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ABSTRACT

In this pamphlet, advice is provided for Pacific Asian American parents about how they can work to help their children to develop positive self-images and to deal with racism and other social problems. The importance of parent-child communication, strong ethnic identity, education, and a sense of self-worth as methods of preventing drug abuse and other self-destructive behavior is emphasized. (WI)

PARENTS

THE REAL TEACHERS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE
Public Health Service
Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration

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THE TASK OF PARENTHOOD

Being a parent is one of the most difficult, confusing, and rewarding roles that we have today. Values in society are changing so fast that it's hard to know what to do. What was condemned yesterday is condoned today. We assume the care of a life for 18 or more years, yet we have no training to prepare us for the task.

Before pressing the panic button, let's take a look at what our role is as parents, what some of the problems are that we encounter, and what we do to become more effective.

The basic role of parents — other than to provide the obvious food, clothing, and shelter — is to create in the home an atmosphere where we can pass on to our children the basic values and attitudes needed to grow into productive and responsible human beings. Although older children spend a good part of their time at school and away from home, the schools are extremely limited in preparing children to understand and deal positively with the challenges of growing up and becoming an adult in our changing society. Crucial values and attitudes must be learned in the home.

If the tasks of parenthood are difficult, they are that much more for the Pacific Island/Asian parent living in America. Conflicts between American and traditional, ethnic values, stereotypes, economic oppression, and perhaps language difficulties are just some of the added problems they face as individuals and must contend with as parents.

Since the first generation of Pacific Island/Asians immigrated to this country, we have been in conflict between the customs and ways of the old country and those of America. Should we bow or shake hands? Should we speak out or accept things as they are? As each succeeding generation tries to assimilate into the mainstream of American society we are confronted with the fact that we are a visible minority; we can't have "more fun" because only "blonds have more fun." We may have adopted the behavior and customs of America, but we are still Pacific/Asians. The problems of assimilation taking priority over our Pacific/Asian heritage have created the foundation for cultural conflict, lack of identity, and racial self-hatred.

This distinct and subtle condition has developed into a breeding ground ideal for the growth of destructive behavior, such as disrespect, mental illness, delinquency, gangs and drug abuse, which have been on the rise in our communities. As parents we can aid our children in the development of a "shield" or "natural resistance" to reduce the vulnerability to drug abuse and other self-destructive behavior *before* it beoomes a major problem.

PACIFIC ISLAND ASIAN AMERICAN IDENTITY

One of the primary ways we can immunize our children against the disease of such destructive behavior is to instill in them a strong identity as a Pacific/Asian American — knowing our ethnic heritage and taking pride in it; accepting in ourselves that which makes us uniquely Pacific/Asian Americans.

When our children do not embrace their own ethnic identities they lose self-esteem in our white-dominated society. Feeling that they are of little worth, they are open to the forces that lead to delinquency, gangs, or drugs. As parents we cannot nurture a strong ethnic identity in our children if we don't have such an identity ourselves. Explore your own heritage and cultural identity. Do it with your children and learn together.

COMMUNICATING WITH OUR CHILDREN

Good communication with our children lays the foundation for all our interactions with them. Yet some of us have language difficulties in bi-lingual homes; others of us have not been trained to express ourselves verbally.

One of the important social norms in some of our Pacific/Asian homelands that has survived both time and relocation is the internalization of our feelings and problems: don't express how you really feel, don't bother others with your troubles. This worked to the advantage of first generation Pacific/Asians immigrating to this country, who were forced to assume a low profile as they adapted to a harsh, new society. Today we hold back our feelings at a price: alienation and loss of communication with our children.

Communication between parents and children is not just a simple matter of talking and listening. There needs to be an exchange of feelings and emotions, much the same as when close friends talk.

While the unquestioned authority of our forefathers may have worked smoothly in our Pacific Island/Asian homelands, it does not adapt itself so well to life in this country where parental authority is diminished by a youth-oriented culture and the many forces that shape our children's behavior: T.V., peer-group pressures, school, etc. A highly authoritative approach closes the door to good communication and forces the child to turn elsewhere, become withdrawn and confused, or seek self-destructive, anti-social outlets.

In expressing our feelings to our children, we do not have to be afraid that we will lose their respect. By doing so we will probably gain their trust. An honest "I'm not sure what to do about that" will lend weight to a later "In my experience this is so."

Communication is not a one-way street. Children are people and they have feelings and ideas that need to be heard just as adults do. This is just as true of our youngest children and daughters as it is of our eldest, who traditionally receive preferential treatment.

We may not like the feelings we hear our children express, but we must accept them as legitimate feelings and distinguish between feelings and behavior. "I can understand that you're jealous of your brother but I can't let you hurt him." Letting a child know that you understand how he feels makes the advice or instruction you give easier for him to swallow. Children resent being preached to or talked at, just as adults do.

Another necessary part of developing healthy relationships with our children is taking care of our own needs. A run-down parent is more likely to feel grouchy and unreceptive to his or her child. A self-sacrificing parent sets up a pattern of expecting too much from the child, creating in him guilt and poor self-esteem.

Parents who practice and encourage honest, open communication with their children will enjoy a stronger and more rewarding family relationship.

