

Parenting Styles in the 21st Century: Wanting the Best but at What Cost?

Keyword: mental abuse

Five year old, Samantha goes to Kindergarten five days a week. She is enrolled in violin lessons on Mondays after school. On Tuesday, she takes ballet lessons. On Wednesday, she joins a group of other Chinese children her age to learn English. On Thursday, she belongs to a science club that performs simple science experiments and investigates the nature around them. The science club is planning to enter a competition in the spring that is hosted by the local government. Every day after school and lessons, Samantha's mother, Mrs. K, presses Samantha to practice violin for two hours and ballet for 90 minutes. Mrs. K bullies Samantha she is not trying hard enough if Samantha complains by saying something is too difficult or impossible to do. Mrs. K then supervises Samantha while she does her Kindergarten homework for up to one or more hours if the concepts for that day are particularly difficult. Getting all the right answers on homework, perfecting the music lesson material, and being able to maintain the exact dance pose are extremely important for Mrs. K. If Samantha first gets it wrong at first, Mrs. K. warns the child that she is embarrassing her mother and is unthankful for her parents and she will throw Samantha's toys away if the child does not get the highest grade and be the best performer. Just before bedtime, Mrs. K. will first read a book in English and then read the book again in Chinese. Mrs. K, then questions Samantha endlessly about the things or events she has read about and Samantha either answers in Chinese or English or both. Then Samantha, reluctantly because she is tired and it is no longer fun, has to read it in Chinese and English to her mother before her mother will release her to go to sleep.

Mrs. K. is raising her daughter the way Mrs. K.'s mother raised her. Many mothers do this. And because this is all Mrs. K knows, she thinks this is the right way and the traditional Chinese style of parenting and that all mothers do this. Push, push, push. Press, press, press. Anything less of the highest efforts or the highest grade of achievement is unacceptable and an embarrassment to the family. The mother chooses the activities that she feels are best for the child and child complies with the mother. Samantha is never allowed to attend sleepovers, to participate in school plays, to have a play date, or to watch TV or play computer games. What Mrs. K. does not understand is that there is a cost for pushing a child academically. This is mental abuse for the child. The cost of this mental abuse is that the child does not develop other important skills such as self confidence, creativity, collaborative skills, problem solving, social skills (communication and cooperation), and emotional happiness; all of which are necessary for success in adult life. A child who only develops academic skills is not a "whole" child, but rather an unbalanced child who lacks important characteristics necessary for a fulfilling life.

There has been much written against this strict and unbalanced style of parenting. This type of parenting is actually mental abuse of the child. Unfortunately, there is this negative type of parenting style all over the world. Early childhood educators and even the popular press label this type of mental abuse and pushing as the "Hurried Child Syndrome." Children are not allowed to be children because parents think that sooner is better and faster is how to "win" and to "be success" in life. *The Hurried Child*, the title of a book updated for its 25th anniversary edition in 2007 by David Elkind, Professor of Child Development at Tufts University, describes the phenomenon. The "hurried child" has no time to play or to choose the activities that the child wants to do. No time to play outside in the neighborhood. No time to explore things or build things out of nature. They are hurried off to lessons, play dates, tutoring, and clubs every

day after school and on weekends they have organized sports. The “hurried child” is pushed to grow up as fast as he/she can by dressing in adult-like fashions, viewing adult TV programs and movies, using adult technology in elementary school (does any 10 year old need an I-phone?), using alcohol and drugs sooner and sooner, and engaging in sexual activity even before puberty. The sad consequence of hurrying the child is that the child grows too quickly into an adult that lacks self confidence and cannot think for him or herself. David Elkind reports that these children may become sexually promiscuous and followers instead of leaders. These children never had a childhood where they could develop and learn important skills. They lack problem solving skills and social skills. They cannot organize their lives because they are accustomed to having everything planned for them. And sadly, they lack self fulfillment and happiness.

Recently another book on this negative and tragic phenomenon of strict parenting, hurrying and pressing children, and not allowing children to be children was released (January 2011). It is a book written by USA’s Yale University law professor, Amy Chua, an American born Chinese woman of immigrant parents. *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* is a memoir of Ms. Chua’s strict parenting of her own two daughters and memories of being parented the same way by her mother. Ms. Chua reports that it appeared that her children were admired by other parents in the neighborhood because of their talents, academic achievements, and manners. While not intended to be a “how-to” parenting book, people, especially mothers, either strongly agree or strongly disagree with her style of parenting which many feel Ms. Chua is advocating in her book. But Ms. Chua does not realize the cost her children will pay for being raised in such a strict environment. Ms. Chua does not realize that her type of parenting is actually mental abuse. Ms. Chua and Samantha’s mother have a lot in common and both, even though they think they are doing the best things for their daughters, do not realize the tragic consequences of parenting in this way.

