

With harsh parenting quickly becoming a hot topic in child-raising, parents and educators debate its effectiveness and potential drawbacks.

Extreme parenting

By RICHARD LIM
educate@thestar.com.my

EVERY parent wants their child to be successful. The obvious aside, parents want their children to be successful for a variety of reasons.

The simple fact of wanting a child to be happy, the fear of a child being left behind and a family quest of upward mobility – or to preserve an existing social status – are some of the common reasons one might hear.

However noble – or ego stroking – these motivations may be, a child's success is a seductive lure by itself and some parents are willing to fight tooth and nail to ensure that.

Such zealous efforts are best encapsulated by Amy Chua's *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* – the best-selling memoir on tough-love parenting, Chinese-style – which is already one of the most controversial books of 2011.

Hard hitting, thought-provoking and brutally honest, the book showcased Chua's already famous list of don'ts and put the spotlight on how parenting can sometimes be harsh and manipulative.

To illustrate, Chua documented how her daughters, Sophia and Louisa, were never allowed to attend a sleepover, have a play date, watch the television, play computer games, choose their own extracurricular activities and get any grade less than an A, among others.

It goes without saying that the memoirs did not go down well with many American parents and a firestorm of criticism resulted after an excerpt was published by the *Wall Street Journal*.

The book's cut-to-the-bone accounts went viral and the memoir even made an impact on local shores when HELP University College devoted a one-day parenting seminar in response to it.

Bringing together some of the who's who in the local parenting and early childhood education scene, the seminar was conceived to examine a wide range of parenting styles and the impact of early childhood education.

Although some speakers had not read the book, the concepts of extreme parenting and corporal punishment were second nature to them and a number noted positives in Chua's methods.

Among them was Datin Amy-Jean Yee, a consultant at St Simon Fung Private School in Kota Kinabalu who noted that Western parents tended to worry too much about their children's self-esteem.

"The obsession over a child's self-esteem sees many parents adopting a *laissez-faire* approach – one where discipline is rarely enforced," she said.

"James Dobson – an American psychologist and author – has already criticised this and there are many pitfalls of lax parenting."

Yee added that the ability to be forthright without having to tiptoe around an issue had to be common practice in order to set rules effectively, which would lead to stability.

"There must be well-defined parameters for children to fall back on and this builds accountability in them," she said.

Joining the debate, Dr Adrian Hare, the head of HELP's English Department, got the crowd thinking with his no-holds-barred criticism.

Focusing on the refusal – or inability – of many parents to admonish their children in public, Dr Hare reversed the commonly held view of self-esteem.

"The common thing we hear from parents is that they don't want their child to be humiliated," he said to a wide-eyed audience.

"Well, the parents should feel humiliated for being unable to discipline their children in public."

No endorsement

Moving along, the speakers were quick to note that they were not advocating Chua's extreme measures.

"Discipline – and encouraging a child to



Yee Joo Keng argues that pushing young children too far is counterproductive as it may lead to burnout.



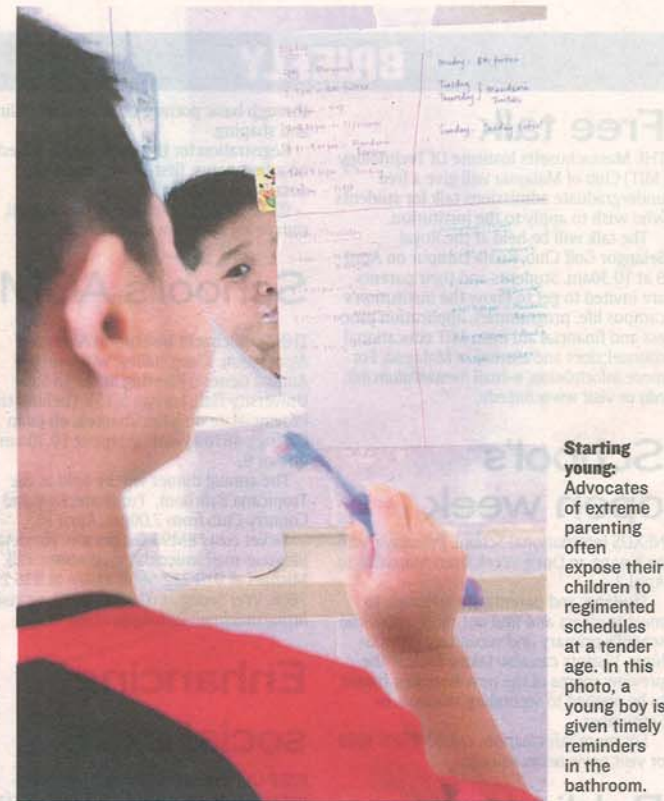
Prof Wilks argues that an emphasis on achievement should not come at the expense of normal social interaction.



