

13th Singapore Children's Society Lecture

Parenting: Does one size fit all?

By Dr John M. Elliott

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Mr Koh¹, Chairman, Singapore Children's Society, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen and I may say friends, I see many friends in the audience, thank you for that very kind introduction. It is a great honour for me to be actually asked to speak here. I have never, when moderating, thought of myself as somebody who ought to be on the other side of the table, so it was a big surprise for me to be asked. But I will do my best to live up to expectations.

I want to make a preliminary comment about all this, which is that I am *not* going to address the question of how you deal with problems. I am assuming that we are talking about parents who have normal concerns and who want to do their best for their children. And I am assuming further that their children are by and large typical children. I am not addressing questions that might be raised by children with special needs, or children with particular disabilities or problems that might require adjustments in parenting. So this is really, I hope, what I have to say would be applicable very generally.

And I took, as it were almost my text, this comment here that "Parenting is something you learn on the job. Books, in-laws, other relatives and friends are no substitute for the real thing." And I am quoting Mr Koh here who wrote the preface for this "Speaking of Children²" book which we published on children and I really believe that. I do think and the tenure of my talk today is going to be very much, that parenting is something that you learn on the job and not something that you learn from books or from other sources. Now I am not going to keep you in suspense. What I am going to do is quite quickly go down through five

¹ Mr Koh Choon Hui is the Chairman of Singapore Children's Society.

² <https://www.childrensociety.org.sg/news-report-page/publication-speaking-of-children/>

points that I want to make in this lecture and explain to you what they are, and I hope you will see where they are leading.

1. *In Singapore, we have parented our children in many different ways.*

The first point is that both historically and right now until today in Singapore, we have parented our children in many different ways. We have different systems of child rearing. We have different systems of discipline. The atmosphere, if you like, the style of different families can be very different. And this is, for perfectly good, understandable and practical reasons, culturally acceptable. But it is a fact. And I want to draw attention right away to the fact that parenting is very diverse. I further want to make a point that there isn't a very clear-cut distinction in my opinion between Western and Asian parenting generally and, in particular, Singapore parenting.

But I *do* want to draw attention to what I think is a potential difference although there are lots of overlap. I think it is necessary to say this because there is a strong tendency, an increasing tendency for people to consult psychology textbooks and other things of that sort, writings that offer guidance and advice to parents on child rearing which are of Western origins. And I have always told my students when I taught developmental psychology, parenting is one of those areas where you shouldn't assume that everything that you read about in textbooks that were written in America or the United Kingdom are necessarily true for Singapore. And this is partly because there are limitations in research on parenting and child rearing. We don't have a lot of research into Asian parenting. We have very little research on parenting in Singapore. It's not that there is none, but we don't have that kind of comprehensive research base to draw upon. And some characteristics of Asian parenting may have been missed or misunderstood or under emphasised.

Now my fourth point is going to be that given all the above, children do actually have definite needs, they are not indefinitely flexible. We are not free to do anything we like with children

and assume it makes no difference to the outcome. It does make a difference to the outcome and what children's needs are should inform parenting. But that doesn't imply in my opinion that there is only a single best way to rear children, that there is just one style of parenting or one way a family should approach the question of how you bring up your children. And therefore I come to the conclusion that Singapore parents should perhaps have more confidence that they are the best judges of what is best in their own families and you can take information from experts or people in other fields or what is written here or there, anywhere and what friends and relatives tell you but at the end of the day, you the parents are probably the best judges.

Okay now I want to elaborate each of these points but you can see where we are going with parents and our children in many different ways. When I first came to Singapore, it was quite common for children to be fostered out during weekdays, or for weeks, months or even years with very limited contact with parents. The baby might be put with another family and brought up as a toddler and never known much about his own family. That would be kind of extreme but it happened quite a lot. And that was the alternative to bringing up children in the family home.

Today of course, fostering refers much more to the care of children whose parents cannot properly care for them. But it is not considered nowadays as a convenient way of sorting out how to manage your children. Historically, families were larger and it was sometimes difficult to keep the fourth or fifth child in the family so the child was fostered out. But I think this was not a good system. This is one area where I would want to professionally say that fostering out is not a good idea and there are a certain number of adults to this day in Singapore who feel a little resentful, a little regretful that they were excluded from the family and didn't know it when they were growing up as children. So I have taken the liberty of including a link³ to the institution which gives a little bit of legal tips on fostering or becoming a foster parent. But the context of fostering is very different now from what it was 50 years ago.

