Fostering Positive Communication and Effective Problem-Solving Among Asian American Parents and Youth

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The parent-child relationship is the earliest and one of the most enduring relationships that a child will experience in his or her lifetime. Parenting practices that the child is exposed to during the early years will influence the ways that child views him/herself (e.g., “Am I worthy of love?”), other people (e.g., “Can I trust others?”), and the environment (e.g., “Is the world a safe place for me?”). Asian Americans represent a diverse group with origins tracing back to more than 20 countries in East and Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent. In the media, Asian American parenting is stereotypically portrayed as highly controlling, low in warmth, and heavily academically oriented at the expense of children’s psychological wellbeing. Tiger parenting, a term popularized by Amy Chua’s (2011) book, Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother, refers to a style of parenting that is strict and demanding. Chua (2011) boasted that her daughters were banned from play dates, TV, computer games, and sleepovers, were forced to practice their musical instruments for hours on end, expected to receive no grade lower than an A, and were better off for it. However, this superficial narrative does not tell the complete story and overlooks many strengths of Asian parenting. Do research and collective wisdom/life stories from Asian American families support the benefits of tiger parenting? How can Asian immigrant parents successfully balance high parental expectations grounded in Asian philosophy and traditions with a flexible, emotionally supportive style of interacting with their teenagers?

In this issue, we will provide practical advice on 1) how to improve parent-teen communication and 2) how to solve problems effectively between parents and teens.

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Parenting practices that the child is exposed to during the early years will influence the ways that child views him/herself, other people, and the environment.
Researchers describe two key dimensions in parenting, parental warmth (e.g. kissing, hugging) and parental control (setting high expectations and limits). Combining high and low levels of each dimension yields four unique parenting styles: authoritarian, authoritative, permissive, and uninvolved. Traditionally, Eastern parenting has been characterized as authoritarian (high control, low warmth) while Western parenting is described as authoritative (high but reasonable control, high warmth). Although Western societies promote authoritative parenting as the gold standard, high levels of control are still the norm in many Asian cultures and may not always predict negative child outcomes. For example, psychological control occurs when parents attempt to control a child’s emotional state or beliefs through practices such as the withdrawal of love (e.g. “If you do not behave, I will no longer love you”), induction of guilt (e.g. “Your father and I made a lot of sacrifices so you can afford tutoring lessons”) or shaming through statements (e.g. “You bring shame to our family!”). All parents, regardless of their country of origin, use these controlling practices to a certain degree, but Asian parents tend to use these psychologically controlling practices more often than parents from Western countries. Cross-cultural differences have emerged in the consequences of parental use of psychological control on child development. Adolescents’ perceived maternal psychological control predicted American but not Chinese adolescents’ decreased learning strategies. Although the reasons for parents’ use of psychological control are complex, they may reflect Asian parents’ anxieties of raising children in a changing or unfamiliar society and parents’ genuine concern about their children’s future competitiveness among peers. Two economists, Matthias Doepke and Fabrizio Zilibotti, found evidence that hypercompetitive and overinvolved parenting is related to a country’s income inequality. In the same vein, immigrant families often struggle with financial hardship, language and cultural barriers, and insecurity related to housing, work/employment, visa status and other stressors. Asian immigrant parents may push their children harder to be competitive and as qualified as their children’s local peers. Although it is important for parents to motivate their children to continually improve, research indicates that psychologically controlling practices are not related to any positive mental health outcomes and in fact may be detrimental for children’s mental health. This is because these practices tend to interfere with the development of children’s autonomy and limit opportunities for children to build a positive self-image. Although Chua’s daughters achieved mainstream success, evidence indicates that children of authoritarian, “tiger-style” parents who lack parental warmth/nurture typically have lower GPAs and experience poorer mental health outcomes including depression, anxiety, and poor social skills.
Does Authoritarian Parenting Adequately Capture Asian Parenting?

