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Immigrant Parents: How To Help Your Children Succeed in School

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One of the top reasons immigrants give for coming to the United States is a desire to provide better educational and economic opportunities for their families and children. Immigrants voice this sentiment regardless of their educational level, financial standing, or country of origin. Immigrant children express the same intentions about education and being successful in life as do non-immigrant children. Fuligni (2001) studied the educational aspirations of 10th- and 12th-grade students of immigrant parents and found that 86.9 percent of them say that "going to college is necessary for what I want to do in the future," "I need to get good grades in school in order to get a good job as an adult," and "doing well in school is the best way for me to succeed as an adult" (p. 61).

Immigrant children, however, often experience cultural and linguistic differences as well as struggles with differences in school systems and academic programs. In addition, they frequently face tremendous psychological challenges as outsiders. These children may need more help at home and in school so that they can be successful. The most important thing parents can do to help children reach their potential is to get involved in their education. Research on achievement gaps has shown that students' home environments play a substantial role

in academic performance (Schaller, Roch, & Barshinger, 2006).

Problems That Immigrant Parents Face in Helping Children Succeed in School

In 2002, 21 percent of all U.S. children lived with immigrant parents (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2005). Immigrant parents, of course, vary from group to group and within groups. The variations within immigrant groups from the same country of origin can be based on education and social class, the immigration experience, religion, and individual differences. Well-educated, middle-class families are vastly different from preliterate families, refugee parents are different from planned immigrant parents or undocumented parents, Buddhist Vietnamese are different from Catholic Vietnamese.

In fact, family characteristics account for 75 percent of the differences in student test scores (Hernandez, 2004). Most of the immigrant parents in the United States have little education and limited income and live in low-income environments (Dorner, Orellana, & Li-Grining, 2007; Hernandez, 2004; Zuniga & Alva, 2007). In 2002, 27 percent of immigrant parents had only a high school diploma and 32 percent of children lived in families with an income of \$39,600 or less for a family of four ("One out of five,"

2007).

Most immigrant parents are very enthusiastic about supporting their children's success in school. However, many of them have limited knowledge or information about how to help their children succeed in school. Immigrant parents with limited English and who have issues with cultural differences sometimes feel helpless. They often sit quietly during parent-teacher conferences, listening to the teacher and looking at a report card and folder with the child's name on it. The parents may understand some of the explanation but are unsure how to respond because of the language barrier. They may try to translate the words they want to say into English, but ultimately decide not to speak up because of shame or embarrassment at their limited English abilities. For many of these parents, their attempts to be involved in their children's education are ineffective or impossible, so they do not participate unless there is a problem (Sohn & Wang, 2006). Although English-speaking immigrant parents may not face language barriers, many still face cultural barriers stemming from different school practices and expectations in their native country (Joshi, Eberly, & Konzai, 2004).

U.S. teachers and immigrant parents may have differing beliefs and expectations, and differing perspectives about school systems,

educational programs, and students' academic achievement. Some immigrant parents were educated in their homelands with traditional education methods, whereas their children are being taught by U.S. teachers who are familiar with progressive education. Many immigrant parents experience school-related conflicts because of their lack of understanding about the U.S. education system. For example, Sohn and Wang (2006) reported that Korean mothers often experienced difficulties when contacting teachers and participating in school activities, including linguistic and cultural barriers, feelings of discrimination, and limited school support. To make matters worse, teachers and administrators often have lower expectations for immigrant children (Sohn & Wang, 2006). Differences in culture are often considered deficits rather than assets in schools (Joshi, Eberly, & Konzai, 2004). Sometimes, this silent power struggle between teachers and parents affects children's educational performance and psychological well-being (Gou, 2007).

At home, many immigrant parents put extreme pressure on their children to excel academically, ignoring a child's natural disposition and emotional health. The dire negative consequences of such overbearing parenting, which are destructive to the parent-child relationship, far outweigh the perceived benefits. Although some youth from immigrant families, particularly those from Asian countries, achieve higher levels of academic achievement than youth of other ethnic groups, they often have lower levels of psychological well-being (Gou, 2007).