³ <https://singaporelegaladvice.com/law-articles/foster-care-become-foster-parent-singapore/>

Now another possibility you could say is, let's have babies or young children in the family but let's have them under the care or responsibility of a live-in nanny or maid or babysitter. So two exemplars of this immediately sprang to mind. One of these was the use of *amahs* (阿嬷) to care for children. Now these *amahs* were traditionally Cantonese and black and white clad, the *ma jies* (妈姐), and they were in effect members of the family. They lived in the family and devoted very long periods of time as members of that family. They were servants but they were in the family all the time. And their exclusive job was to look after the children. But they have passed with the passage of time and they were to some extent, superseded or succeeded by the use of maids or nannies and both of these have some sort of pros and cons.

If we look first at the *ma jies*, the black and white *amahs*, they were not strict. All the people I had known who had anything to do with them, anything that came across from Kenneth Gaw's⁴ excellent book, is that these were patient, loving caretakers. If there was going to be discipline involved, it was provided by parents, not so much by these *amahs* who were very patient and very, very loving and very, very inclined to sway and cajole the children to do what they needed to do. And I took a quotation from Madam Tong Yuet Ching from the "Superior Servants" book, "You should not hit children. A girl I looked after was four when her father hit her for not eating her food. She said that it made her very angry then. She is eighteen now but she has not forgotten." Mrs Mae-Lim, whom I am happy to say is somewhere in the audience right here, kindly gave me permission to use this photo which is of her as a little girl with her *ma jie*, Lan Jie, in 1952. And she was very clear that Lan Jie had never caned her or administered physical discipline. She was caned but not by Lan Jie.

Alright, now of course with maids, the problem was a little bit different. I remember 10, 15, 20 years ago, there was quite a lot of concern about the use of maids, especially Filipina maids but not exclusively Filipina maids, as being a childcare live-in home arrangement. This was because

⁴ Kenneth Gaw is the author of the book "Superior Servants: The Legendary Cantonese Amahs of the Far East" (first published in 1989 by Oxford University Press).

you actually had in the house somebody who has a different culture trying to bring up the children according to what you wanted. But they too were a little bit, well, you couldn't be assured as in the case of the *amahs* that your maid was going to be a wholly dedicated person. In fact if you look at the cartoonist Morgan⁵'s latest survey, it shows more Singaporean children speaking Tagalog. So Morgan picked up on a concern and drew his cartoon which is in our first childhood book⁶ and this was always a slight concern.



The other thing was that maids were usually not long term. It was a worry that children would be attached to the maid and would start to love their maids more than their natural parent. So now I am happy to say that I don't think it is actually the nub of the problem. I think it is perfectly possible for children to have really good relationships with their parents and still have been brought up to a large measure at home by a maid. I should also say that I am not talking exclusively about Filipino maids as there are maids from Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and

⁵ Morgan Chua (1949–2018) was a Singaporean political cartoonist known for his astute and biting political cartoons.

⁶ Singapore Childhood: Our Stories Then and Now (2012) is published by the Singapore Children's Society. It describes how the political, economic and social changes have transformed the childhood of children in Singapore over the last six decades. The sister edition of this book in Chinese is titled 《我们这样长大：新加坡的童年生活》.

Myanmar; this is a general observation. Because, as I am going to go on to show from some of the research done by the Society which strongly suggests that the relationship between the mother, in particular, and the child is really important for long term outcome in terms of the success of parenting. So maids and *amahs* shared a tendency to be patient and loving rather than strict. Most parents wouldn't be too happy to delegate the idea of strict discipline to their maids and in fact they worry, still worry to this day, about the other way of children being spoiled and children developing a sense of entitlement as a result of being brought up by maids. And indeed I found a picture on the website from The Canossa Convent⁷ newsletter showing a maid carrying the child's backpack to school and illustrating a concern that children were being a bit too coddled. And also there is a possibility of maids not turning out to be good caretakers. This is from The Straits Times⁸ last week, some of you may remember it. So I think the verdict on maids as a way of, as a method of childcare, is a little bit open actually but if managed right probably works okay.

Now the third possibility, I am still talking about the diverse ways in which we make arrangements for bringing up our children, is that you could rely on grandparents or other relatives to provide actual caretaking. With parents often absent at work, it makes a lot of sense as opposed to having the parents, which would normally mean the mother, provide the actual childcare. This is very common. It can also raise issues of disagreement over how to rear the children, especially if the parents see the grandparents as spoiling or over-indulging their grandchildren. That's the modern way of looking at it. If I go back 30, 40 years, I think the problem was rather the other way around. Grandparents tended to have rather strict ideas about how children ought to be brought up and young mothers who have modern ideas from reading psychology textbooks on how to bring up their children would find themselves arguing with their grandparents, with their in-laws in particular, about being too strict. But it is the other way round now. The parents tend to feel that grandparents are spoiling their children and grandparents tend to say, well you know we are grandparents, we want to enjoy our

⁷ <http://ccpslrd.blogspot.com/2011/04/helping-to-point-of-helplessness-are.html>

⁸ Referring to title of headline: "14 months jail for maid who ill-treated two girls"

grandchildren and not have to be discipline masters. So I found that the New Age Parents⁹ which is an online journal actually had an issue with eight separate tips on how to deal with grandparents who spoil kids. So clearly this is a contemporary issue.

