

Maine Voices: Tiger Mom's Methods Hold Lessons for American Parents—and Vice Versa

By Joseph W. Gauld

Melding Chinese attitudes toward success with U.S. appreciation for individuality could pay off for both nations' children.

BATH – The response to Amy Chua's Wall Street Journal essay, "Why Chinese Mothers are Superior," predictably was negative.

But having worked in-depth with thousands of families over the past 40 years, including both Chinese and Chinese-American families, I think American and Chinese parents could learn from each other.

- In America, we have endlessly tried to reform our education system without success, struggling with problems like class size, teacher quality, student motivation and discipline.

But in China, they produce top students internationally, with 50 in a class, lined up in rows, listening intently, religiously doing homework in schools operating without disruptions.

They accomplish this because 1) Chinese students are thoroughly prepared at home for the school experience, and 2) whatever the standards are at school, students know the highest demands are set by their parents at home.

So essentially, while Americans tend to hold schools accountable for student performance, Chinese students know their parents hold them primarily accountable for their performance.

However, Chinese parenting is heavily influenced by Confucianism and the gaokao (the college entrance exam).

This tends to value qualities like obedience, respect and rote learning at the expense of initiative, creativity and enterprise. The result is the average Chinese college graduate makes the equivalent of only \$44 a month more than the average worker.

One study found that fewer than 10 percent of these graduates would be suitable for work in foreign companies.

So if American parents would begin to emulate Chinese parents in terms of preparation, discipline and expectations of children regarding school, American students and schools would significantly improve.

And if Chinese parents would begin to emulate American parents by letting go of their teenagers more and allowing them to better express their unique potentials, their initiative, creativity and enterprise would make them far more attractive candidates in careers beyond college.

- We should learn from Amy's gigantic struggle to teach her daughter Lulu to play "The Little White Donkey" on the piano -- reminiscent of the first struggle miracle worker Anne Sullivan had in teaching Helen Keller. Very few of us would go to such lengths to get the best out of our children, but that lesson may well become the foundation of Lulu's self-confidence in life.

I was a poor student in school, flunking geometry, when my stepfather took over my instruction -- the most frustrating learning experience I ever had. His constant question "why?" sent me to my room many times until I could answer correctly. I eventually ended up on page one, but I began to understand math and realize I could think!

- Amy Chua has another important lesson to teach American parents: She makes no effort to gain her children's love, only their respect.

Children depend upon us to prepare them for life; quite bluntly, their love for us depends upon how well we prepare them.

I spent much time in my room growing up, because my stepfather was always finding fault in me. But in life I grew to love this man, who taught me the value of discipline, integrity and commitment.

- But I take issue with Amy's lack of respect for nature's role in raising children. She seems unable to distinguish her plans for her children from the natural development of their unique potentials. As Kahlil Gibran said to parents:

"Your Children are not Your Children,

They are the sons and daughters of life longing for itself.

They come through you but not from you,

and though they are with you yet they belong not to you ..."

Gibran's words are particularly important in America. We believe every child is gifted with a unique potential. Therefore in humility, we must always honor this higher priority in our parenting.

I grew up in a very dysfunctional home, but I think it worked for us kids because our parents continually challenged our best while respecting our unique potential.

When I organized a neighborhood baseball team, Mom picked up the other team in our Model T Ford. Early in my career, I became a coach and athletic director.

But I reluctantly let her sign me up for tap dancing lessons -- the only boy in the class! In life I came to appreciate the freedom it gave my body.

So I applaud Amy Chua. I think she has much to teach American parents about the power of commitment and dedication, and not seeking your child's love or friendship.

If she can internalize the humility of Kahlil Gibran, I'd call it superior parenting.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Joseph W. Gauld is the founder of the Hyde Schools, a network of public and boarding schools and programs located in Washington, D.C., and the Northeast.