However, immigrant parents can do a number of things, without pressuring their children, to improve their children's academic achievement and become more involved in the educational process. In the following, I suggest some of the

ways immigrant parents can help their children to be more successful in school.

Suggestions

Parents are their children's first and primary educators and so their support of their children's achievement in school is critical. They can protect their children from unhealthy influences, provide appropriate nutrition, and encourage interaction with and attachment to caring adults (Evans, 2000). Immigrant parents are "funds of knowledge" (Moll & Amanti, 2005); that knowledge can be used to provide a rich foundation for involving the parents in educational change and improvement (Zuniga & Alva, 2007).

What matters most is what parents *do* with their children, not who they are. Lees and Tinsley (2000) found that children of immigrant mothers with less education but who provide a strong literacy-oriented environment outperformed children whose mothers were better educated but who engaged in fewer literacy-promoting activities. Another predictor of success in education is the quality of the home learning environment. For example, having study rooms with no distractions was found to be more strongly related to child outcome than socioeconomic status or parents' level of education (Dorner, Orellana, & Li-Grining, 2007; Schaller, Roch, & Barshinger, 2006).

In other studies, most educated immigrant parents believed their children were active learners but need to be taught and guided through active participation in educational activities in schools (Md-Yunus, 2005; Sohn & Wang, 2006). Teachers need to get the immigrant students involved by having them participate in group projects, clubs, and sports. In addition, immigrant parents need to have skills and knowledge, opportunities, and time to help their children succeed in schools (Sohn & Wang, 2006).

Steps To Help Your Children Succeed in School

1. Provide support from home.

- Model concrete behaviors that can be used to support children's success. For example:
 - Provide an appropriate environment for learning at home.
 - Set aside space to study away from the television, computer games, and other distractions.
 - Help your child get organized to do homework. Establish a regular time and space for doing homework. Have a table and chair in a quiet place away from the TV, perhaps in the corner of a bedroom. Provide adequate lighting. Add a bookshelf for books and supplies. As your child gets older, add a clock. Keep this area tidy and ready for use.
 - Limit television viewing to 30-40 minutes a day during the school week.
 - It is important to read to, or with, your children for at least 15-20 minutes a day (model frequent reading). It does not matter which language (your home language or English) you use. Older siblings or relatives also can get involved.
 - Assist with academic activities at home. Check children's schoolbooks, ask whether they have homework or extra-credit work to finish, and spend time every night focusing on homework or reviewing the subjects your children are studying. Decide with your child on a good time to do homework and stick to that schedule as much as possible. Ask what homework your child has been assigned and look it over when it is finished, but do not be a tyrant about homework. The goal is for the child to be responsible for getting it done without excessive nagging. Monitor your child's assignments and make sure they are completed.

If homework isn't getting done, talk to the teacher about ways to help your child. Don't feel bad if you are unfamiliar with an assignment or the subject. The teacher is always there to help.

- Support academic success by making sure children get to the school bus on time, have breakfast, study exam materials, and get enough sleep.
- Invest in educational opportunities, if possible, by purchasing a computer and educational computer software. Sign up for an Internet service provider and monitor your child's use of the computer. Having Internet access will broaden your child's educational skills, such as researching and writing papers.
- Have a place at home to keep all communication from the school, whether it is on paper and sent home with your child, or it is in electronic form. This includes reports on your child's grades, lunch menus, notices of upcoming events, newsletters, requests for materials from home, and so on. Respond promptly to teachers' requests for information or things from home. After you read them, save them in a box or basket that is easy to access. Let your child know that these communications from school are important to you.
- Make appointments to see the teacher during parent-teacher conferences or regular school hours. If you are not in position to do all these things, find someone who can help. If one is available, contact the community center to find someone who can help.
- Visit and help your child do research projects at the library, museum, or nature center. Introduce them to the world of learning outside of school.

