

Communication with Schools Can Help Hmong Parents Cope with Discipline Issues

MPC-31

Hmong parents can find parenting to be trickier than they expected if their children and teens are exposed to cultural influences different than those with which the parents grew up. Traditional Hmong values and discipline practices can be quite different than their contemporary American counterparts, and Hmong children who grow up in the United States may develop different values than their parents. Communicating their cultural values and practices to their children's teachers and other school officials can help Hmong parents to cope with and resolve discipline issues.



Traditional Hmong values and discipline practices can be quite different than their contemporary American counterparts, and Hmong children who grow up in the United States may develop different values than their parents. Communicating their cultural values and practices to their children's teachers and other school officials can help Hmong parents to cope with and resolve discipline issues.

Hmong students bring the cultural behaviors they are taught in early childhood to the classroom, according to Dao Xiong, an advocate at PACER Center for Southeast Asian parents. These may include respect for the self

and others, responsibility for one's own actions, and being silent unless it is absolutely necessary to speak. The last behavior may present a problem if a teacher interprets a child's silence as failure to participate in class. Hmong parents need to inform teachers about their cultural values so that teachers interpret their behavior patterns correctly and offer encouragement if children have questions but are afraid to ask, Xiong said.

Hmong children who began their lives in Laos or are raised by parents who grew up there are taught that every family in the village serves as a role model for the children. "In Laos, children receive all the care they need from the entire village, not just one family or one parent," said Xiong. He said the model and the values that children learn from observation, are not as effective once the Hmong family moves to the United States. The reasons for this include differences in social and cultural environments, in addition to the influence of media and advertising on children, particularly teenagers.

When Hmong teens enter high school, these influences can be even more exaggerated due to peer pressure and larger class sizes, said Xiong. In high school, Hmong students suddenly find themselves in situations in which teachers cannot pay as much attention to them as they did in elementary school, causing the students to turn more to their peers for support.

continued on other side

Minnesota Parent Center is a project of PACER Center, Inc.

©2000 PACER Center, 8161 Normandale Blvd., Minneapolis, MN 55437-1044, (952) 838-9000
(952) 838-0190, TTY; 1-800-53-PACER; www.pacer.org



Hmong ideas about fair treatment can be very different than mainstream American ideas. For example, if a disagreement or a fight results after a Hmong student is teased by others, the Hmong student may not feel he should be punished by being sent to the principal's office when he did not start the trouble, Xiong said. Xiong said parents need to communicate their cultural perceptions assertively to school authorities and teachers so that issues are interpreted appropriately.

Xiong has several suggestions to help Hmong parents cope with discipline issues:

- Observe your teen's behavior. Watch for signs that everything is not alright, such as lack of involvement in family or school activities, including homework.
- Be aware of your teen's grades. If the grades are poor, start investigating what may be negatively influencing them and what can be helpful resources.
- Monitor where your teen is and who they are with; make sure they are where they say they are. If necessary, include after-school or community-based contacts in this task.
- Educate your children about city curfews and immigration law and deportation if you or your children are not naturalized citizens.
- Go to your child's school to develop relationships with important contacts. If you do not know who the contacts should be, ask the front office if there is anyone you can talk with on a regular basis.

Language, social, or educational barriers can all prevent Hmong parents from approaching a school, Xiong said. If this is the case, Xiong recommends that parents bring a friend or relative who can assist them but to be aware that interpreters cannot make decisions for the family. Although parents may appreciate what an interpreter can do for them, they should not feel they need the same educational background and training as the interpreter to communicate their needs to the school authority. Maintaining strong relationships with school and community contacts is really the key to Hmong parents overcoming problems and using discipline in a manner that will help their children grow, Xiong said.

Reprinted from the FAST Work newsletter, Vol 7, May 1999.