Okay now I come to something a little controversial. We don't just vary in how we bring up our children in terms of the arrangements we make, we have a lot of diversity in the dynamics of the parent-child relationship within the family. We also have a big range of disciplinary techniques ranging from corporal punishment (caning) and scolding to relying on persuasion, reasoning, and what I would call emotional control, appealing to the child's sense of right and wrong, a sense of guilt, a sense of what you ought to do, as being the basis of which you try to persuade the child to do the right thing. And very often these methods are mixed. It is rare to find anyone who relies on a single disciplinary method but the emphasis varies tremendously from family to family.

Now physical discipline is quite a controversial topic. Caning has always been widely used in Singapore by Singaporean parents. I have asked successive cohorts of developmental psychology students in NUS, "Were you caned as a child?" And about 70% say yes. I then asked them, "Will you cane your children if any?" and the answer was much less. They, having experienced it, weren't keen to perpetuate it on their children. The trouble is this figure of 70% did not change over the years. So quite obviously when the students matured and were faced with the realities of what it actually means to bring up children, they found it helpful to have a cane in the house. And I have, many times, been challenged on this. People say it's a form of child abuse and in many countries, it is considered a form of child abuse. In Scotland only two weeks ago, they banned smacking children, never mind using a cane, using a hand is also considered illegal now in Scotland. But in fact, the empirical data is quite mixed. This is one of those areas where I wished we had more local research because a great deal seems really to depend upon the spirit in which corporal punishment is used and the kind of extensive social acceptance. I give you one example from the research literature. I am trying wherever possible

⁹ <https://thenewageparents.com/how-to-deal-with-grandparents-who-spoil-kids/>

in this lecture to base what I say on research findings where there are any but I am freely mixing in my personal opinions as well so you must feel free to challenge me on them when we come to the Q&A.

There is a well-known study which you will find if you google caning as a disciplinary technique or something like that in Wikipedia. Wikipedia has quite a big entry on caning kids. And there was a research done in the United States which studied families that were white Caucasian and black but were otherwise reasonably similar, and followed the children up from about the age of 8 or 9, to late adolescent. And it looked to see on one hand children who were caned or paddled or smacked or given physical discipline and on the other hand, those who were not and how they turned out in terms of getting into trouble with the law, being juvenile delinquents, having problems in school, that sort of things. And they found very interesting results. For the Caucasian families, physical punishment for the children was associated with more delinquency, more school problems, more likely to get involved with the law. For the black families, it was the exact opposite pattern. It was the children who were given corporal punishment in one way or another, who were the ones least likely to be getting into trouble when they were adolescents.

When you think about it, there are two obvious reasons for this, the first is simply that in America, if you are black you are much more likely to be picked up by the police. You are much more likely to be targeted as being a potential delinquent. It is part of the price you pay at the moment still, I am afraid, for being black in the United States. So it is important for parents to really impress on their children that you mustn't fall in badly with the law. There is a certain urgency about this for parents. But I think the other reason is that in the case of the Caucasian families it was seen by the children as rejection, it was seen by the children that my parents don't love me, my parents are unfeeling, my parents are cold, whereas in the case of the black families, it was seen as evidence of concern. It was seen as evidence that the parents were worried about the children and that made all the difference to how it was perceived.

Now I think there is a very real argument against corporal punishment. I am not myself an advocate one or the other. I don't actually think it is for people like me to tell parents what they ought to be doing. But I will draw attention to the fact that I don't think caning has any inherent merit. I have no time at all for people who say or imply that caning children once from time to time is somehow good for them, that it stiffens them up, improves their moral fiber and reminds them of their proper place in society. I have no time for that sort of argument at all. But I think the real argument against it is that once you make it normally acceptable, it becomes something that can easily go down a slippery slope. You can easily become an over user if you are not a conscientious parent, you might find it too easy to fall back on caning. So it's one thing to talk about caning as a judicious punishment but it is another thing to find that it becomes something that is universally regarded as somehow desirable. So it has no inherent merit and it opens the way for the slippery slope to child maltreatment. I personally don't think you need to cane children to bring them up perfectly well. But as I said, I am not in the business of telling people what they ought to do, I am in the business of providing people with information that they can use in making decisions about their families.

