" of fathering, defined by scholars in the BYU School of Family Life, is that good fathering is essential to being a good man (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997). This approach, of course, is not exclusive to U.S. fathers. Many of the Asian fathers interviewed
shared an identical view that fathering is moral in nature. One Chinese father summed up the view when he explained that “a good father equals a good person.”

Most Asian fathers take their fathering roles and its responsibilities seriously, but show they are good men in a variety of ways. The majority of fathers saw the moral dimension of fathering in two similar perspectives. First, morality is connected with sacrifice, giving up something of their own for the sake of their child or children. Others related morality to duty, equating moral responsibility with financial responsibility to their offspring. Additionally, as good fathers they stressed the importance of teaching moral principles and values to their children.

The obligations of duty and sacrifice to their children last well beyond childhood and adolescence for most Asian fathers. They revealed a strong obligation to provide for their children’s education and welfare, even as the children grew into adulthood. Typical of the men we interviewed, one Taiwanese father said it is his duty to support his family and “pay for all my children’s tuition.” Indeed, Asian fathers will sacrifice almost anything to finance their children’s education and transition to adult life. A Vietnamese son told us, “Fathers in Vietnam pay for everything for their child so the child can concentrate on education. Children also stay in the family home longer than American children, usually until they get married.”

Participants from various cultures explained to us the same basic method which was used to instill morals in their children: fathers set an example in their own lives through self-discipline. This, in the words of one father, is “the right way.” In most of the Asian cultures we studied, parents were, by tradition, the children’s moral teachers, and childrearing was mainly the job of the mother. On the other hand, most men demonstrated good character to their children through their hard work outside the home. One Japanese father told us that whenever he traveled away from home, his wife reminded them to respect him for his authority and sacrifice. In this way, the wife ensured that the father had a strong presence at home even when he was absent.

Many of the Asian fathers acknowledged that their jobs had taken priority over their time at home when they were living in Asia. This has often been observed by scholars who study Asian fathers (see Shwalb, Nakazawa, Yamamoto, & Hyun, 2004, for a review of scholarly research on East Asian fathers). Asian fathers stated almost unanimously that their main purpose in life was to provide for the family’s needs while their wives raised the children. Before coming to America, many fathers had formal and distant relationships with their children because they were so focused on work. For example, one father, a 50-year-old scientist, said that “In Korea I never saw my kids except on the weekends.” A 55-year-old Japanese businessman from Hiroshima told a story of how he lived for several years in another city, because his company transferred him away

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from home. His family had to “choose between living with me or hurting our children’s friendships and education.” As these cases illustrate, Asian fathers often sacrifice having a relationship with their children in order to provide them with financial security. The distant father-child relationship did not, however, negate the respect Asian children had for their fathers. Almost all said they respected their fathers for their hard work.

The gratitude of Asian-born children was related to the educational opportunities made possible by sacrifices of their fathers. Yet these same children expressed a desire to see their fathers more often and to have stronger relationships with them. One Japanese son described his father as being great at job-related tasks (“fixing computers”), but not so great at working with his family (“fixing problems at home”). Another Japanese son said that after he and his family had moved to America, he began to regret that his father had spent so little time with his family when the son was younger. Other Japanese children we interviewed expressed similar ideas. But would these children give up their opportunities and experiences, which were made possible by their fathers’ sacrifices at work, in order to have more time with their fathers at home? The consensus among the Asian children we interviewed was that they would rather have had their fathers at home. In most of the interviews, the children also expressed a reciprocating sense of moral duty to their fathers to study hard and succeed in behalf of the family. This duty continued on into later adulthood where children felt obligated to work hard at their own jobs and to take care of their aging parents, out of respect and “moral debt.” From the Japanese, for example, we learned the saying, “One never repays one ten-thousandth of one’s indebtedness” (Shwalb & Shwalb, 1996).

Religion and Fathering

Moral codes of conduct such as honesty, moderation, and hard work are closely tied to a Judeo-Christian religious perspective. We learned from the Asian-born fathers that their link between religion and moral values was less than clear-cut. When we asked them how religion influences the role and conduct of fathers, many replied that morality was more connected to culture than religion. One Chinese interviewee felt his father’s style of parenting

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was based on “strong Chinese tradition” rather than on religion. He felt that values of honesty and integrity were taught and learned as a part of one’s culture, regardless of religion.

