



Education in Southeast Asian Communities

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The first wave of Southeast Asian refugees arrived in the mid 1970's from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia after the fall of Saigon in April, 1975. Although they fled their countries with nothing, many were highly educated. They are considered "old timers" because they have been in the United States for at least 25 years. Since they have been here for a long time, the families have had time to adjust to their new culture and have assimilated very well.

The second wave of refugees came in the early 1980's and the third wave in 1990's from Vietnam. During the second wave, Vietnamese risked their lives trying to escape by foot from the oppressive government to neighboring countries, but the most common means was by boats, thus earning their name of "boatpeople."

The third wave of refugees was a combination of a "Bring Our Kids Home" and helping the high officials in the South Vietnam forces who had fought the war to freedom alongside the Americans. They were Amer-Asian children whose fathers were American soldiers. They came with their immediate families or their half-family members. They are considered "new comers" and are still dealing with adjustment and assimilation acculturation. There are still some recent new arrivals, but not to the extent that it was before.

It is very important to see that in the Asian culture education is highly valued. Children, who were part of the first wave of refugees to arrive in the States, grew up to be fairly successful because of their background and parental support. They completed high school and went on to higher education because education was seen as an opportunity to assist the family out of hardship.

The second and third wave of families that arrived in the United States are not as successful because, prior to coming to the U.S., they suffered so much economic hardship in their country that higher education was not an option for everybody. Many children at a young age had to work in the fields or in the markets.

Most Southeast Asian children in schools now are children of parents who came in the first and second wave. These children were born in the United States. You can see the distinction between two groups. The second wave refugee parents usually speak limited English or they know enough to "get by."



The Asian community recognizes that education can be the key to their children's success. Education is seen as a privilege and an opportunity. Because the Asian/American is so often portrayed as highly educated, it creates pressures which may not otherwise exist among other minority students. An Asian /American who does poorly in school, or is in need of assistance, may find a sense of failure particularly distressing because of the very high expectations that are set on students because of their cultural heritage. The likely consequence is that the student will drop out of school. On the other end of the spectrum is the Asian/American student who is aware of the stereotype and minimizes his/her intelligence in an effort to gain acceptance by other students.

The Asian communities are seeing a trend of more Asian/American children who are "lost" and increasingly at high risk of dropping out of school. There may be several reasons for this. One reason may be because some Asian children are not being taught morals and values. In Southeast Asia, the responsibility to teach morals and values fell upon the schools. In the United States, parents are responsible for and expected to install morals and values in their children. The confusion about where this responsibility lies is a factor in the quality of life for these children.

In Southeast Asia there are two types of education, home and school. Home includes immediate and extended family members. They are responsible for teaching the young boys and girls their appropriate role in their society. It is very important for a student to represent his/her family well. He/She must not do anything to have the family "loose face". This term, "loosing face", is exactly what it sounds like. You must not bring disgrace to your family name. The Asian family is close-knit and essentially classless. The culture itself is held together by the ancestor and your first loyalty is to your family.

The second type of education is the school. In Southeast Asia, the schools' role is to teach the educational component and also to teach morals and values to students. Together, the community and families all share and agree on the same morals and values and the schools have every right to teach and discipline children. Therefore, when you send your child to school, it is the school's responsibility to deal with any problem as they see fit and the family supports this.

The Asian community also understands the impact of language on the family. Problems can occur when the children in the family are fluent in the English language and the parents are not. This has the tendency to shift the balance of power, or control, away from the parents. A situation like this has the potential to create dysfunction within the family. Parents depend on their children to be their "mouthpieces." This gives the children much responsibility. Some children use it to their advantage and tell parents only certain things.



Adjustment and assimilation issues often create conflict between Asian parents and their children. For example, some Asian parents think their children have too much freedom in the States but the parents do not offer their children much guidance in this area because of the language barriers. Asian parents are not used to monitoring their Children - knowing who their friends are and what they are doing. There is much more of this in the United States than what they are used to.

Asian parents want their children to speak the language, eat Asian food, and celebrate Asian holidays and traditions but the children don't always want to do so. Parents say to the children, "I say so, so do it." In Asia, you do things "for the family." In the United States, however, children are encouraged to be independent thinkers. Many Asian children want to be treated more like American children so there is conflict in the home.

In Southeast Asia, the family has very little contact with the school and their children's progress. There are no school conferences or daily monitoring by parents of the children's homework. In Southeast Asia, if the homework is not returned or completed on time, the teacher will handle the situation. So, in the United States, it is up to the children to do their homework and monitor themselves because their parents usually do not.

The lack of monitoring their children's homework and being involved in their children's education is partly due to not understanding it is expected because this was not what they experienced in Southeast Asia. It is also partly due to the fact that the parents do not understand English well so they feel overwhelmed and not sure how to help.

The Asian culture is male dominated - the father is in charge. The mother is in charge of the household and keeping the children in line. She will make most of the decisions about the children and school-related issues.

It is important to tell parents to make sure their child does the homework and reads every day. It is also important to tell them to check back packs. Some parents do not know that it is important to do these things.

The majority of Asian parents will come for parent-teacher conferences, if they know about them and are asked. Parents will wait for the teacher to initiate contact; they will not initiate the contact themselves. They highly respect the teacher and all other school staff.

Always have a translator at the conferences. There are some Asian organizations and churches in the community that may be able to provide a translator. Also, ask the parents if there is another family member, other than the child, who could translate.



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It is important to communicate with Asian families in a variety of ways - by phone and through letters in their language. Try to keep communication open and do not just call if there is a problem.

If you want to get information to Asian parents, you could place posters or flyers at churches, temples, or the Asian markets.