2. Support children's emotional and social development.

- Share your ideas about the impor-

tance of education with your children. Talk about the ties between what your children are learning today and how the knowledge might be used in the future.

- Help your children set short- and long-term goals for their education. Discuss technical and professional schools in your area, careers that you find interesting, or people you have met who seem to enjoy their work. Let your children know that they have many educational possibilities and opportunities in high school, technical school, and college.
- Tell your children that you want them to be successful in school. Praise their successes and good grades; minimize criticism, and do not be overbearing or put extreme pressure on your children to be successful.
- Let them explain the reasons why they do such things as failing a class, being late to school, or receiving low grades. Use these reasons to build strategies to help them counter these behaviors.
- Understand that U.S. school systems typically champion creativity and honor individual ideas, and that children in U.S. schools often are encouraged to talk to and discuss ideas with adults.
- Talk about your children's problems in school and be willing to discuss issues with the teacher and come to a reasonable solution. Encourage your children to try their hardest and do their best, and then reward good marks.
- Engage with your children at dinnertime. Even if your work schedules do not always permit you to be home at dinnertime, try to have dinner with your children at least once a week. Ask about their friends and teachers at school. Know who your children's friends are and whom they are spending time with. One study showed that children whose parents talk to them almost every night at dinner do better in school

than children who rarely talk to their parents except to argue (Md-Yunus, 2005).

- Appreciate your children's schoolwork. If you do not understand it, ask them to explain it to you. Ask questions to show that you are interested and want to know more about their school activities. Even if you do not understand their schoolwork, just being there is a good way to show support and interest in their work.
- Talk to your children about what they are learning at school. Ask questions that cannot be answered with only a "yes" or "no." Share any knowledge you have, and, if you are curious, read the textbook.
- Be careful not to pass along negative attitudes about school that may be part of your own past experience. Without realizing it, you could start your children off on the wrong foot by recalling bad memories from your own school days. If school was a bad experience for you, you might tell them you made the mistake of not liking school and you do not want them to do the same.

3. Get support from the school.

- If you cannot help your children complete their homework, contact the school. They may have ways to help your children, such as an after-school homework club or a telephone homework hotline.
- If homework is not getting done, talk to the teacher about ways to help your child. Do not feel bad if you are unfamiliar with the assignment or the subject.

4. Get involved in school in meaningful and useful ways. Work with the teachers!

- Navigate the school system and access its resources.
- Go to the school and ask for information, such as a parent handbook, fliers, or the school's web-page address.
- Visit, call, or write to your child's teachers to know at what level she

or he is performing.

- Establish a network of other immigrant parents in your area to discuss concerns and other topics. This step often can be facilitated with the help of the school.
- Overcome the language barrier. If your English is limited, learning English is one of the most empowering steps you can take to help yourself and your family to succeed in the United States. Some schools offer English classes for immigrant parents. These classes provide good opportunities to meet other immigrant parents who are learning English and to get better acquainted with your local community. Find out if the school offers translation service for parents who are not comfortable speaking in English during parent-teacher conferences and other events. Another way to boost your confidence about participating in school meetings and events is to find a friend to go with you.
- Become involved in the Parent Teacher Association or parents' advisory council.
- If opportunities exist, get involved in parenting education and support programs that can provide training on parenting and information on how to give children the support they require to realize their potential.
- Participate in available home-visit programs. Allow teachers or school personnel to visit your home to learn about your home environment. This is especially appropriate if you have younger children or if a social worker is involved with the school programs.

Conclusion

Involving yourself in your children's education not only helps your children to become successful but also indirectly helps to close the achievement gaps between minority and majority students in schools. Parents need to be educators even

after school hours. Remember, education is a way out of poverty, and the degree that your child will someday receive will earn respect in this country.

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