It was also common for fathers to say that their families adopted useful principles from various religions, whether or not they belonged to a specific religious group. One Korean father mentioned that “concepts of Christianity make me better” more so than does membership in a particular denomination. Although his children were raised Catholic, a father from India shared this viewpoint that “all religions have similar values.” From his perspective, universal principles such as duty and love are espoused by religions worldwide, and no particular religion has a unique set of moral standards.

However, one subgroup of fathers who were members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) attributed their parenting style to their religion. When asked whether religion influenced them as fathers, Asian LDS fathers said that they felt a strong influence from their religion. They described increased feelings of moral responsibility to teach, care for, and spend time with their families. Similarly, one Japanese adult child told us that LDS teachings “affected my father’s time commitment to our family and gave him better family values.” These were sentiments echoed by many of the Asian LDS fathers and children.

A Father’s Love

Our interviews showed that a father’s love for his children is expressed differently in Asian and American societies. Despite different cultural and religious backgrounds, all the fathers we interviewed made it a point to express their love for their child. As one Japanese father put it, “across culture, fathers love [their] children the same.” Another Japanese man remarked, “Japanese fathers love their children, care about their dreams, and provide support. We all love our children in the same way. But we Japanese just explain it differently.” A Chinese son commented on how children are surrounded by love in the family: “The child is the emperor of the Chinese home. Fathers really care about their children, especially about their schooling, and show their love by providing money and support.”

Financial support is one way the Asian fathers we interviewed showed their children they love them, and many fathers provide support under difficult living conditions. As one Chinese father described the situation, “Americans don’t have to worry about surviving. In China there is a lot of pressure for fathers to find security for their families and provide a future for their children.” Under these conditions, where survival and success are not taken for granted, love is equated with being a provider, and the child’s future welfare is a man’s top priority.

We noticed that even among Japanese adult children, who had no experience with poverty, there was a perception that fathers are too busy to spend time with their families because of the demands of their jobs. As a consequence of the heavy responsibilities placed on them at work, many fathers appear to serve their companies in a life-and-death financial struggle. Most have little or no choice about the matter, and for the average Japanese company worker, work-related time extends beyond “office hours.” These men do not feel they have the option of spending time at home with their children, although they are aware that some American fathers have such flexibility. According to the fathers we interviewed, long work hours are a necessity to keep their jobs, and it is also a man’s duty to give his children the opportunity to succeed in life, so they can then provide for their own families. Most adult children viewed their fathers’ dedication to work favorably. An Indian son commented that his father was absent physically because of his job, yet “he’s there for me emotionally.” A Korean son responded likewise, saying his father “worked hard and sacrificed much for my dreams.”
By combining strengths from American-style fathering with other strengths from their native cultures, many fathers thought they had become more complete as fathers and as men.

The population of the PRC is now almost 1.3 billion and the size of families has diminished dramatically under the “One Child Policy.” Consequently, many fathers think it of even greater importance that their first-born (and only child) be a son. As one Chinese father described it, in traditional culture many parents’ dream was of having a male heir whose duty it would be to care for his aged parents. The birth of a daughter, by contrast, was once called a “small happiness,” because daughters marry into the husbands’ families and care for his parents. Similarly, one father from Thailand told us that this causes fathers to pay less attention to nurturing and raising their daughters “because they will leave.”

Such traditions have lasted for centuries, but in the current information era, traditions seem to be giving way to “globalization” (Arnett, 2001). This is certainly true in Asian-born adult children, whose expectation is that they will have close relationships with both their male and female adult children. In cultures with low birth rates (Japan, China, Korea, etc.), fathers can devote equal time to sons and daughters. And while there are still differences between Asians’ and Americans’ thinking about gender, Asian fathers in the United States incorporate an egalitarian American view of parent-child relationships into their own childrearing.

As one Chinese father explained, “I now express my feelings more openly. I am not as serious. I communicate more, am more reasonable, not as strict, and I spend more time with my children than before.”

