Article 17

Fix My Children: Working With Strong-Minded Asian Parents

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By 1997, more than half of Asian Americans were not born in the United States (Lee, 1997). Asian immigrants in the United States have been mostly urban, well-educated technical and professional people. Many of them came to the United States for higher education. After completing their studies, they applied for a change of residency status from international students to permanent residents (Seth, 1995).

The decision to become a permanent U.S. resident gives the immigrants opportunities to develop a more comfortable life than they would have in their country of origin (Locke, 1998); at the same time, it brings many unique life challenges. The majority of the Asian immigrants grew up in a monoculture and do not have a sufficient understanding of how to raise bicultural children in the United States. These parents often possess a strong desire to maintain their ethnic and cultural identity, while their children are experiencing the stress of developing their own identities and places in the U.S. society.

Children from these families often feel mistreated by both their parents and their peer groups because their parents do not prepare them for or understand their struggles in coping with rejection by peers due to their ethnicity (Das & Kemp, 1997). Isolation and depression become common themes in these children's lives. Some children want to fit into their peer groups and will shed any cultural traits that set them apart from their peers. Their attempts to make changes also produce tensions between parents and children, or between grandparents and the younger children (Sandhu, 1997).

In the past decade, more and more literature has addressed Asian mental health issues, which has helped counselors increase their cultural sensitivity to this population. However, reports on the effectiveness of these counseling treatments are still limited. The treatment strategies suggested in this article are based largely on the authors' and other Asian clinicians' successful clinical experiences.

Common Issues Presented in the Asian American Family

A common expectation by Asian parents is that their children will automatically be happy and grateful to have a comfortable life in the U.S. When this is not the case, children's negative behavior may be interpreted as a lack of appreciation and respect for the parents. Some parents may assume an even stronger authoritarian role to teach the child a lesson, while other parents may assume the victim role, accusing the child of bringing shame to them and to the family.

Academic Failure

Achievement and education are status symbols in Asian society (Sue, 1997). Asians tend to be work oriented, with their jobs as their primary source of identity. In addition, the family plays a critical role in the individual's career decision making. Many Asian American parents develop an agenda for their children's future career when the child is fairly young. These parents equate their children's achievement as the pride of the family and a sign of successful parenting. At the same time, they take any academic failure or disturbance in their children's career path personally. Some parents see a child's failure as shaming the family and a personal assault. As a result of these concerns, Asian parents are more willing to see a counselor for their children's academic problems than they would for a personal problem.

Shame, Guilt, and Threats

In many Asian families, shame and guilt are mechanisms used to gain compliance from family members. Asian American children are taught that they have an obligation to maintain their families' positive image, and they may be reluctant to search for help and choose to keep their personal struggles secret due to their loyalty to the family image and their fear of abandonment. This self-imposed isolation may increase their risk of self-harming behaviors and increases their risk of victimization by others.

Depression and Suicide

Although there are no statistics available for the prevalence of depression among the Asian American population, researchers have found that Asian American youth have higher suicide rates than European American youth (Yu, Chang, Liu, & Fernandes, 1989). Considering the cultural expectations regarding Asian American children (educational achievement at any cost, devalued autonomy, and shame-based anxiety), it is reasonable to believe that depression would be a major issue among this population, and counselors should be alert to the suicidal ideation expressed by this population.

Treatment Strategies

The counselor's role and intervention should be designed to correspond to the client's level of acculturation. Traditional Asian American clients are familiar with hierarchical relationships, and counselors are often expected to be experts and authority figures. Any attempts to establish a more egalitarian counseling relationship may be viewed as a lack of expertise and competence (Leong, 1993). A counselor's knowledge, credentials, and personal life experiences are important for establishing trust in the counseling relationship. Therefore, it would be wise for a counselor to inform Asian clients about her or his training background, degree, credentials, awards, and counseling practice experiences.

Keep the Parents Close

Counselors need to structure the therapeutic interchange such that Asian Americans can feel comfortable being in the session without having their value orientations ignored, minimized, or challenged (Sue, 1997). If Asian American parents feel that a counselor does not understand their value orientation, the entire family will withdraw from counseling due to hierarchical structure in the Asian American family.

As mentioned, many Asian American families often come into counseling for the children's academic failure. In these cases, the parents usually appear to be controlling and critical with their child, and the child tends to be depressed. In the initial session, a counselor may get an impression that the parents are overly judgmental and that the child's emotional well-being needs to be protected. A common pitfall for counselors in this situation is to use direct confrontation with the parents and to instruct them to control this perceived behavior.