So why are there so many different approaches to bringing up children? I think it is quite clear it is a practical matter right, and a necessity for working parents. It can be a matter of is there caretaking help available? Can we afford it? The background of parents is important to know. Values are important in an Asian culture. Is obedience more desirable than creativity? If you go to any kind of preschool or nursery, they advertise creativity. You know it is wonderful. Everything is going to be about creativity. That's very recent. Most parents would have said 20 years ago, obedience is far more important. The impact of Western or other influences from the West and research have had an impact. So we really have a tremendous variety for many different reasons.

But what I want to stress is there is not much evidence to suggest that the actual approach makes that much of a difference. And I have actually taken the trouble to quote a little bit of evidence at this point. Singapore Children's Society, kindly mentioned by the Chairman in his

address, supports research and we did a recent study over the years 2007 to 2014 where we followed up with children from infancy to about 3 or 4 years. And we thought we would find that there was a difference in outcome according to the caretaking arrangements. But in the end, only the closeness of the mother-child relationship seems to matter much. If you go to the Completed Research Studies tab at the Children's Society website¹⁰, look for The Infancy Study¹¹. And what do we do is that we measured temperament, a range of developmental outcomes, and mother-child attachment. We measured it at 4 months, 18 months and 3 years old. This was done jointly with KK Women's and Children's Hospital.

We looked at who is the main caregiver and of course, straightaway out came the varying arrangements. We had some where parents were the main caretakers, some were the grandmothers, some were the nannies, some were the domestic helpers, some were other relatives, some was childcare and in fact that was the main caretaker for most of the time. And there were plenty of cases where it changed over time. And we thought at first that this might produce interesting results as to what was best. But our findings suggest there is no one "best" caregiving type. Parents can decide which best fit their children's needs while keeping in mind family circumstances and their available resources. Mothers however may wish to strengthen mother-child attachment by having a deeper understanding of and being more responsive to their children's needs because mother attachment was the one thing that seem to matter. And we did not expect this reassuring finding.

We also found that mother-baby bond was related to social emotional skills but not affected to a lot of other things. So in other words, of all the things that we looked at problem solving skills, fine and gross motor skills and personal social skills were not related to the mother-baby bond but this was important for social emotional skills. So we found that hugely reassuring that it didn't actually mattered too much what sort of caretaking arrangements you adopted provided that the relationship between the mother and the child was a good one. And it didn't seem the

¹⁰ <https://www.childrensociety.org.sg/research-completed>

¹¹ https://www.childrensociety.org.sg/resources/ck/files/newsletter-and-report/Infant%20Newsletter_Final%202017.pdf

case that mothers had any difficulty in maintaining a good relationship despite the fact that they were working and I would add that research everywhere does suggest that working mothers are not risk factors for problems with children. Happy mothers who are happy because they are working and pursuing their careers are better mothers than unhappy mothers who have given up their careers to spend all their time with their children to put it in a nutshell.

So my first point was that historically and today we parented children in many ways and it appears from what research there is here that this does not reveal big differences in the outcome for at least some of these varying arrangements.

2. *There is no clear cut distinction between Western and Asian parenting generally, and Singaporean parenting in particular, but they are not quite the same either.*

Now I want to move on to the question of whether there is a clear cut distinction between Western and Asian parenting generally and Singapore parenting in particular. Because that affects how we should address the question of, or what weight we should give to sources of information in textbooks or books on parenting— the Dr Spock's books, the textbooks of child psychology. Should we pay attention or should we assume they might not apply in Singapore.

Now I want to consider two possibilities when addressing this question of what's the difference, if any, between Western and Asian parenting. Now you would think that maybe Tiger Parenting is the one thing that must surely be a very Asian thing. Well, maybe. This term "Tiger Mom" (虎妈) is a term coined in 2011 by Amy Chua who wrote a book called "Battle Cry of Tiger Mom" in America and detailed how she brought up her children accordingly. Later she backpaddled a bit. She got such a lot of adverse reactions that she softened a little bit. But it is certainly quite clear what she had in mind, and it was first of all, that parenting is strict and demanding. You expect the highest standards of your children. You demand high levels of academic achievements. You expect mastery of activities such as music or sports or ballet or all three.