Many fathers reported that they had changed as fathers, and as they became increasingly familiar with American culture, they were able to make comparative analyses between their native cultures and American culture. Many believed their fathering practices would combine the best of both worlds—a style that both satisfied them and provided opportunities for their children within an American lifestyle. The most common change reported by fathers after living for several years in the United States was that they saw themselves as
becoming more affectionate toward their sons and daughters. They also believed that in American culture they were able to spend more time with their children.

A Vietnamese father summarized his changes this way: “I express my feelings and communicate more. I am more reasonable, not as strict or serious. I also spend more time with my kids.”

Although some aspects of fathering changed as Asian fathers adapted to life in the United States, other aspects remained the same. Men proclaimed their dedication to their children’s education, their feelings of love, and their work ethic, reflecting their lifelong values. By combining strengths from American-style fathering with other strengths from their native cultures, many fathers thought they had become more complete as fathers and as men.

**Asian Views of American Fathers**

There has been much research on the crisis of single parent homes and discussion that American families suffer because one or both parents are frequently absent (Lamb, 1990). Children’s daycare has become common in the United States where single-parent and two-parent families work outside the home (Lamb et al., 1992). Yet almost all the Asian fathers interviewed thought that American fathers did a good job of maintaining a presence in the home and spending time with their children.

Therefore, Asian-born fathers viewed American fathers as being quite involved. This may be because relative to American standards, Asian fathers spend less time at home or with their children than do the Americans. For example, one survey showed that the typical Japanese father spent only half the time with his children as does the typical American father (Ishii-Kuntz, 1994). This might contribute to the image among Asian fathers that American fathers are child-centered. American fathers were seen by our interviewees as supportive, family-oriented, and close to their wives and children, while in most cases providing for the family as breadwinners. This outsider’s view of American fathers made us reconsider what is “American” about fathers in the U.S., in that we had previously not thought about the closeness between American fathers and their children.

From the perspective of Asian-born fathers, American fathers also excel at balancing work and family time. One Japanese father told us that “American fathers have more time to talk to their children.” This amount of time is valuable in the relationship fathers and their children build together because quantity of time is a prerequisite for quality time. This family time provides the setting in which American fathers can be affectionate, close, available, and aware of their children.

One Korean son described the American father-child relationship in this way: “American fathers are closer to their children, more like friends than family.” Another child, a Chinese daughter, called American fathers “close and warm” in their relationships with their children. Korean, Chinese, and Japanese participants all depicted American fathers as being more affectionate toward their children in hugs, physical closeness, and in their words, as compared
to fathers from their own countries.

The perception of family-centeredness was not limited to father-child relations, but also extended to Asian fathers' perceptions of the American husband-wife relationships. For instance, one Vietnamese son observed that "American husbands show a lot of respect for their wives" and share in family responsibilities such as chores and managing finances. According to our Asian interviewees, one way American families "stay close" is by sharing family activities and responsibilities, even though fathers are often away from home.

This result may surprise some American wives, who might wish that their husbands would help more around the house. However, from the view of someone raised in a society where help around the house is considered unthinkable for men, fathers may be impressed with the domestic contributions of American men, even if all they do is take out the trash.

Finally, according to our interviews, American fathers, in contrast with Asian-born fathers, raise their children with the specific goals of independence and individuality. They emphasize these goals even when children are very young, by letting children make their own choices. Surprising to many Asian fathers and children, American children seem to be free to choose their own educational and career paths.

American children are also encouraged to work as teenagers to pay for their own cars, brand-name clothing, and other luxury items. After high school, children are expected to live independently and to pay for their own college education. One Indian son described American independence this way: "Parents give more freedom here in the U.S.A. and American kids work at a younger age, but parents in India pay for us to get an undergraduate degree."

One serious concern with American fathering that several Asian fathers mentioned was about respect. One Japanese father observed, "American fathers receive less respect than Asian fathers." Similarly, a Korean father said, "In Korea, children are much more respectful of their fathers." Many of the Asian fathers and children we talked to also said that American fathers are treated like children's "friends" rather than with the respect they deserve. Several of the Asian-born fathers told us that they were trying to find a balance between being respected as a father (as in Asian families), and having a close, warm relationship with their children (as in American families). Some fathers stated that they tried to balance respect and closeness by purposefully spending more time with their children, yet trying to be more of a respected teacher than a companion. Other Asian men we talked with, however, still felt that the best way to be respected and have an important relationship with children was to strive for success at work.