So is Samantha’s mother right or wrong in her strict style of parenting?

She is wrong because she is mentally abusing her child and this will lead to outcomes that Mrs. K does not want and perhaps is unaware of. What is mental abuse? Mental abuse is defined as a repeated pattern of damaging interactions between parent and child that becomes typical of the relationship; e.g., when a person constantly and characteristically conveys to a child that he or she is worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, endangered, or only of value in meeting another’s needs. When Mrs. K. harps over and over that Samantha has to try harder, is embarrassing her, and must be the best, the consequence of this mental abuse is tragic and we will discuss this more later.

Samantha’s mother is like many mothers around the world. They think that they are doing the right thing and that sooner is better and that the mother can “force” the child to learn whatever, whenever. Science does not agree. These strict mothers mean well, but they do not realize the consequences, the cost to the child, and that children will lack other important skills if only academics are pushed at and pushed at inappropriate times or when the child shows no interest or is ready. Forcing children to memorize before they are ready to really learn is like the Farmer and the Plant. The plant looks like it has grown, but it has not. The final consequence to the plant is that it dies. The final consequence to the mentally abused and hurried child is that the child will grow into an adult that lacks creativity, lacks social skills, lacks self confidence, and lack true happiness.

First, let's look at normal development of young children and what they need mentally in order to grow up and truly be the best they can be. Early childhood is considered the years from birth to age 8. These are critical years in the development of the child's brain and body; and, specifically, the wiring of the brain for future learning and future happiness. Samantha's mother needs to know that one cannot force learning before the child is ready. Adults are often fooled into thinking that true learning has occurred when the young child can recite the ABC's or count to 100. But, these are merely performances, not true learning. Research shows that "rote learning" at age 3, 4, or 5 years is not real learning, but rather memorizing or being "trained" or "behaviorally conditioned" to give the correct response. Memorization does not lead to appropriate connections of the neurons found in the brain; i.e., the proper "wiring of the brain" that can support future learning and positive emotional well being.

Research also shows us that the *rate and pace of development varies greatly among children*. As the old Chinese proverb goes, "Not all apples on the tree ripen at the same time." The same is true for the cognitive development of children. Arnold Gesell, PhD, MD, was the first to systematically study the growth of young children. He found that while all children pass through the same stages of development, the rate and pace varies for each child. In fact, the younger the child, the more variance in development there is among children. Therefore the research shows us that the testing of young children below Grade 3 (or age eight years) is highly unreliable and unpredictable due to the variances of development.^{1,2}

Two examples best demonstrate this very observable fact of developmental difference among children. The average age that children start walking is 12 months; 50% before, 50% after. Some begin as early as 9 months and some not until 16 months—and all of this falls within a normal range. We all know and agree that early walkers are not better walkers than later walkers, nor can we push children to walk before they are developmentally ready. The second example is that the average age at which children learn to read independently is 6.5 years; 50% before, 50% after. Some begin as early as 4 years and some not until age 7 or later. Research shows that by the end of Grade 3 (or eight years), early readers do not have an advantage over later readers.^{2,3} In fact, many later readers far exceed early readers by becoming excellent students and then very successful community members. Earlier is not simply better—nor is it even possible for *all* children.

One of the most important outcomes of learning in these early years should be that children love to learn and want to learn. This will create a lifetime love of learning. Samantha's mother is forgetting this very important point. By forcing Samantha to do what the mother wants her to do without either asking the child if he/she likes the activity or by noting whether the child's reaction is to the activity is positive or negative, is not good. Appropriate early learning experiences that are enjoyable for the child build the skills (motivation, persistence, cooperation, communication, tenacity, and curiosity) that are the basis for future successful learning and life skills.⁴ However, children who feel like failures because of inadvertent mental abuse from their parents early in life often enter into a cycle of failure and negative spirit from which it becomes extremely difficult, and often impossible to escape. As Nobel Laureate economist James Heckman points out, the characteristics and skills such as creativity, communication, cooperation, problem-solving, and persistence enhance adult life, and the ability to contribute to the workforce and society and are more important than test score.⁵