But children are not allowed to say, no I don't want to do it. And you are usually given a choice of violin or piano and if you say, no I want to play the triangle or the ocarina or some completely obscure instrument, this is not going to go down too well. You have a highly structured life program. You tend to have a detailed timetable, the mom will have an hour by hour plot of exactly what the child is going to be doing on Wednesday at 7 o'clock and so on. And the children have very little autonomy. The children are not consulted about this very much, maybe a little bit on choice of instruments or choice of sport, but by and large the children don't have a great deal of say in all these. It does seem to be very effective in promoting academic success. It may lead, however, to low self-esteem and school adjustment difficulties in the long run because the children, as they get older, become increasingly aware that they are actually satisfying their parents' wishes but not necessarily their own wishes.



Illustration from a research by Professor Wang Cixin¹²

And I took this rather striking illustration from a research by Professor Wang Cixin at University of California, Riverside but there are many other researches that have come to similar conclusions. So it is a little bit ambivalent. However the term has entered the Lexicon and you would think this has got to be an Asian thing particularly in the Confucian tradition.

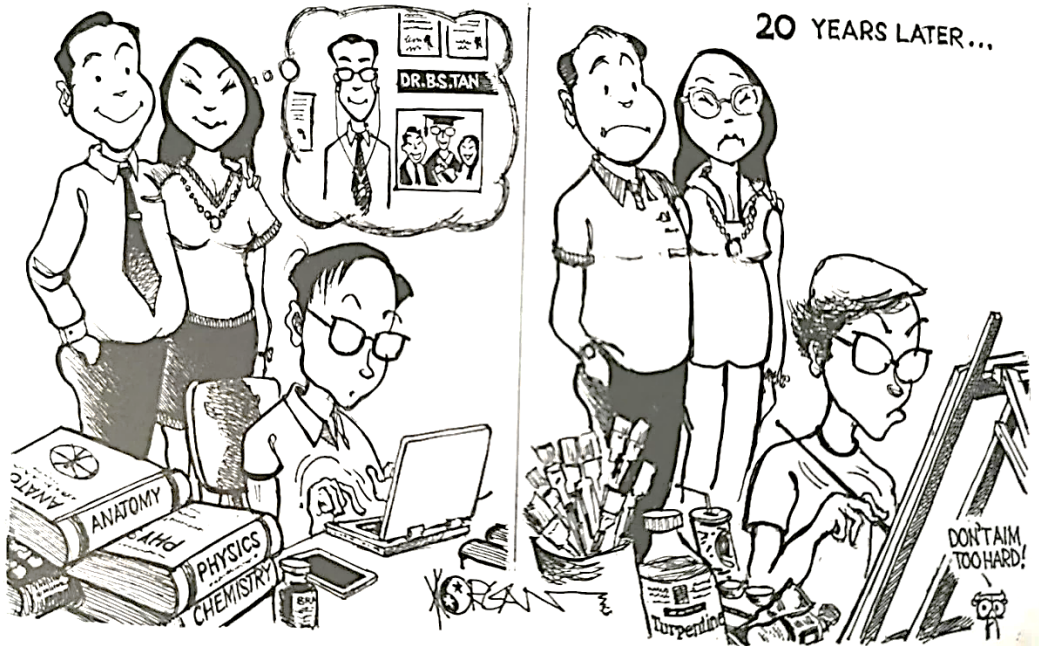
¹² <https://ucrtoday.ucr.edu/24565>



Cartoon by Yong Teck Meng, first published in 1989

But “Tiger aspirations” are not new. This cartoon was published by Yong Teck Meng in 1989 in *The Sunday Times* right and I loved it. As soon as I saw it, I thought yes! I know mothers exactly like this. I want everything right? The idea that you should prepare your children from the earliest possible age to be accomplished in as many ways as possible is a long-standing interest in Singapore. We have always been like this.