Under pressure: A young child is coaxed to play her piano pieces by her cane-wielding mother.



Meet the Pohs: Strict parenting often requires children to comply to certain rules before they get to indulge in their favourite activities.



Starting young: Advocates of extreme parenting often expose their children to regimented schedules at a tender age. In this photo, a young boy is given timely reminders in the bathroom.

succeed – is important as long as it does not get too overbearing," mused Yee.

"Ultimately, children should not be robbed of their childhood."

Pointing out that children had been sent to her for help because they were "sick with school", Yee warned against pushing children too hard at a young age, she added that the sheer number of tuition classes many young children were subjected to, could pass as a social hazard.

"Some may only get five to six hours of sleep a day and if things get worse, being at school could become a terrible rat race."

Her views are shared by Justina Poh, an educator at a Cambridge English For Life centre in Kota Kemuning.

Relating how parents complained about the lack of homework their children were given, Poh pointed out that one's childhood should not be like a pressure cooker.

"Some parents just take things too seriously," said the mother of two. "I made it a point not to be too domineering on my children."

Emphasising that Chua's book was not intended to be prescriptive, Assoc Prof Christine Lee Kim-Eng of Singapore's National Institute of Education said that extreme parenting yielded mixed results.

Dismal failures are met as frequently – if not more – as success stories and it would be foolhardy for parents to associate extreme parenting with successful children.

"Although she hasn't stopped trying, Chua herself conceded that what worked for her

older daughter did not work with her younger one who rebelled," she mused.

Drawing parallels to her two "boys" – the older is driven while the younger is rather laidback – Lee said that it was pivotal for parents to "know" their children before committing to any particular method.

Mind matters

Offering a more academic take on the matter, Prof Ray Wilks, the head of the International Medical University's Psychology programme, ventured that the effectiveness of extreme parenting hinged on a child's psyche.

Simply put: Not everyone was cut out for hairdryer treatment and parents ran the risk of adversely affecting a child's long term development or interest in a field by pushing – or scolding – too hard.

"Not every child can take it mentally," he said.

"If children deem themselves unworthy, they could end up having an inferiority complex and this won't help their self-confidence."

"A lack of freedom when it comes to social activities could also result in a child becoming introverted and this could be a problem later in life."

"In an ideal situation, children should be able to sit back at some stage and take pride that they have given their best in a particular endeavor."

But what happens when one's best isn't quite good enough?

This gave rise to another debate and it is interesting that Chua herself admitted that the Chinese parenting approach was weakest when it came to failure – it did not tolerate that possibility.

And that refusal to go under was the cornerstone of a virtuous circle of confidence, hard work, and more success.

To that, Prof Wilks argued out that while hard work was often the trait of successful men, unsuccessful men often worked hard – if not harder – as well.

He added that there was no guarantee of personal success and initial setbacks on paper should not prompt parents to up the ante at the expense of normal social interaction.

However, advocates of extreme parenting begged to differ this was best exemplified by Hassan (who requested anonymity), a firm advocate of strict parenting.

"Normal social interaction?" he remarked. "I don't want my daughter to be normal and I don't mind pushing her to ensure she is successful."

"I even considered enrolling her in a Chinese school for a rigorous experience, but my wife and I don't speak Chinese, so we send her for extra language classes instead."

As he spoke, his 10-year-old daughter Zuraida could be heard practicing Schumann's *Op 68* on the piano.

"She's already in Grade Four and we'll make a musician out of her yet," enthused Hassan. "Her progress is good and I'm sure she can perform at some big events one day."

Dysfunctional behaviour

Zuraida's orientation bears some uncanny resemblance to Chua's daughters.

Also a piano player, Sophia won an international competition to perform at Carnegie Hall while Louisa's prowess with the violin saw her accepted by Naoko Tanaka's – a world renowned violin teacher – private studio.