Let's fast forward to Samantha as an adult. Let's look at two possible outcomes. Samantha Number One is socially awkward in situations except with her closest relatives, no longer has an interest in violin or dancing, and lacks self confidence to try new things on her own. She is skillful in her job as a chemist and makes lots of money, but cannot find new solutions to challenging problems at work. She cannot think outside the box. She is very smart and knows her facts about her job, but she lacks common sense in the real world. Sometimes she finds her refrigerator empty because she forgets to shop. She is not happy. On the other hand, a Samantha Number Two is a successful doctor. She loves interacting with her patients in a friendly way and has no trouble meeting new people and making friends. She is open-minded and self-confident. She is constantly reading new medical studies and then finding new treatments and trying new solutions to the medical problems her patients bring with them to her office. She frequently attends the ballet or the orchestra with her boyfriend and enjoys the arts very much. She is happy with her life and looks forward to having her own family soon.

Mentally abusing a child, as Mrs. K did with Samantha, will create a Samantha Number One. Positive parenting and understanding what a child needs during the early years, will create a Samantha Number 2.

Parents do want the best for their children, but they need to understand what the cost might be to the child if the parents forget that the whole child is important—not just the child's brain. The whole child must have positive social and emotional development, good health and physical development, along with appropriate cognitive develop to truly be successful and happy in spirit in the adult life. Parenting is not easy. But it can be more fun with very positive outcomes if parents understand the basic principles about child development. This is what Arnold Gesell has taught us!

Tips for parents to support positive mental health

1. Allow child choices. Do not force children to do what parents want all the time. Simple choices like do you want an apple or an orange to eat, do you want to wear the dress or this set of shorts and top, or do you want to walk or ride your bike to the park. Choices start out slowly and in small ways. Giving a child a choice shows the child respect and helps encourage thinking for the child. It also helps develop self confidence. The child feels I have the power to choose.
2. Expose child to lots of experiences. Parents may think that they know best and want children to value what the parent values. Is the violin or piano the only musical instrument of value? Is being a doctor or a lawyer the only occupation of value? Providing lots of experiences helps the child understand the world around them and appreciate that the grocer is just as important as the garbage collector or the country is just as important as the city. Meeting all kinds of people also helps develop social skills.
3. Respect the child's feelings. Parents must remember that children have feelings and their feelings are the building blocks to positive mental health. One story in Tiger Mother was that the mother rejected the child's homemade card saying the card was not good enough and to make it better. This is very damaging to the child's feelings. This makes the child feel like a failure and is mental abuse. The parent should respect the child's feelings and accept the child's heart-felt effort to please the mother with the homemade card however

primitive it might be. Parents should not threaten children either. Consequences should fit the “crime.” If a child does not clean his/her room, then the parent should realistically withhold the bedtime story because now there is not enough time to read the story. Never threaten to do something you would not carry out. Also think of the mental abuse it causes if a parent would threaten to withhold dinner or make the child wait on the porch in the cold.

4. Talk to your child. Discuss all kinds of things with your child and value their contributions. This helps develop creative thinking and problem solving skills. Why does cooking the rice make it soft when it starts out hard? Why does the artist use so many colors in the painting? Why does the squirrel run away when you get too close to it? Why makes the baby bear in the story so happy? What makes the snow so cold? There are so many things to talk about and talking with your child also shows respect for the child. It also shows that you value their thoughts and this in turns develops positive mental health and self confidence for the child.
 5. Provide balance in your child’s life. Busy is not bad, but balance is the key. Balance is based on understanding what is appropriate for a five year old or a six year old, etc. (Gesell books and materials provide a good explanation of what each age needs.) Balance means respecting the child’s time as much as you value what you believe are important activities. A child needs time to be a child in order to build positive mental health. The best preparation for becoming a six year old, is to be the best five year old one can be! Children also need time for themselves to think and read or be alone. Parents should not try to fill every waking moment of the child. This leads to mental abuse and the hurried child. Independence and self-confidence are built when a child has to think for him/herself about how to fill the moment.
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“望子成龙”不是揠苗助长

文/美国格赛尔人类发展研究所 马西·古达米
美国格赛尔人类发展研究所 河北大学教育学院 刘彤

让孩子成为一个成功而幸福的人，这是教育的目标，也几乎是所有家长共同的心愿。因为“望子成龙”，很多家长毫不犹豫地给孩子提供他们自己认为的最好的选择，让孩子有最早开始学习或训练的经历、要求孩子学习尽可能多的知识和技能。家长为孩子倾注了大量的心血，但是，他们收获的结果却不一定随人所愿。