Although Asian “tiger” parents are criticized for their use of authoritarian parenting methods, contemporary researchers recognize that Asian parents may not necessarily be low in warmth, but that they express care and love in different ways that are not easily captured through Western measures. For example, Chinese and Filipino parents often show care through continual, instrumental support practices such as sacrifices (e.g. moving to a neighborhood with a good school district despite a longer work commute) and financial investment, as opposed to verbal proclamations of love (e.g., “you are the best,”)¹⁴. Asian parents’ motivation for the use of psychological control practices may also differ from European American parents. Over-involvement in children’s daily activities may signal commitment to children’s wellbeing and an underlying belief in their enormous potential. Chua (2011) surmised that her uncompromising parenting tactics are rooted in a larger cultural model of parenting where, “the Chinese believe that the best way to protect their children is by preparing them for the future, letting them see what they’re capable of, and arming them with skills, work habits, and inner confidence that no one can ever take away” (Chua, 2011, p. 69). This perspective is consistent with the developmental goals set forth by Confucianism, a system of philosophical and ethical teachings that influence many Asian societies such as China, Korea, and Japan. Confucianism advances seven developmental goals for Asian parents including: gaining knowledge, adhering to social norms, being modest of success and shameful of failure, demonstrating self-restraint and filial piety (i.e. respect, obedience, and care towards parents, elderly, and ancestors), and maintaining harmonious relationships with others². Asian parents take their responsibility to inculcate moral and social values in their children very seriously. High parental expectations stem in part from the Confucian belief that personal perfection is attainable, and personality and intelligence can be improved with diligence and effort.

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Parenting, Immigration, and Acculturation

Asian American immigrant parents raising children in a foreign country (i.e., United States) presents its own set of unique challenges. Often, second-generation children (i.e. those who are born in the United States but have at least one foreign-born parent from Asia) adapt to mainstream American culture at a faster rate than their immigrant parents due to increased contact to the host culture (e.g. school). The process of cultural, social, and psychological change as a result of prolonged exposure to a second culture is known as acculturation.²⁶

Family conflict and youth adjustment difficulties occur when there is a parent-child acculturation gap.²⁷ Consequently, parent-child communication difficulties and conflict are common in immigrant families, and may contribute to decline in relationship quality, especially when English becomes the child’s preferred language. Additionally, research suggests that there are three circumstances in which conflict between Asian parents and children arise:

1. The home culture dictates that parents hold absolute knowledge and children are expected to defer to that knowledge.
2. There are drastic differences in traditional standards for child behavior compared to U.S. culture.
3. Parents lack knowledge about American culture and society.²⁸

In addition to stressors related to acculturation, Asian immigrant families must also navigate challenges that are part of normal development. Adolescence is a period of significant physical, social, and emotional changes. During this transition to adulthood, there may be an increase in parent-child conflict over issues such as peer pressure, risk taking, identity development, romantic relationships, and academics. Children may desire increased independence and freedom resulting in many parents struggling to connect with their teens. Parents often avoid having important conversations about sensitive topics (e.g., sexual relationships) with adolescents out of embarrassment, uncertainty surrounding what to say, or concern that their teen will view them as prying, or will not take them seriously.²⁹ In immigrant families, acculturative family distancing, the distancing between parents and children that results from immigration, cultural differences, and disparate rates of acculturation can make effective communication challenging. Alongside immigrant parenting challenges, today’s parents also have to navigate childrearing in a fast-changing, technologically advanced society.

To raise children who are academically, socially, and emotionally competent in this new world requires a careful, deliberate balance between high parental expectations and warmth and emotional support. Parents maximize their children’s development when they respond appropriately to the social and emotional needs of children and model healthy communication and empathy in parent-child interactions.
How to Improve Parent–Teen Communication

While it can seem difficult—sometimes impossible—to have meaningful conversations with your teenage child, research shows that it is one of the most important aspects of the parent-child relationship. Parent-teen communication has been identified as a protective factor against a range of risky behaviors, such as drug and alcohol use, risky sexual activity, and delinquent behaviors20, 21, 22. Open family communication has also been linked to improved familial relationships, youth academic achievement, self-esteem, and mental wellbeing23, 24, 25.

Communication is a “complex, dynamic, and reciprocal process”, which means it takes effort and practice to gradually improve communication between youth and parents26. However, there are a few important skills that can be used to build a stronger relationship with your child: active listening, paraphrasing, and “I” statements.

