



Quentin Vjoux

February 17, 2012

Building Self-Control, the American Way

By SANDRA AAMODT and SAM WANG

EACH year, it seems, a new book emerges to capitalize on the parental insecurities of Americans. Last year it was Amy Chua's "Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother." This time it's Pamela Druckerman's "Bringing Up Bébé."

But rather than trying to emulate the strict discipline supposedly instilled by child-rearing techniques in other countries, it may be more useful to consider the science of successful parenting in general. Like their Chinese and French counterparts, American parents can make a child's mind strong — by enlisting the child as an ally.

In any culture, the development of self-control is crucial. This ability, which depends on the prefrontal cortex, provides the basis for mental flexibility, social skills and discipline. It predicts success in education, career and marriage. Indeed, childhood self-control is twice as important as intelligence in predicting academic achievement. Conversely, poor self-control in elementary school increases the risk of adult financial difficulties, criminal behavior, single parenthood and drug dependence.

Traditionally, Asian students succeed in part because they show good self-control from an early age. In one study, Chinese preschoolers were six months ahead of American children in developing mental control, like the ability to look to the left when shown a face pointing to the right. Another study found that Korean 3-year-olds did as well on such tasks as British children who were 17 months older.

Like many brain capacities, self-control can be built through practice. Chinese parenting emphasizes child training, which combines close supervision of performance with substantial support and motivation for the child's efforts. This approach comes at a great cost to parents and children. East Asian students study long and hard — in South Korea, 14 hours a day. Parental pressure there is so intense that the government has hired inspectors to enforce a 10 p.m. curfew on private tutoring.

In "Bringing Up Bébé," Ms. Druckerman, a journalist, is envious of Parisian parents whose children don't throw tantrums in public or fight on playgrounds. She ascribes this good behavior to stern French methods like forcing children to follow schedules and wait for attention. But in the school system, this strict approach translates to a rigid curriculum with an emphasis on memorization. French children also are tracked into different academic paths by age 12, a practice that reinforces the influence of parental socioeconomic status on educational and career outcomes, reducing social mobility.

Fortunately for American parents, psychologists find that children can learn self-control without externally imposed pressure. Behavior is powerfully shaped not only by parents or teachers but also by children themselves. The key is to harness the child's own drives for play, social interaction and other rewards. Enjoyable activities elicit dopamine release to enhance learning, while reducing the secretion of stress hormones, which can impede learning and increase anxiety, sometimes for years.

Effective approaches for building self-control combine fun with progressively increasing challenges. Rather than force activities onto an unwilling child, take advantage of his or her individual tendencies. When children develop self-control through their own pursuit of happiness, no parental hovering is required. Find something that the child is crazy about but that requires active effort. Whether it's compiling baseball statistics or making (but not passively watching) YouTube videos, passionate hobbies build mental staying power that can also be used for math homework.

Play allows children to practice skills that are useful in adult life. Young children build self-control through elaborate, imaginative games like pretending to be a doctor or a fireman. Preschool teachers can promote self-control with simple techniques — for example, handing a child a drawing of an ear to remind him that it's his turn to listen. Frequent practice is crucial. Montessori preschool instruction, which has been shown to lead to strong academic achievement, incorporates self-control into daily activities.

Learning a second language strengthens mental flexibility, an aspect of self-control, because the languages interfere with each other and because children must determine which language the listener will understand. Bilingual children do well on tasks that require them to ignore conflicting cues, for example reporting that a word is printed in green ink even though it says "red." Bilingual children are better at learning abstract rules and reversing previously learned rules, even before their first birthday. People who continue to speak both languages as adults show these benefits for a lifetime.

Aerobic exercise, which increases prefrontal cortex activity, is another way to build cognitive flexibility. Further benefits may come from Asian practices that require sustained attention and disciplined action, like martial arts, [yoga](#) and meditation. Though parents often worry that physical education takes time away from the classroom, an analysis of multiple studies instead found strong evidence that physical activity improved academic performance.

The connection between self-control and social skills seems to be a two-way street. Helping children to identify their emotions and think through possible consequences before reacting improves self-control, in the classroom and at home. According to an analysis of 213 studies involving more than 270,000 students from kindergarten through high school, programs to enhance social and emotional development accelerate school achievement as much as interventions targeted at academic subjects.

Children do not all start at the same place, but they all can benefit from building self-control. Though many children develop this ability at home, children of stressed and overwhelmed parents have fewer opportunities to do so and benefit greatly from preschool programs as preparation for later schooling. In addition, boys, on average, develop self-control later than girls. Regardless of initial ability, increasing self-control improves life outcomes.

Americans could take one tip from Asian and French parents: abandon the idea that they must support self-esteem at all costs. Children do not benefit from routine empty praise, like the cries of "Good job!" that ring out over American playgrounds. Chinese and French parents are sparing in their praise, yet children from those cultures do not have noticeably lower self-esteem.

More effective is to praise a child for effort. “You’re so smart!” doesn’t suggest what to do next time; “Wow, you kept working on that math problem until you got it right!” carries a clear message about the desired behavior. Communicating high but achievable expectations confers tools for real success — the best route to true self-esteem.

An internally motivated approach to building self-control plays to traditional American strengths. Being self-motivated may lead to other positive long-term consequences as well, like independence of thought and willingness to speak out.

Helping your children learn to manage themselves, rather than rely on external orders, could pay big dividends in adulthood. With a little luck, they may end up agreeing with the legendarily hard-striving Thomas Edison: “I think work is the world’s greatest fun.”

Sandra Aamodt, a former editor in chief of Nature Neuroscience, and Sam Wang, an associate professor of molecular biology and neuroscience at Princeton, are the authors of “Welcome to Your Child’s Brain: How the Mind Grows From Conception to College.”