最近，美国耶鲁大学华裔学者蔡美儿写的《我在美国当母亲》一书在中国和美国相继出版。在书中蔡女士讲述了自己打造杰出女儿的家庭教育方法。比如，她从小就给两个女儿定下了十条“戒规”，其中，要求孩子各门功课的成绩必须达到全“A”；孩子不能参加同学聚会，不能经常玩电脑、看电视；除了她给孩子选定的钢琴和小提琴，孩子不能有其他的业余爱好。除此之外，当孩子不能按照她的要求去做或者达不到她的要求的时候，她就对孩子进行严厉的批评甚至惩罚。

这种近乎苛刻的教育方法，被她自己叫做“中国妈妈的魔鬼教育”。由于经常严厉地对待孩子，她也被女儿称为“老虎妈妈”。然而，在这种严格的教育下，她的两个女儿，不仅学习成绩优秀，音乐技能超然，并且勇于拼搏、追求卓越，成为学生中出类拔萃的佼佼者。

蔡女士的“育儿经”在大洋两岸的读者中引起了强烈反响，但她的教育方式却饱受争议，那么苛求严管、多学早练是培养“成功”儿童的最好方式吗？这种方法培养的“成功儿童”的背后还有没有其他隐忧？下面，谈谈我们的看法。



马西·古达米：教育学博士，美国格赛尔人类发展研究所所长，美国国际儿童游戏权利协会主要负责人。



刘彤：教育学博士，河北大学教授，美国耶鲁大学儿童发展与社会政策研究博士后，美国格赛尔人类发展研究所研究员。

正确的教育方法应该促进儿童的全面发展，为孩子一生的成功和幸福奠定坚实的基础。

从目前来看，虎妈的两个女儿确实是非常优秀的中学生，她们之所以取得这样的成绩，和虎妈的教育有着必然的联系，但是如果说现在就认为虎妈的教育方法是符合教育目的的好方法，还为时尚早。

首先，一个人的成功和幸福，要从他一生的发展和自身的感受来衡量，尤其是在基础教育阶段。教育的主要任务是儿童以后的发展奠定基础，从这个意义上讲，虎妈是否真正培养了两个成功、幸福的人，还有待于进一步检验。

其次，儿童的发展需要全面评价和衡量，除了认知能力和音乐艺术等技能，还包括交往能力、创造能力、意志品质、求知欲望、学习兴趣、自信心、幸福感等多个方面，对于学龄前儿童来说，后者对于以后的发展影响更大。诺贝尔奖获得者经济学家詹姆斯·赫克曼（James Heckman）指出：“诸如创造性、交往、合作、解决难题等能力，比分数重要多了。”研究表明，在基础教育阶段，单单是优异的学习成绩、炫目的获奖证书和儿童以后的成功幸福并没有必然的联系。而全面发展、综合素质优良的儿童未来获得成功的几率确实比较高。我们没有看到对于虎妈两个女儿发展情况的综合测评资料，所以对于虎妈的教育方法不能轻易评价。

再次，虎妈的两个孩子是在一种比较特殊的家庭环境下成长起来的，他们是移民家庭，具有东西方两种文化的背景，虎妈有很高的学历和学术水平，当我们认真读过虎妈的书，就会发现在十条“戒规”和高标准要求、严厉管教的背后，还有很多教育和管理孩子的艺术，包括对孩子自身潜能的了解，对孩子承受压力的把握，以及激励孩子的途径和方式等等。这些环境因素和教育艺术都与孩子的成长息息相关，具有很大的个性和不可复制性，因此，抛开大的背景单纯去看“魔鬼教育”就很片面，单纯模仿就容易误入歧途。



对孩子缺乏尊重和理解，一味简单地“高标准、严管教”容易导致揠苗助长的后果。

格赛尔研究中心接触过这样一个案例，一个5岁的女孩名叫萨曼塔，她的妈妈和虎妈一样，也是迫切“望子成龙”的家长。她的做法和虎妈有些相近，但结果却不尽相同。

萨曼塔的妈妈最明显的表现就是：恨不能让孩子所有的时间都用来学习。我们看看萨曼塔的日程表。

每天要去幼儿园，放学后练习小提琴两个小时、舞蹈九十分钟。

除此之外，每周一上小提琴课；周二上芭蕾课；周三和同龄小伙伴一同学习西班牙语；周四参加学校组织的科学俱乐部活动。

妈妈总是要求萨曼塔必须服从父母为她选择的他们认为最好的项目，以可能达到的最高标准要求萨曼塔。她不允许萨曼塔偷懒或者是抱怨学习的东西太难，一旦出现这种情况，妈妈就会要求她再增加一个小时的作业时间。妈妈特别看重优异的成绩、准确无误的演奏和到位的舞姿，如果出现失误，她就会把萨曼塔最喜爱的玩具丢掉作为惩罚。