Let’s take a look at an example of parent-teen interaction to demonstrate the first two concepts:

**EXAMPLE** A 13-year-old girl sits at the kitchen table doing homework, looking visibly upset. Her father comes downstairs and sits down on the couch.

“Dad, I’m so upset that my best friend wouldn’t sit with me at lunch. What did I do wrong?” the girl asks.

“In a minute,” her dad replies, flipping through the newspaper. “Can’t you ask your friend? In the way, aren’t you supposed to be studying now? I saw that Xiaoping (a neighbor’s daughter) got a much better score than you on the last test.”

“I tried to study, but I’m too upset. I’m really worried I lost my best friend.” [She puts her head on the desk, looking defeated, but her father has not looked over to see her distress.]

“Oh, that’s her loss. Why don’t you focus on studying? I saw that Xiaoping (a neighbor’s daughter) got a much better score than you on the last test.”

As this example shows, busy parents often miss important verbal and nonverbal cues as well as opportunities to connect with their child because they fail to understand their teenager’s perspective. For example, peer relationships and sitting with friends during lunch are very important for children during the middle school years. Many Asian American parents have high academic expectations for their children, and as a result, they may risk undervaluing children’s peers’ relationships, socioemotional skills, and leadership abilities. Asian American parents may occasionally use social comparison as a way to motivate their children (such as comparing the daughter’s score with another student in the neighborhood). However, these parenting behaviors may have unintended negative consequences on children. Based on the award winning essays from the “Hear Me Out” essay contest in 2018, Asian American teens often perceive that their parents fail to understand their perspectives, jump to conclusions, or criticize too quickly (e.g., “In your eyes, I was not good enough.” http://en.pavhc-dc.org/hear-me-out.html). Over time, this can negatively impact the parent-teen relationship and the adolescent’s self-esteem (e.g., “Comparing me with others at such moments makes me feel anxious, disoriented, and extremely awkward.”).

By learning to use active listening and paraphrasing, parents can show support and build a better relationship with their child.

**Tools for Active Listening**

1. **What is Active Listening?**

Active listening involves not only hearing, but also working deeply to understand, what is being said27. This means not giving advice prematurely, criticizing, or blaming your teenager. By using active listening, parents can take the time to understand their child’s thoughts and feelings before responding or inserting their own opinions. Research shows that active listening helps teens learn independent problem-solving skills while allowing them to feel supported and understood28.

One key component of active listening is nonverbal skills. Eye contact, nodding, and an open body posture all convey that you are interested and paying attention to what is being said28. In order to do this, it is important to eliminate distractions that often prevent both parents and teens from being fully present. While many parents complain that their teens are distracted by their cell phones, recent research shows that a large number of adolescents also reported that their parents were distracted by their cell phones during family conversations. If something comes up that prevents you from fully engaging in conversation with your child at that moment, let your child know (“I want to talk more about this, but I need to make a phone call for work now. Can we talk in 30 minutes?”). Set aside time to talk later that day, and stick to the plan. Showing your teens that you value your conversations with them will increase the likelihood that they will open up to you in the future. When teens are in the habit of talking to parents about their daily activities, they are more likely to share their bullying-related experiences or other social and emotional difficulties with their parents.

In the above example, the father was looking at the newspaper—not at his daughter—and answered his cell phone in the middle of her request for advice. A better response would be to walk over to her, put his hand on her shoulder, or simply make eye contact. By acknowledging her distress (“I know how close you two were.”) can understand why this is so difficult for you”) instead of dismissing her problem (“Oh, that’s her loss…”), he could have shown that he understands what she is going through and offered to help.

**Showing your teens that you value your conversations with them will increase the likelihood that they will open up to you in the future.**

What do you think the girl is feeling after this conversation? Will she feel confident about the upcoming exam? Will she talk to her Dad if she experiences bullying or other problems at school in the future?
What is Paraphrasing?