Learning from Asian Fathers

Every father (and mother) at times may feel lost or confused about how to be a good parent. As Dr. Benjamin Spock (1994) taught parents, every parent should learn to trust his or her own judgment. Along these lines
we believe that we can learn more about fathering from fathers than from anyone else. It is particularly useful, we think, to look to fathers from other cultures in order to understand more about American fathering. Men from other cultures, such as those in our survey, can look at American fathers from both inside and outside of our culture. Fathering is a universal role, and it would benefit any father to learn to share skills and practices with fathers from various cultures.

Many Asian-born fathers living in the U.S. come to appreciate a balance between having a relationship with their children and making money. In our interviews, most expressed admiration for American fathers, and some of them idealized American fathers because fathers in Asia typically have an image of being relatively detached from family life. Several told us that they now try to spend more time with their children after work, attempting to make family life a greater priority. Nevertheless, and as we expected, our interviews also showed that men were bound by strong values and morals from their native cultures. These values and morals continue to set traditional expectations for fathers.

American culture has seen the deterioration of the family unit, and a large number of American fathers no longer take responsibility for their families or children (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). It seemed ironic that some of the qualities Asian men attribute to American fathers and families actually may be on the decline in American society: family unity and family time. In every culture fathers face common daily challenges and stresses. However, one PRC father told us that “every father in this world wants the same things for his children: success and happiness.” But does every father want the same success and happiness for his children? Perhaps success and happiness mean something different, depending on one’s culture, and this could lead to difficulty when comparing cultures. Our interviews with Asian fathers opened our eyes to the fact that we must learn more about other cultures, and by doing so, we can learn more about ourselves.

The interviews showed us that willing fathers in all cultures raise and care for their children in the manner dictated by their culture and personal beliefs. We do not claim that American fathers are worse or better than fathers in other cultures—rather, they are different. For instance, there are those who urge fathers to spend “more” time with their children, yet in some cultures the amount of time is not assumed to equate with closeness (Shwalb et al., 2004). As Asian and American cultures increasingly come together in the 21st century, both through immigration and the globalization of the world media and economy, fathers from both sides of the Pacific will have the opportunity to learn from one another. If we are open to learning from people from other lands, this cross-cultural learning will benefit us as parents and it will benefit our children.

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NUANCES OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS INFLUENCE OUR HEALTH, NEW STUDY SHOWS

Ambivalent relationships raise our blood pressure

Anyone who has ever pounded a wall or wolfed down a gallon of ice cream over a frustrating relationship would agree: the positive health effects of socializing have a flip side. Recognizing that not all relationships are created equal, a Brigham Young University professor went to great lengths to measure the health effect of relationships based on their varying quality.

Julianne Holt-Lunstad, an assistant professor of psychology, and colleagues found that dealing with those for whom we have mixed or conflicted feelings can raise our blood pressure. In fact, study participants’ blood pressure was higher in those situations than when interacting with people for whom they have clearly negative feelings.

“The conventional wisdom is that stress is bad for our health, and that personal relationships are good because social support helps us deal with our stress,” Holt-Lunstad said. “But some relationships can cause interpersonal stress, so we can’t just lump all our relationships together. Most people can think of someone they might feel ambivalent toward — a mother you love very much but who is also overbearing or critical, or a good friend who’s lots of fun yet very competitive.”

Holt-Lunstad reports her findings in the new issue of the American Psychological Association journal Health Psychology. She was assisted by four co-authors at the University of Utah.

Holt-Lunstad arranged for 102 study subjects to wear portable blood pressure monitors, mostly concealed by their clothes, for three days. The participants pressed a button about five minutes into every social interaction to record their blood pressure, which was logged by the electronic monitors. They also kept detailed diaries of those with whom they dealt each day and answered questions about their relationships. The researchers took extra steps to account for the relatively few times participants forgot to measure their blood pressure or record an interaction.

After analyzing the results and accounting for factors like physical activity and diet, the researchers found that in relationships, mixed feelings seem to be more unsettling, at least as related to blood pressure, than outright hostility.

“When you’re interacting with those you feel aversive or negative toward, these people are predictable and you will either avoid them or you can discount them because you know what to expect from them,” Holt-Lunstad explained. “But for a person you feel both positive and negative toward, there could be hope and an expectation for something positive, and then, when you don’t get the support you wanted, this can be very distressing.”