Confronting Asian parents is not effective, because direct confrontation often causes Asian parents to feel that they are being blamed for their children's irresponsible behavior. The parents may feel misunderstood by the counselor and choose to end the counseling relationship, which results in the child losing the chance to receive necessary help.

Respect the Power

With Asian American parents, the counselor has to be cautious about using a bicultural approach. This approach attempts to place parents and children in an equal relationship in an attempt to communicate their cultural differences (Valdez, 2000). Many Asian American parents know the dominant culture fairly well, and they will not benefit much from one more cultural lesson. These parents may be more concerned with how their children are becoming very different from themselves. Some parents misinterpret these differences as a form of disrespect for the original culture and thus disrespect for the parents. In addition, they may blame the dominant culture for their children's problematic behavior, and some parents already resent their children's desire for American culture over their original culture.

Asian American parents need to understand that the level of acculturation will influence the children's future survival and success in U.S. society. The children's differences are therefore not born out of disrespect, but instead, they are positive qualities to ensure these children's survival in a particular environment.

Asian American parents also need to reassurance that their appreciation for their original culture helps their children in retaining their Asian heritage. This sense of heritage can then be continued to be carried through generations. Many Asian parents need to know that their culture will not be completely abandoned before they can accept their children's differences.

Acknowledge Parents' Efforts and Good Intentions

The pressure Asian American parents exert on their children to academically perform is aimed at the children leading a successful life. Frequently acknowledging the parents' efforts and reminding them of their good intentions for their children will encourage the parents to try new parenting skills. Furthermore, helping parents to more specifically define what they mean by a good life will usually widen their view on different choices and help them recognize there is more than one way to achieve this goal.

Redirect the Attention Away from Shame and Guilt

In some cases, Asian parents are disappointed in their children, and they express low expectations for their children, such as "I do not want my child to become homeless." Statements like this deliver a great sense of

shame and insult to the child, especially when the child's performance and ability is obviously much better than the parents' description.

Counselors can guide parents back to reality by identifying more positive parenting they have done in the past, reviewing the child's strengths with the parent, or encouraging the parents to keep an observation log regarding their child's positive and negative behaviors. Once the parents get in touch with reality and overcome exaggerations, the counselor can help them develop a clear plan for parenting strategies and goals. Having clear goals will facilitate the parents in maintaining positive parenting skills and in refraining from using shame and guilt.

Identify Goals and Break Them Into Small Steps

Asian Americans usually prefer a structured, problem-focused, task-oriented approach to solving problems (Leong, 1993). Open-ended and self-directed counseling approaches may make many Asian Americans doubt the effectiveness of the counseling.

When identifying goals, the counselor needs to help the parents look beyond the surface and allow more possibilities for incorporating the child's goal as well. The counselor can divide the counseling plan into small sequential steps to prevent parents from getting discouraged. When the goal is small, both the parents and the child will have a greater possibility of achieving it, thereby increasing the feeling that they are making progress.

Most Asian American clients benefit from an educational approach (Root, 1985). Effective parent skill training, such as understanding children's developmental needs and boundary setting, can provide the parents with helpful knowledge. Homework assignments will help the parents practice new parenting skills. Honoring the family's culture through continuing to acknowledge the parents' efforts and highlighting small positive changes will encourage them to continue effective parenting techniques with their children.

Working With Teens

Allowing the parents and teens to each have individual time with the counselor at the initial stage of counseling can provide the necessary environment to release many negative emotions toward each other. Individual time for parents and children will avoid further blaming by the parents in the session and provide the teen with an opportunity to reveal her or his negative emotions toward the parents without violating the cultural standards held by the parents.

At the end of each individual session with an Asian American teen, the parents usually will want to know about the session. The counselor can discuss with the teen the exact information that will be revealed to the parents before the end of the session, and the counselor can allow the teen to be present in the room when sharing these statements with the parents.

Emotional Reconnect

Many Asian American parents and teens will have been in a struggle and emotionally disconnected for some time before they come to counseling. Whenever the counselor recognizes any unexpressed caring emotion within either the parent or the teen, the counselor can structure a family session to help the parents and the teen to express the positive emotions and reconnect with each other. In the family session the counselor can help the parent or child to identify their caring feelings and create concise phrases regarding their feelings. They can be instructed to maintain eye contact when they state these phrases directly to each other. However, this approach has to be structured carefully to avoid counterproductive resistance.

Conclusion

Asian Americans possess a unique cultural background. It can be difficult for both the parents and teens to work through the adolescent adjustment process. There is limited research regarding the treatment for Asian parent-child relationship. As the Asian American population grows in the U.S., the mental health field needs to develop sufficient knowledge about their issues, and endeavor to train counselors to be more culturally sensitive when working with this population.

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