Another way to show empathy and active listening is called paraphrasing, or summarizing or rewording the main point of what your child has said. This skill shows you were paying attention and validates your child’s feelings. Note that paraphrasing does not involve restating exactly what was just said; instead, paraphrasing aims to reword or summarize what it seems like your child is trying to express. Pulling out a single key thought or emotion is an excellent way to practice paraphrasing and show you have been actively listening to your child. For example, the dad in the above example could have said, “I can see you’re pretty upset about how your friend treated you,” or “I know it is hard to concentrate when you’ve got a lot on your mind.” Notice that these statements focus on expressing the child’s thoughts and feelings in a nonjudgmental way. It is important to refrain from voicing your own opinions until you fully understand what your child is saying. By using paraphrasing, you can show that you value your child’s perspective, increasing the likelihood that s/he will come to you for help in the future.

What are I-Statements?

Picture this: Lee, a 17-year-old teen, walks through the front door and immediately heads toward his bedroom.

“Where have you been?” his mother asks. “You were out way past curfew. Don’t you know that it’s a school night?”

Lee responds angrily, “None of your business!”

“Why: State the impact (“I feel disappointed”).

2. When: State the context (“I feel disappointed when you lie to me”).

3. Why: State the impact (“I feel disappointed when you lie to me because it makes it hard to trust what you say”).

4. What I need is: State a possible resolution to the problem (“In the future it is important that you tell me the truth about where you will be going after school”).

Let’s return to Lee’s situation to see how I-statements can change the outcome of this conversation. Just like before, Lee walks through the front door and immediately heads toward his bedroom:

“It’s past midnight, Lee,” his mom says. “I was afraid something bad might have happened because I hadn’t heard from you,” she said calmly.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to worry you,” Lee said. “I’ll try to call next time.”

The simplest way to begin using I-statements is to calmly state how you are feeling in a difficult situation. It is important to focus on your own feelings (such as worry, or sadness) rather than your thoughts about the situation or what actions should be taken. For example, “I feel frustrated” is an effective I-statement that expresses your feelings. “I think that you are irresponsible to make such a careless mistake” or “I feel that you are disrespectful towards me” are not effective I-statements because they are not addressing your emotions. Instead they involve your interpretation of your child’s actions. By focusing first on your own feelings, you will help your child understand your perceptions of the difficult situation.

To make I-statements even more effective, you can describe the context and why it is impacting you, which helps the other person see your perspective. Gordon (1976) created the following formula that can be used as a guideline for practicing I-statements:

The I-Statement Formula

1. What: State the feeling (“I feel disappointed”).

2. When: State the context (“I feel disappointed when you lie to me”).

3. Why: State the impact (“I feel disappointed when you lie to me because it makes it hard to trust what you say”).

4. What I need is: State a possible resolution to the problem (“In the future it is important that you tell me the truth about where you will be going after school”).

Use nonverbal skills (e.g., nodding, paying attention) to show you are interested and engaged.

Remove distractions (e.g., phone, television) and set aside time. If you are too busy at that moment, make a plan to talk later (and stick to it).

Paraphrase the main idea of what your child is saying in a nonjudgmental way to show that you are actively listening. Avoid giving advice before fully understanding the situation.

Use I-statements to convey your own feelings about a situation and help your child understand your perspective. To avoid blaming, it is better to communicate feelings such as worry or sadness instead of anger while using I-statements. Often times, what’s underneath a parent’s anger towards a teenage child who comes home after curfew is actually the parent’s worry and concern about their child’s safety and wellbeing. Compared to worry, parents’ anger is more likely to elicit defensiveness and other negative feelings and thoughts (e.g., “my mom does not love me anymore”) among children.
It is common for parents and their children to have disagreements or arguments, and these conflicts can become more prevalent as children get older. Teenagers may seek more independence, become more interested in social interactions, and be more sensitive about how others perceive them. Problems can be exacerbated when families engage in ineffective problem solving such as conflict engagement (e.g., losing one’s temper, saying hurtful things), withdrawal (e.g., not talking about the problem at all), or compliance (e.g., giving in to the other party without expressing one’s point of view). While these styles of problem solving can temporarily stop arguments between parents and children, they may have negative long-term effects on children, including increased externalizing (e.g., physical aggression, yelling) and internalizing behaviors (e.g., isolation, depression).