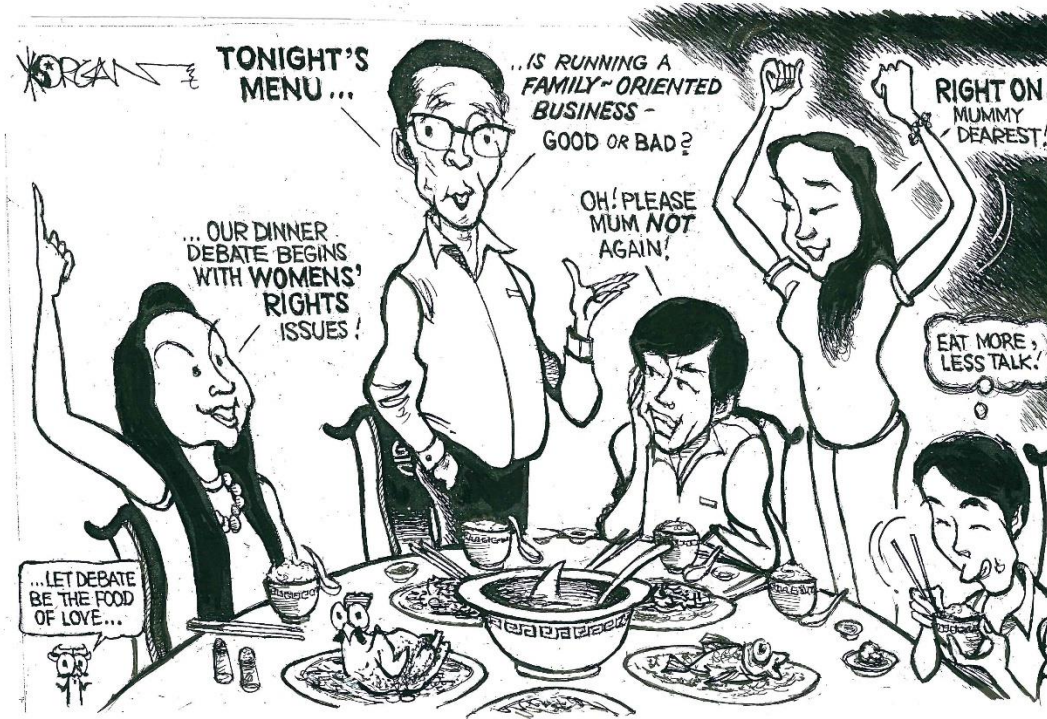
Moreover you actually can't be sure how your children will turn out. I am sure lots of parents can identify with this sort of couple. The boy is studiously mastering physics, chemistry, anatomy and goodness knows what else. I remember in the early days when I first came to Singapore, being a lawyer, being a doctor, being an engineer were okay, being an economist was definitely a step down and after that there was not really that much to smile at. So nobody wanted to be a psychologist I can tell you.



Cartoon by Morgan from Speaking of Children (Chapter 8 by Janadas Devan)

This is Morgan's cartoon again, this one is from the Lecture delivered by Janadas Devan about five years ago. Most educated parents could identify with this dilemma. 20 years later, the boy is determinedly pursuing his artistic career and parents have seen their aspirations go up in smoke. But so could many ambitious Western parents. The idea that you try to get your children into the best schools, into the best universities, get the best education you can, get the best sort of job that you can find is not unique to Singapore, is not unique to Asia.

And if that was not enough, we have also locally, parenting that is apparently about as far from Tiger parenting as you could possibly get. This is a cartoon, again by Morgan from "Speaking of Children" based on a previous lecture by Ho Kwon Ping, who was one of my predecessor speaker. And Ho Kwon Ping gave a very delightful and frank account of how his dinner time was occupied by violent vigorous debates because he and his wife, Claire Chiang, encouraged their children to ask questions. And this is one of the best lectures I have heard actually. I really, really enjoyed it. And I think he quite liked it too, the cartoon I mean. Because he bought the original cartoon and I sincerely hope he framed it and hanged it in his dining room.