At the same time, the study results reaffirmed the sense of security we tend to find among family members, said Kathleen C. Light, professor and director of the Stress and Health Research Program at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine.

“This is an important contribution to the field of health psychology because it adds to growing literature on the health benefits associated with close family ties,” Light said. “The investigators used a sophisticated approach and found that not only do people tend to have more frequent positive interactions with family members and spouses, but even when they do have negative interactions with relatives, the blood pressure levels do not rise as much as when negative interactions occur with other people. This may be one reason why people with strong family ties live longer and experience better quality of life.”

Relationships have been shown to have a positive influence on the most common cause of death in most industrialized countries — coronary heart disease. One way relationships may affect heart disease is through their impact on blood pressure. The most accurate measurement of blood pressure is taken while a person is going through his or her daily life. Until Holt-Lunstad’s study, little research has examined whether characteristics of social relationships affect this ambulatory blood pressure level.

“Prior research on social relationships and health has primarily looked at blood pressure in a laboratory setting,” Holt-Lunstad said. “But in our study, they were out in their everyday lives, interacting with people; and we recorded their blood pressure while they were doing it. This methodology affords such nice naturalism and realism and in prior research has been shown to be highly predictive of clinical outcomes.”

Because of the extra precision of the study, Holt-Lunstad can look beyond general axioms that declare social relationships are healthy and negative relationships raise blood pressure in the lab.
or clinic. By recognizing nuance in the relationships, people can begin to evaluate their social networks to consider who might be most beneficial to approach in various circumstances.

“We might know some people who are unreliable in some situations but who are there for us in others,” said Holt-Lunstad. “We can be strategic about our coping. If we can avoid seeking support from them in unfavorable circumstances and instead seek them out in situations in which we can count on them, or seek support from someone who is more consistently helpful or understanding, we might be better off.”

Research continues in the effort to offer more clues about how we can better understand our relationships and other aspects of our everyday lives to better our long-term health.

“Psychology is really gaining in influence now that our leading causes of death have a high behavioral component,” said Holt-Lunstad. “Many of them, like heart disease, develop slowly over time and are chronic, so people need to adjust their lifestyles to prevent and deal with those illnesses.”

Co-authors on the study are Bert N. Uchino, Timothy W. Smith, Chrisana B. Cerny and Jill B. Nealey-Moore, all of the Department of Psychology and Health Psychology Program at the University of Utah.

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PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR NEW STUDY

Professor Julianne Holt-Lunstad is conducting a new health marriage study that measures two physiological processes that impact health: blood pressure and salivary cortisol. Participants will be asked to wear a portable blood pressure monitor for 24 hours and take four saliva samples while going about their normal daily activities. Participants will need to come into a laboratory at BYU twice – at the beginning of the study and at the end – and to complete two questionnaires.

Participants can be married or single. Married couples must be legally married and both members of the couple must be willing to participate. Participants must be between the ages of 25 and 70 years old and fluent in English. Each participant will be compensated $60.

Those interested in participating should contact Professor Holt-Lunstad at 801-422-3522 or by e-mail at julianne.holt-lunstad@byu.edu.

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UPDATE ON THE JOSEPH F. SMITH BUILDING CONSTRUCTION

Construction on the new five-level Joseph F. Smith Building on the Brigham Young University campus is moving forward quickly. This building was planned and designed to replace the Smith Family Living Center. It will be the new home of much of the College of Humanities (including the Humanities Research Center, the Center for Language Studies, and the university’s language departments), units from the College of Family, Home and Social Sciences, the School of Family Life, the Family Studies Center, Women’s Research Center, and child and family studies labs.

Heating systems and window installations have begun on the south end of the building. Also, brick masonry (which started on the south end) is three-fourths complete.

The contractor is ahead of schedule and expects to complete construction in August or September of 2004. Inside the Smith Building will be a theater, a large auditorium, 27 classrooms, and 401 faculty and administrative offices. There will be a large, three-level parking garage beneath the building. This building’s construction was paid for through private donations.
“Children who grow up with friends around the dinner table will have their hearts knit together in love with their parents and siblings.”

—Anonymous