On the other hand, positive problem solving involves trying to understand the other party’s point of view and negotiating the conflict to find a compromise. Positive problem solving used between parents and children improves children’s sense of having control over the forces that affect their lives, which is an important aspect of psychological health. One type of positive problem solving is structured problem solving, which breaks down problems into six manageable steps, designed to be effective and easy to learn.

Parents can use the structured problem solving steps with their children to identify and implement a solution to problems or disagreements they have been having. There are many positive outcomes associated with using the structured problem solving approach. This method for problem solving allows families to break down large issues (e.g., child complains to his/her parents “You only care about my grades. You do not let me do anything fun.”) into smaller, more specific concerns (e.g., specific discussion about access to phones/tablets, curfews). The act of brainstorming possible solutions (without judgment) shows your child that you are open to their suggestions and want to work with them to find a solution that makes both parties happy; and evaluating each solution is a great activity to help your child learn to see other people’s perspectives, and learn how to make good decisions in the future.

Finally, picking a solution and making an action plan can help your child take responsibility for implementing the solution - making them more likely to do their part and see the value in the problem solving steps. Whether the solution works or does not work, reviewing how it went reinforces the importance of open communication and shows your child that you are willing to either (a) come up with another possible solution to the current problem or (b) use the problem solving steps in the future to avoid fighting about disagreements.

Using the steps can help solve existing problems, and can also teach children how to effectively solve problems between family members, friends, and colleagues in the future. See the next pages for detailed action steps and examples for each step.

It is important to only use the problem solving process on problems that you are actually willing to negotiate on. Remember that the important piece of structured problem solving is the process of using the steps - not the outcome! You will find that not all problems can be negotiated, and not all solutions can include compromise. However, the act of working through a problem with your child will help increase your communication, trust, and ability to see each other’s perspective.
The Six Problem Solving Steps in Practice

You and your child always fight about the amount of time s/he spends on video games versus completing homework.

**Child**: You are too controlling. You make me go to all these extra lessons and do all this extra homework. I do not have any time to play. All my friends play video games and talk about their games during lunch and after school. I have nothing to say because you never let me play!

**Parent**: I am saving money to pay for these lessons and tutors so that you can go to a good university, have a good job, and a good life. You are so ungrateful! Look at Auntie Mei Mei’s son, Min. His GPA is much higher than yours and he is the Math Club Champion. You should learn from him.

**Child**: [getting more upset, slamming the door]

Similar arguments happen in many households (not only among Asian American families), and negatively impact the relationship between youth and parents. Instead of arguing, we will demonstrate how to use the problem solving steps to avoid arguments and come to a solution below.

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**Step 1**: Stay calm.

**ACTION**

Do not use the problem solving steps when you are angry or upset—take some time to calm down so you can talk rationally with your child.

When the problem arises, acknowledge your child’s emotions or thoughts, and say that you will talk to them about the problem after a short break.

**EXAMPLE**

**Child**: I hate you! You are so controlling. You never let me have any fun! I want to play my video game tonight, not practice my violin!

**Parent**: I hear that you are upset with me and do not agree with my rules about video games. I am going to go make dinner, and we can talk more about you playing video games after dinner when we are both calm.

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**Step 2**: Define the problem.

**ACTION**

Define: What exactly is the problem? What is each person’s goal in solving the problem?

Remember to use clear terms and make sure everyone understands.

**EXAMPLE**

**Child**: You never let me have any fun!

**Parent**: Did something specific happen that is making you say that? You never let me have any fun? I want to play my video game tonight, not practice my violin!

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**Step 3**: Brainstorm all possible solutions.

**ACTION**

Make a list of any ideas you and your teenager have that might solve or address the problem.

Don’t judge or evaluate the ideas yet. Remember, no solution is perfect anyway!

Ask other family members for input if you are having a hard time thinking of new solutions.

**EXAMPLE**

**Parent**: It seems like what matters to you most is that you get to play when all of your friends are online, and what’s most important to me is that you don’t spend more time playing video games than practicing your violin.

