

Cultural Divide Over Parental Discipline

The New York Times

May 29, 2002 Wednesday, Late Edition - Final

Copyright 2002 The New York Times Company

Section: Section B; Column 1; Metropolitan Desk; Education Page; Pg. 8

Length: 1122 words

Byline: By YILU ZHAO

Body

When a Chinese immigrant mother beat her 8-year-old son with a broomstick last month because he had not been doing his homework, she thought she was acting within the bounds of traditional Chinese disciplinary practices, and did not realize the trouble she was creating for her family.

The next day, when the boy's reddish welts were seen by his teachers, his school in Rego Park, Queens, reported the incident to the Administration for Children's Services, the city agency that protects children. That evening, the police went to the home in Rego Park, and her three children, 6 to 8, were put in foster care. The parents were investigated for child abuse.

The teachers did as they were supposed to. Under state law they are obligated to report signs of physical abuse to Children's Services. But the handling of the case touched a nerve in immigrant communities, where many parents have disciplinary ideas that differ from mainstream American views.

"It's something **cultural**," said David Chen, the executive director of the Chinese-American Planning Council, a nonprofit organization, referring to corporal punishment among Chinese immigrants. "The Chinese believe I hit you because I love you. The harder I hit you, the more I love you."

As more such incidents involving immigrant families occur and are reported in New York's ethnic media, from Korean newspapers to Spanish TV, advocacy groups are joining with public schools to educate immigrants about America's child welfare laws.

Social workers employed by the advocacy groups distribute cautionary tales from real life intended to make immigrant parents think twice before administering an imported version of tough love. Parents are warned that Muslim children of parents accused of abuse can be placed in non-Muslim families, where they may inadvertently be fed pork. Children from nonreligious families may be taken to Christian services by their foster families, parents are warned.

When the Coalition for Asian American Children and Families, an advocacy group, printed a brochure to advise parents on child abuse issues, it addressed fundamental **cultural** beliefs.

"In the Chinese culture, the family is most important," it said. "A Chinese family might expect their child to support the family by doing well in school and obeying his parents."

"In America, the individual is the most important. American society might consider the family's **discipline** to be too strong, especially if the child is hurt physically or emotionally."

The difficulty in adopting American ways, said Patrick So, a psychotherapist for the New York City School Board, largely stems from different beliefs about children.

Cultural Divide Over Parental Discipline

"In Asia, your child is considered your property and you can do whatever you want," he said. "In the Western culture, it's not the case."

The clash about how to discipline a child is not new in New York City, where half of the population are immigrants and their children. Many immigrant parents have said for years that American parents are too permissive, and that children are disrespectful to elders.

Half a century ago, principals paddled the disobedient, and other forms of physical punishment were tolerated. But for more than 30 years, such punishment has been forbidden in New York schools. The schools have gone from places where punishment was administered to agencies looking for signs of physical abuse, sometimes at the hands of parents from cultures with different beliefs about punishment. The Board of Education would not comment on the Queens case, citing privacy.

As the emphasis has shifted from keeping families together to removing children to prevent harm, the conflicts over disciplinary practices have become acute, said Edward Zigler, a Yale child psychology professor who was a founder of Head Start.

Well-meaning advice can put parents in a predicament, said social workers, since many parents know no other way to discipline children.

Mrs. Liu, a Chinatown resident who would give only her last name, said she had been at a loss after she learned about local laws.

"I don't even dare to touch him," said Mrs. Liu, referring to her mischievous 11-year-old son. "Every time I want to hit him, he threatens to call 911 and have me arrested."

Joe Semidei, a director of the Committee for Hispanic Children and Families, said his organization teaches parents other ways to discipline children.

Mr. Semidei said: "Here are some examples: You are not going to the baseball game this weekend if you do this. But you are going to have a new toy if you do that. You negotiate with the kids and lay the boundaries. Here in America, you reinforce good discipline by rewards."

But many immigrant parents see this as bribery, and they cannot understand why they are not allowed to do what they think is best. They grow more antagonistic toward the child welfare system when their children encounter negligent foster parents or guardians.

"Some Chinese kids have become addicted to drugs in foster care, and a few teenage girls got pregnant," said Xuejun Chi, who was a university professor in China and is now a social worker at the Y.M.C.A. in Chinatown. "When their parents eventually get them back, they are so messed up. The parents ask, 'How has the system cared for them any better than I did?' "

Professor Zigler says corporal punishment can make children abusive or depressed as adults, but he favors less drastic measures than removing children every time their parents hit them too hard.

"Taking children away from their homes is itself a form of child abuse," he said. "We have to give immigrant parents a chance to get acculturated."

When immigrant parents do give up children to foster care, advocacy groups usually sympathize and find them legal advice to win their children back.

The Chinese American Planning Council, whose family counseling program is financed by Children's Services, helps families whose children have been put in foster care reach settlements with the family courts to prevent long separation. The agreements often include mandatory sessions for parents on raising children.

Billy Wong, a director of the Chinatown Y.M.C.A., offers a class on anger management for parents.

Cultural Divide Over Parental Discipline

The Coalition for Asian American Children and Families has started a campaign to recruit Asian families to provide foster care for Asian children.

Children's Services is willing to become more sensitive to **cultural** differences. "Our goal is to keep families together, not to break them up," said Kathleen Walsh, a spokeswoman. "But our ultimate goal is to keep the children safe." The agency has formed an immigrant issues group, which meets once every three months, when officials are briefed by immigrant community leaders about their groups' **cultural** practices.

<http://www.nytimes.com>

Graphic

Photo: Billy Wong, a director of the Chinatown Y.M.C.A., offers a class on anger management. He spoke with an immigrant grandmother whose husband has been overly harsh toward the grandchildren she cares for. (Edwina Pickles for The New York Times)

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: CHILDREN (90%); ASIAN AMERICANS (89%); CHILD ABUSE (89%); FOSTER CARE (89%); FAMILY (89%); EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION EMPLOYEES (89%); INVESTIGATIONS (77%); CUSTOMS & **CULTURAL** HERITAGE (77%); CORPORAL PUNISHMENT IN SCHOOLS (77%); EDUCATION SYSTEMS & INSTITUTIONS (76%); CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES (76%); URBAN SCHOOLS (76%); CHILD ABUSE PROGRAMS (74%); ASSOCIATIONS & ORGANIZATIONS (73%); CHRISTIANS & CHRISTIANITY (71%); PUBLIC SCHOOLS (71%); NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS (70%); PUBLIC HEALTH & WELFARE LAW (69%); EXECUTIVES (67%); RELIGION (67%); MUSLIMS & ISLAM (62%); PSYCHOTHERAPY (60%)

Industry: EDUCATION SYSTEMS & INSTITUTIONS (76%); URBAN SCHOOLS (76%); PUBLIC SCHOOLS (71%)

Person: ZHAO, YILU

Geographic: NEW YORK, NY, USA (92%); NEW YORK, USA (91%); UNITED STATES (96%); CHINA (79%); ASIA (52%); NEW YORK CITY

Load-Date: May 29, 2002