However, this was far from a picture-perfect scene.

Teeth marks were discovered on the piano and a younger Sophia was the culprit. Unhappy at being pushed for hours, she gnawed on her piano in frustration.

As for Louisa, catching the eyes – or rather, ears – of a world-renowned teacher turned out to be the last thing she wanted and as she

ended up playing more tennis after rebelling. A rift of sorts, perhaps, but worse examples can be derived from the detritus of parenting experiments gone wrong.

And at times, the wrong just hides behind a façade of what appears to be a success story, which ironically serves as an effective smoke screen.

An investment banker in London, Kok Siang (not his real name) was the pride of his family ever since he was knee-high.

A musician of sorts – he plays the piano and violin – Kok Siang's rigorous drilling paid off as he constantly scored straight A's during his school days.

In fact, the only instance he missed out was in Form Four when he was convalescing from dengue fever.

"It wasn't a major exam like the SPM but my parents gave me a grilling for getting a B in Biology," he recalled.

"They did not – or refused to – consider the fact that I missed school for a few weeks and I could not prepare because I was ill."

"It was then and there where I felt that they were more interested with my accomplishments than me."

The seething incident later degenerated into meltdown and Kok Siang's relationship with his parents was altered forever.

He still pays his respects out of filial piety but his recent three-day stopover in Malaysia for Chinese New Year sums up everything.

"Why stay longer?" he shrugged. "I don't know whether they want to see me or my 'success'."

"Maybe it's both but they always emphasise and brag about the wrong thing if that's the case. I don't really know till today."

"There's only one thing worse than being a bad or an abusive parent – you can be a stranger."

Striking a balance
Kok Siang's case personifies Prof Wilks warning that parents should not take their children's successes as an extension of their own.

By well-rounded, Prof Wilks is not referring to a string of extra-curricular accomplishments on paper, but rather, sufficient time with a good support group of trusted friends and family members.

"In essence, parents would want their children to be responsible citizens who are compassionate, confident, upright and self-motivated."

"Achieving helps but parents must not get too distracted by this."

Sharing similar sentiments, Lee emphasised that children had to find their "own way" in life.

She added that she was not advocating a model of anti-perfection but rather, a simple reminder: Why not let children be themselves?

"In this case, parents function as a guide and not a dictator," she said philosophically.

"If you have to try so hard to get them to do something, it probably isn't working."

But giving credit where credit is due, the interviewees in this story did not withhold praise from Chua.

Prof Wilks said that he would congratulate Chua on a "job well done" as her children turned out the way she hoped they would be – successful.

On the other hand, Lee pointed out that Chua showed tremendous resolve in parenting.

"Quite frankly, not everyone could do what she did to her girls," she quipped. And Poh can hardly disagree.

"I could never imagine myself being so harsh on my children and I would not want to," she said.

"However, her list of 'don'ts' give me a few ideas for the future."

Why we are not 'tiger' parents

SOME parents may be caught in two minds when it comes extreme parenting but Patrick Poh Tze Liang and his wife Justina Poh have no such qualms.

"I'm no tiger mom," said Justina unequivocally.

"I'm not one because I believe there's no one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to raising children and I'm not the domineering sort to pressure them into something."

Emphasising that life was a non-linear journey, Justina said that heartbreaks and disappointments were bound to happen and she wanted to be there for her children.

"It can't be smooth sailing all the way and when they fall, I want to be there for them and I don't want them to feel apprehensive."

Agreeing, Patrick added that tiger parenting could only work if parents – or at least one of them – could dedicate a considerable amount of time to their offspring.

And in their case – both Patrick and Justina have day jobs – such a solution was simply impractical.

He added that extreme parenting could also backfire.

"I only have a few hours to spend with them each weekday," he said. "I can't be scolding them too much with two hours, can I?"

He added that the dynamics of parenting had been altered by the digital age and parents were no primary source of influence as children spent more time with their friends in person or on the net.

Emphasising his balance, Patrick said that he just wanted his children to do their best in whatever they chose to be.

"I want them to have their own mind, ambitions and dreams," he enthused. "Everyone defines success differently but if they achieve it, it's a bonus."

Chosen paths: 'Tiger parents' sometimes select extracurricular activities for their children and ballet is a popular choice along with classical instruments like the piano, violin and cello.