**Child**: What if I make a schedule of when my friends will be online, and I get to follow the schedule?

**Parent**: That seems like a good idea, but I want to limit it to an hour of playing daily.

**Child**: Okay, what if we make a weekly limit instead of a daily limit? If you spend a lot of time playing one day, you’ll have to play less another day.

**Parent**: I know. It’s helpful to know how much time I have.

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**Step 4**: Evaluate each possible solution.

**ACTION**

Quickly create a list of the advantages and disadvantages for each solution you and your child created.

It is possible that no one solution will be perfect. You are looking for options that are viable, or could be combined to create an option that makes both parties happy.

Choose a solution that is easily implemented. If it takes too much time, resources, effort, etc. it is unlikely that you and your child will follow through.

Plan out a step-by-step plan for how you will implement the solution. Who will do what? When?

**EXAMPLE**

**Parent**: Let’s think of the pros and cons for each of our ideas. We can start with your idea that you can play whenever you want.

**Child**: Okay, the pros are that I will be happy, I won’t lose my friends, and we won’t fight about it anymore.

**Parent**: Those are great points. Some cons are that you will be unprepared for your upcoming recital, and I will worry about how the games affect your brain development, your sleep, and your grades.

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**Step 5**: Pick a solution and make an action plan.

**ACTION**

Pick one solution or a combination of solutions which is/are most likely to solve the problem.

Choose a solution that is easily implemented. If it takes too much time, resources, effort, etc. it is unlikely that you and your child will follow through.

Plan out a step-by-step plan for how you will implement the solution. Who will do what? When?

**EXAMPLE**

**Parent**: Let’s think of the pros and cons for each of our ideas. We can start with your idea that you can play whenever you want.

**Child**: Okay, the pros are that I will be happy, I won’t lose my friends, and we won’t fight about it anymore.

**Parent**: Those are great points. Some cons are that you will be unprepared for your upcoming recital, and I will worry about how the games affect your brain development, your sleep, and your grades.

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**Step 6**: Review how the solution went.

**ACTION**

**If the problem is solved**: Talk about the successes and issues that came with the solution. Discuss how you could use the problem solving steps to address other issues.

**If the problem is not solved**: You can restart the process or resume at step two and reconsider other possible solutions or brainstorm new solutions.

Consider why the solution did not work. Can you do anything to address these things so that the next solution will be more successful?

**EXAMPLE**

**Parent**: I’m glad that we found a solution to the video game problem we were having. I think it was helpful because now we don’t fight every night about the video games.

**Child**: I know. It’s helpful to know how much time I have left to play each week.

**Parent**: How could we use the problem solving steps in the future to avoid fighting with one another?

**Child**: Maybe we could list some common fights we have and use the steps now, instead of waiting until one of us is upset.

**Parent**: I think that’s a great idea!
Suicide is the second leading cause of death among Asian American youth aged 15-24 yearsn yet little is known about the risk and protective factors for suicidal thoughts and behaviors (STB) among this population. Professor Cixin Wang, at the University of Maryland, College Park, and her colleagues recently published a study that found 15.4% of their sample of 12,511 Asian American middle school students reported suicidal thoughts and behaviors within the past year. Their investigation revealed that face-to-face victimization, cyber victimization, and negative school climate predicted higher STB scores. However, parents' home-based involvement in their children's education (e.g. homework assistance) as well as positive school climate buffered the risk of peer victimization on suicidal youth thoughts and behaviors.

These findings led her team to conclude that positive family factors such as parental school involvement and monitoring are protective factors for youth mental health. Strengthening the collaborative relationships between schools and families may be an essential step towards alleviating the adverse effects of peer victimization and STB.

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The Calvin J. Li Postdoctoral Fellowship, proudly hosted by the Asian American Studies Program at the University of Maryland, is intended to support a recent PhD with expertise in the issues facing second generation children of Asian immigrants to the United States, such as identity formation, racial and ethnic representation, acculturation, transnationalism, family dynamics, or closely related topics. Li Fellows also teach courses related to their research for the Asian American Studies Program.