Is Tiger Parenting Possible Without Tears?

The new book 'Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother' certainly has parents in the playground talking. According to author Amy Chua, "This was supposed to be a story of how Chinese parents are better at raising kids than Western ones. But instead, it's about a bitter clash of cultures, a fleeting taste of glory, and how I was humbled by a thirteen-year-old."

In case you haven't read the book or one of the articles, Chua lists a number of rules that she enforced with her daughters. These include not being allowed to watch TV or play computer games (fair enough – many parents aspire to this one), attend sleepovers (mmm... tempting...) or get anything less than an A (if only...). However, there are also no play dates, no choices in extra-curricular activities and (though not on the list) probably no time for fun. Instead, there was total commitment to academic success and expertise at something, preferably violin or piano.

According to Chua, in Chinese parenting theory, hard work produces accomplishment, which produces confidence and yet more accomplishment. We may think that 'Asian kids are naturally good at maths', when in fact, she asserts, it is simply a case of hard - sometimes punishing - work.

She has clearly put an astonishing amount of effort and focus into her kids. For this I admire her – she didn't just pop up occasionally demanding full marks, but shared some of the hard slog, both in engaging with the detail and in building the self belief that helped her children succeed. She helped her children develop a 'growth mindset' where they attribute success to persistence and hard work (or conversely the lack of it), rather than a 'Fixed Mindset', where success depends on factors outside their control (their perception of their ability, the teaching, problems with their equipment...boring books etc). The latter results in a tendency towards giving up earlier or not even trying and consequently not reaching their potential.
On the other hand, if her daughters didn't practice Chua threatened them with no lunch, no dinner, no birthday parties for two, three, four years...she told them to "stop being lazy, cowardly, self-indulgent and pathetic." They then "worked right through dinner" without letting her daughter "get up, not for water, not

©Parenting Matters 2010

even for bathroom breaks." The anecdote concludes by describing how her eldest daughter was "beaming" after she finally mastered the piece and "wanted to play it over and over."

In the short-term shame, guilt and bribery may work, depending on the personality of the child and determination of the parent. Most parents resort to these tactics occasionally, but used consistently they can damage relationships, lead to power battles, and in the long run are neither motivating nor effective.

'Helicopter parenting' or hovering over your children and scheduling their lives completely risks denying them the opportunity to learn to make their own choices, and their own mistakes. These are vital learning experiences for children and help them find out who they are and to become capable and confident. And this becomes increasingly important as they head for the teenage years. It can be really hard as a parent to know for example when to stop swimming club because they have lost interest or whether to encourage them through a bad musical patch, believing they will be pleased they stayed with it in the end.

Interestingly, a published letter by Chua's eldest daughter (the compliant one...), defends her parents' methods. She ends by saying, "If I died tomorrow, I would die feeling I've lived my whole life at 110 percent. And for that, Tiger Mom, thank you."

As with all things – it's about balance. If parents give plenty of positive encouragement to motivate and praise after a child has worked hard, children become more resilient and learn an enduring sense of competence and self worth. Instead of feeling valued only for achievements, giving children the opportunity to develop genuine passions and interests along with the ability to work hard and persevere, undoubtedly equips them well for later life.

Must go and get the kids off their computer game...

©Parenting Matters 2010