DEALING WITH BEHAVIOR

It is helpful for us to have a general understanding of why people — adults and children — behave the way they do. We have basic needs that must be met and feelings to work out. We use whatever ideas, skills, and physiological and psychological resources that we have available to reach our goal of satisfying our needs. Sometimes we learn methods from books and pamphlets such as this. Sometimes we try ways that we see others doing, such as when children follow the example of their parents. If a particular method is helpful in meeting our needs, we continue to use it. If we encounter a barrier and our needs aren't met, we feel frustrated and we try to remove the barrier. If we do not know how to remove the obstacle in an acceptable or permanent way we sometimes resort to inacceptable or temporary means. This comes out in the form of aggressive behavior, delinquency, drug abuse and other ineffective avenues.

We can lay a foundation for the prevention of such unconstructive behavior by helping our children understand the nature of their frustrations, how they can work to remove barriers constructively, and how to use this knowledge in making daily decisions.

Many of the frustrations we enoounter as Pacific/Asians in America stem directly from the stereotypes and discrimination we are up against and our own bi-culturalism and conflicts of identity. We need to help our children understand the nature and source of these frustrations so that they can cope with them in a positive and constructive manner rather than turning against themselves.

Offering alternatives to unacceptable behavior or encouraging a child to think of alternatives himself is much more constructive than simply condemning the behavior. Instead of saying "Stop making so much noise," try "Noisy play is for outside. Indoors is for quiet play." Or, "The noise you're making annoys me. What can we do about it?" Parent and child then offer ideas on how to solve the conflict and can negotiate until a solution is found that is acceptable to each. This approach is particularly effective with older children and teenagers.

In these ways many conflicts between parent and child can be resolved in a way that is satisfactory to both and wars between parent and child are avoided.

When we criticize our children we should take care to criticize behavior rather than personality or character. "You need to do a better job of cleaning your room" is far less damaging to a child's self-concept and to family relations than "You're always so messy," which would make anyone bristle.

Some of our Pacific Island/Asian cultures discourage the praising of children, always pointing out to them how they could do better. However, living in America our children need praise at times, as well as criticism. White American society is constantly telling them that they are never quite good enough simply because they are Pacific/Asians.

The use of shame or guilt — "How could you do this to your family" or "Your grandparents have done so much for you" — transplanted to American soil further serves to develop in our children a feeling of self-hate.

In this society where individualism and competition are so heavily stressed our children need to feel that they are of worth. Our traditional outlook that de-emphasizes the individual by placing him in relationship to the world around him and our traditional emphasis on *how* we do things rather than on achieving goals are wonderful values that we should continue to teach our children. But this does not have to keep us from giving our children a few words of praise — "You did that so well. I'm proud of you."

EDUCATION AND LEARNING

A child's education is not limited to reading, writing and arithmetic, homework and books. Although these are necessary parts of education, just as necessary is the development of attitudes and values regarding him/herself and the world in which he or she lives. This type of education begins at home long before a child enters school and continues throughout life. The schools alone can't do this job. Parents need to continue this responsibility.

For the most part, the basic attitudes and values that we develop in our early years generally do not change much as we mature into adulthood. Parents can foster their young children positive attitudes and ways of perceiving the world that will enable them to cope effectively with the demands of our society. By talking honestly with our children, we are telling them that we — and the world — can be trusted. Constant criticism makes the world seem like a foreboding place. "That's only for boys" tells girls that they are inferior.

Children learn at their own speed and in their own way. Some are able to learn faster than others, some are able to learn more than others. Children learn what they are able to learn without parents forcing education upon them. Sometimes Pacific Island/Asian parents set unrealistically high expectations for their children by pushing them to pursue a professional career that the parent wants, without being sensitive to the child's wishes and abilities. This can only lead to resentment, rebellion or feelings of failure and self-hate. The same is true when we constantly compare our children with others. Rather than pushing our children in school or showing no concern at all, we can best help our children through sympathetic interest and gentle encouragement. "Arithmetic is not an easy subject We have faith that you'll do your best" is of more help than "Why can't you make A's like your sister" or "Teacher is always right."

Pacific/Asian parents can also help their children in school by talking with them about the stereotypes and racism encountered there. Talk about the nature of stereotypes in general, that we are not all stupid or all smart. A "good" stereotype like "smart" or "conforming Pacific/Asian" can be damaging too for it stems from a racist attitude and may set up unrealistic expectations that the child may have difficulty living up to. Encourage your schools to confront racism and to include ethnic studies as part of their curriculum.

IN CONCLUSION

By exploring our behavior, attitudes, and values in the context of being Pacific Island/Asians living in America, we can develop a new consciousness and approach to our role as parents. And we can become more effective in guiding our children's development into responsible, productive adults.

If you wish to read more on the ideas presented here, the following books may be helpful:

- "Between Parent and Child" by Dr. Haim G. Ginott, Avon Books, 1965. Many of the ideas on communication & child-rearing were taken from this book.
- "Parent Effectiveness Training" by Dr. Thomas Gordon New American Library, 1970. Good ideas for solving conflicts between parents and children.
- "Roots: An Asian American Reader" a Project of the UCLA Asian American Studies Center; edited by Tachiki, Wong and Odo. Regents of the University of California, 1971. Good exploration of Asian American identity.

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