逐渐地，妈妈发现萨曼塔在学习、弹琴、跳舞等方面确实有不凡的表现，但同时也变得郁闷、胆小、焦躁，脾气古怪而易怒。她不愿意和别人交往，没有朋友，也不愿意主动思考问题，对什么事都不感兴趣，后来，萨曼塔开始厌恶学习、拒绝练舞，甚至摔琴抗议。

美国著名的儿童发展心理学大卫·艾尔金德 (David Elkind) 把这种现象称为“忙碌儿童综合症”。在他的著作《还孩子幸福童年》中描述了“忙碌儿童综合症”的症状。“忙碌”的儿童们没有时间玩耍或者选择参加他们喜欢的项目，没有时间在小区里游戏，没有时间探索和欣赏大自然的美丽，他们除了放学后穿梭于大大小小的补习班和社团活动，就是参加周末的体育训练。

大卫指出，在童年阶段如果孩子没有学会应该习得和有利于发展的技能，就会导致他们缺乏自信和解决问题的能力，不擅长交往，他们依赖家长为他们安排生活，缺少管理自己生活的意识和能力，更可悲的是，他

3 培养“成功儿童”要尊重儿童的成长规律，既不是学得越多越好，更不是开始越早越好。

根据皮亚杰的认知发展理论，儿童从2岁到7岁属于“前运算阶段”。这个阶段，儿童主要是通过感知而不是简单的记忆来学习，游戏是最好的学习方式。因此，对于幼儿教育而言，让孩子学会了多少知识技能并不重要，重要的是是否培养了孩子喜欢学习和想要学习的愿望。

脑科学的研究也表明，在学龄前阶段，儿童的大脑还不具备掌握知识的条件，家长们常常为自己幼小的孩子能顺利背诵26个字母或从1数到100而倍感欣慰。其实，那不过是行为的条件反射，不是真正的学习。合宜的早期学习经历应当是快乐的，通过快乐的学习形成儿童的坚持性、合作、交流、耐心和好奇心，这是儿童未来成功学习知识和掌握技能的基础。

许多家长常常羡慕有些所谓的“超常儿童”，其实，这也只不过是儿童成长速率的差异。例如，婴儿大致在12个月开始走路，但是，有的9个月开始走路，有的到16个月——所有这些都认为是正常的，早走路并不比晚走路好。一般来说孩子开始独立阅读是在6岁半，但有些4岁开始，有些到7岁甚至更晚。研究表明：到三年级（或者8岁），早读者与晚读者相比没有任何优势。事实上，倒是有很多儿童后来居上，他们成为了非常优秀的学生和成功人士。

有多少个家庭，就有多少种教育孩子的方法。“望子成龙”没有一个固定的模式。然而，家长一定要尊重孩子的成长规律，了解孩子的发展状况，关注孩子的心

们缺乏自我满足感，他们没有快乐的人生体验。

大卫通过研究还发现，“忙碌”的儿童是在被迫的情况下快速长大的，所以早熟行为发生在他们身上的几率也远远高于其他儿童。比如，穿大人的衣服、看成人电视节目或电影、用成人电子产品，甚至吸食毒品、酗酒、在成年以前就有性行为等等。

萨曼塔的妈妈只是关注了孩子在某些领域的发展，但遗憾的是，这种发展确实以牺牲孩子其他方面的发展为代价，而这种牺牲造成的后果可能在以后很多年才能显现出来。



理感受，在此基础上对孩子有一个合理的期盼，并且采用有利于孩子全面发展的教育方法。美国著名心理学家格赛尔告诉我们，“全面发展的孩子应该有健康的身体，健全的人格和积极的情绪，伴随着适宜的智力发展，到成年的时候，拥有成功和快乐的精神世界。家庭教育不容易，但如果家长了解和掌握基本的儿童发展规律，就一定会有一个良好的结果”。■