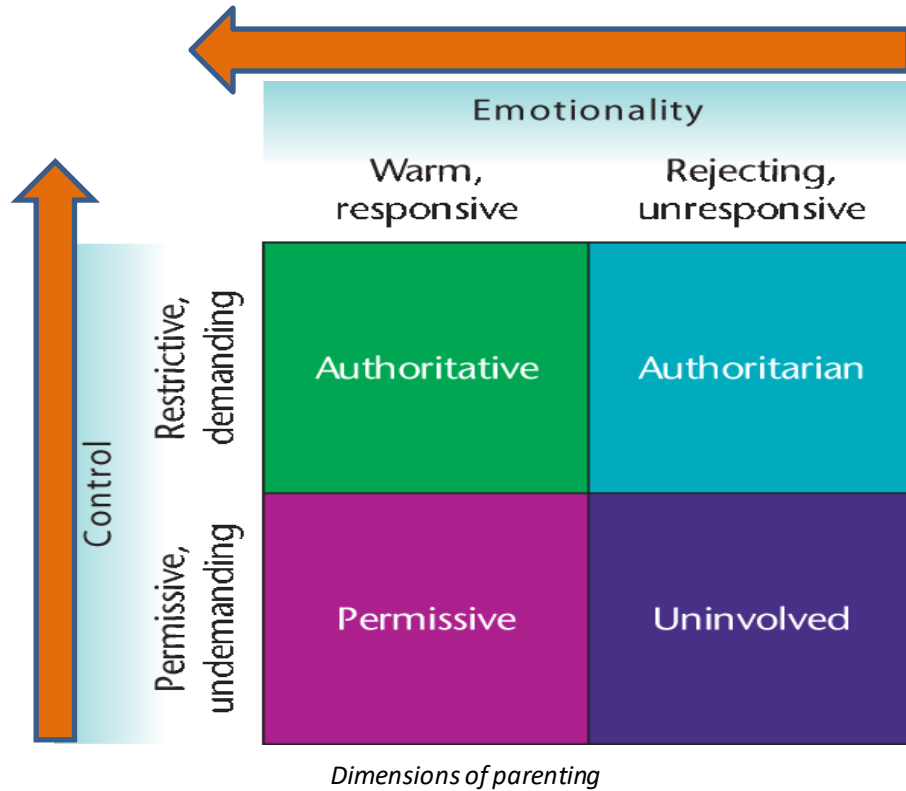


Cartoon by Morgan from *Speaking of Children* (Chapter 6 by Ho Kwon Ping)

And here, I have actually taken the trouble to get two quotes from his chapter in “Speaking of Children”. He says, “Asking ‘why?’ got me into enormous trouble with my teachers, who, I remember, always just told me to shut up and sit down.” My teachers said the same thing by the way so I really resonated with that. “But asking ‘why?’ was the reason the greatest scientists discovered unknown truths of the universe, or doctors conquered incurable diseases, or social activists liberated entire societies or races from colonial oppression or racial apartheid.” Asking ‘why?’ is the last thing a Tiger parent would tolerate. The answer is because I say so, okay?

And this is a second quotation, an even more interesting one. “We prepared our children to be independent. When my elder son reached 18 years of age, I gave him just a few hundred dollars and I asked him to take a plane to Hanoi by himself and spend a week there on his own without any friend or any plan. He did it and he was very happy and I think it opened him up to the fact that you can be, from very young, an independent person.” Now it would appear to see here

completely opposite approaches. So, we can have Western parents who are pretty tigerish and we can have local parents who are pretty Western in the sense that they are encouraging their children to be independent.



So, what about parenting styles? Okay now I have to be a little bit technical but I hope not too bad. It's become traditional, meaning throughout the last 50 or 60 years, to break down parenting according to two, what I would call, dimensions. If you look along this arrow along the top, what you are looking here is a dimension called emotionality which has at one end the idea that the parent is warm and responsive and at the other end the idea that the parent is rather unresponsive. I think rejecting is a bit strong but I take it from the textbook so I can't change it. And then up here you have another axis which is the control axis. So parents on the bottom line are not very controlling, they are either warm in which case they are considered permissive or they are either rejecting and unresponsive which are considered uninvolved. On the top line, they are restrictive, they are demanding, they have expectations that they insist upon. And they are either warm when they are doing it, in which case, they are authoritative.

Or they are not, in which case, they are authoritarian. And that actually, in a nutshell and from a recent textbook, is kind of a standard view.

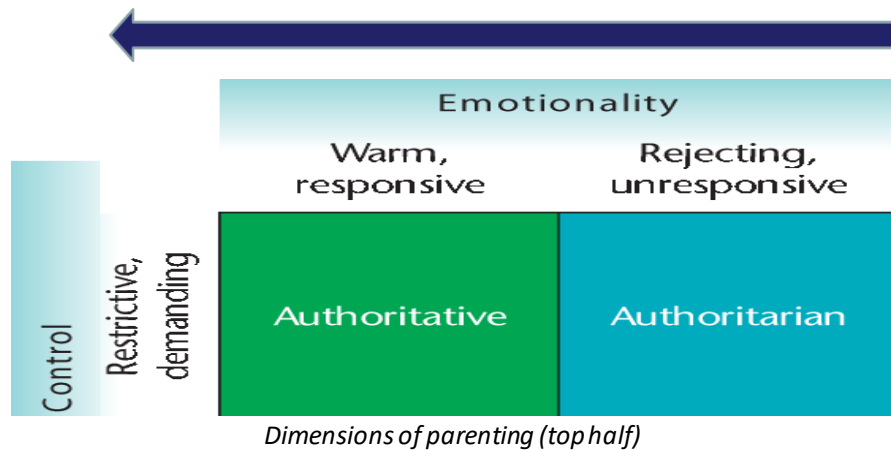
Now I think we can straightaway get rid of the bottom half. I don't think anybody is going to be arguing permissive parenting or uninvolved parenting is a good thing. So we will just consider this question of authoritative and authoritarian parenting. What distinguishes them? Now it seems to me obvious that somebody like Ho Kwon Ping falls into the authoritative category. Authoritative parents are warm, responsive but demanding. He did have expectations of his children, they had to go to Hanoi and spend his \$500 to go to Hanoi for a week, do it. And these parents tend to rely on inductive discipline, mainly on reasoning and appeal to conscience rather than fear. They tend not to run their families on the basis of 'be afraid of me' but on other basis.

The Tiger Parent, on the other hand, would be considered authoritarian on this scheme of things. They are also demanding but they are neither warm nor responsive. They are very top down, they are very "do as I say" in their approach. And they tend to use power assertive discipline, corporal punishment or nagging and scolding. Things that you know are insisting that the children do what they want but not granting much autonomy.

Now is there anything that these two extremes have in common that tends to distinguish them as Asian parenting styles? We are at the nub now, at the meat so to speak. Because I think there is, actually. So what might there be in common?

3. Some characteristics of Asian parenting may have been missed, misunderstood, or under-emphasised

We are at topic three now. In my view, what these two examples have in common is a high, really high level of parental concern and concern is not the same as warmth.



If you look at this diagram again, it is showing you the contrast between warm responsive parents and rejecting unresponsive parents. And this idea of concern is somehow linked to warmth but they can be delinked. You can be concerned without being warm. You can be warm without actually being very concerned. They are not synonymous, they are not the same thing. So now we can see the possible difference between Asian and Western parenting. In Western parenting, warmth has come to be seen as very important. This is in the last 70 years. If you go back to the middle of the last century, it was quite a different story. But now Western parenting considers warmth important, discipline inconsistent with warmth is seen as rejection and experienced by the children as rejection. They go to school and say my parents caned me, they are monsters.

In Asian parenting, concern is important. Discipline is accepted by and large as evidence of concern. And warmth is not a traditional Asian value in a parent. If I think over the years, the number of times I have had parents say to me when I gave public talks like this on parenting, 'But surely you can't expect, you know, you mustn't be too loving to your children, they will take advantage, they will climb all over you if you do that'. So warmth in the sort of sense of being physically and emotionally warm within the family is not a traditional Asian value at all. But it is a pretty much a traditional value now in Western parenting. And I think that is actually quite an important difference. And one that makes me very cautious about attacking systems of

parenting or styles of parenting that appear to lack warmth just on the grounds that they appear to lack warmth. I mean there has to be other questions asked such as, is parenting doing what it should do, is it achieving the results it wants to achieve, rather than just worrying about how warm the relationship is.

4. *The Needs of Children*

Now I do need to say something about children having definite needs and this should inform parenting but this doesn't imply a single method. Now what do I think the psychological needs of children are? I have listed what I think are the foremost important ones. Other experts may disagree slightly.

First and foremost, I think psychological security is really important. It is difficult for an adult to understand how chronic fear, anxiety, worry about the future can affect and undermine a child's sense of well-being. If you are worried that your parents might abandon you, if they warned you if you behave too badly we will give you away or something like that. We may joke about it as parents but to children, their parents are like gods, they have huge power. If you say something like that, the child takes it seriously. It is really, really undermining the sense of security that they need in order to develop in other directions cognitively and socially. It's really paralysing to be suffering psychological insecurity especially if it's chronic when you are a child.

Number two. Have one or maybe a few adults that they are strongly attached to and whom they trust. Doesn't have to be mother. It commonly *is* mother but it need not be. All the studies that have shown over many years, one or a few figures that you really can rely on as a child, as an infant, is really important. This sense of trust adds to a sense of psychological security. The two things tend to go together.

Babies are smarter than you think. We now know because recent research in the last twenty years shows that infants have got considerable cognitive abilities that they develop, that they

don't tell us about because they can't talk very well. But they are there and they develop by an opportunity to interact with the world in various ways. So developing cognitively through play or other active experiences is important and that's what the root this research on babies is, at the root of all these emphasis in childcare provision for emphasising creativity and so forth. So they need opportunities to develop cognitively and they need opportunities to interact socially with other children and adults. And if they have all these four things, then that sets a framework within which a lot of other things can vary on the details.

5. Concluding points

Singaporean parents may need a bit more confidence that they are the best judges of what is best in their own families. And I say this because families differ. The personalities and temperaments of parents and children vary. Children may have special needs. Parents may have to juggle many responsibilities. Parents have many other things on their minds besides their children. It's not easy to be a parent.

Western parenting is predicated on the assumption that warmth is the essential ingredient in parenting. But in my opinion personally, concern is more important than warmth. I won't be popular in some places for saying that but I think it is true. There is not much research on Asian parenting and even less on Singapore parents. We need more research. And children and infants do have their definite needs and they should inform parenting. Parents should know about the existence of these needs and their importance, but it does not mean there is a single best or only way to rear children.

And on that note, I would also like to thank you for your attention and I also like to thank all Singapore Children's Society staff and volunteers who put in so much work to make this and previous public lectures a success. Thank you all very much!