

Viewpoint

Lessons for parents and teachers

Why we can only win in our family relationships – not conquer

If there is one thing all parents can agree on, it is that they want the best for their children. But what is truly best? This is where opinions start to diverge. Some believe discipline and a focus on achievement are necessary to prepare children for success in our competitive society. Others think children must have the freedom to find their own paths to happiness. Ever since childhood was “invented,” people have attempted to weigh the interests of society against those of the individual, obedience against freedom. Danish family therapist Jesper Juul urges us to stop thinking in terms of opposites. To him the family is a place for living out relationships, while schools and other institutions are tasked with education. Adults and children should share the goal of learning from each other and developing each other’s competences.

by Jesper Juul

A BOOK that recently provoked bitter controversy in the USA is now attracting widespread attention in Europe as well. In her *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, author Amy Chua sings the praises of the traditional Chinese mother over the typical Western one. In a broader sense, she uses these archetypes to advocate stricter regimens for children. Chua, a professor at Yale University who comes from a Chinese-Filipino family, bases her advice on her experiences raising her two daughters, from whom she demanded high achievement starting at an early age. Her older daughter succeeded, the younger rebelled.

Amy Chua’s book is not only well written but also well timed. It arrives at a point in our history where there are more questions than answers regarding the upbringing and education of children. The way we raise children within the family used to be based on a moral consensus, but this has vanished in many countries. At the same time, our scientific knowledge about the development of children and their brains has grown tremendously and is still growing every day. This has led to varying degrees of insecurity among the majority of parents. Some are what I call “constructively insecure” – curious, engaged and willing to rethink their own parents’ methods – while some are quite simply lost in their effort to do the right thing, to be good parents and raise happy children.

Performance and achievement

Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother is interesting and relevant insofar as Chua compares two nations that share similar values and goals: raising and educating winners and accumulating power, wealth and control, both nationally and internationally. The highest priority is placed on performance and achievement, which serves as moral justification for almost unlimited use of force, manipulation and punishment.

It might surprise many of my readers to learn that I consider Chua an excellent parent. She wholeheartedly does what she believes to be right and commits herself to spending much of her time and energy with her



Thomas Struth, The Barlow Family, New York 2007

“Children as well as adults are competent individuals. They can be disciplined and obedient – if treated with respect and dignity.”

daughters. Her convictions and strategy are successful with her first-born daughter, and when the younger sister rejects the regime, Chua responds appropriately – by reflecting and modifying her ways. The traditional alternative would have been to call her second child wrong, impossible, guilty and naughty and maybe even search for a diagnosis.

Relationships in families and education in schools

Would I recommend that other parents follow Chua’s approach? No, definitely not! As a family therapist and professional educator I have met far too many “project kids” suffering from very painful existential problems that affect not only the individual but also their relationships with their partners, children and parents in very painful and destructive ways.

As the reader may have noticed, I make a careful distinction between raising children in families and education as something that takes place in an institutional setting. There are and should be important differences; the two bodies should influence, support and guide the child at very different levels in order to serve its best interests. This of course raises an old question: Do the best interests of children conflict with the best interests of society? Historically, this has been a concern – but the fact is, they do not. The answer depends on the kind of society we want and how we define our objectives as parents and educators.

Gains for society

As a father, grandfather, citizen and professional my answer is to emphasize mental and physical health as well as psycho-social competence. This is without a doubt the best for the individual, and the gains for society are enormous – even from a cost-benefit perspective. Measured by these standards, the raising and education of children has been a near-disaster for the past three hundred years at least. I invite those who doubt this

conclusion to look at the statistics on alcoholism, mental illness, crime, physical and sexual abuse, consumption of illegal as well as legal drugs, psychosomatics – the list goes on and on.

Assuming that we want to avoid emotional abuse and physical violence (the two most costly phenomena we know) when raising our children, the formation of their individual personalities and personal characteristics is difficult to plan and predict. The first-born child always tends to be the most cooperative, i.e. the most likely to submit to any style of parenting. The second child – regardless of gender – tends to be very different and is often considered difficult. Number three will often develop into a more creative and free spirit. In other words, if you want one of your children to follow in your footsteps and fulfill your dreams, pick the first born!

Thinking in alternatives instead of opposites

Since the first PISA study on the achievements of schoolchildren in different countries was published, governments all over the world have reacted with panic, putting pressure on schools, teachers, students and parents. This has coincided with growing dissatisfaction among teachers and school administrators, who are finding that children and parents today are less willing to conform to a school system that was meant to serve an early industrial society and its need for disciplined, obedient and submissive workers.

The fact is our school system is going through a severe crisis. The majority of schools in the Western world are moving further away from fulfilling their educational potential as well as the intellectual potential of their students. This is not being caused by parents and children, but by the schools themselves – and by politicians with no political vision. Governments seem to believe that an extra hour of mathematics will be enough to improve their nation’s math skills and ensure its ability to compete on the world market.

Even some professionals in the field of pedagogy and education are calling for more discipline and obedience,

for more rules and stricter consequences for children and parents. In other words, we are living in a reality where fewer and fewer parents are willing to imitate the methods Chua used with her firstborn, while our educational system continues to think in opposites instead of seeking alternatives. The fact remains that today's children and teenagers are coming into the educational system as people, not merely as pupils – and the same is true for adults who enter the job market. Unless the Western world is faced with a severe recession that lasts several decades, this development will continue.

Faced with a similar situation, the corporate world seems slow to change its old attitudes and realize that employees have families and that these families are not in competition with the employer. All our research and experience tells us that employees with families work more and better than those who live alone. It also tells us that family crises and especially divorce tend to lower performance and create dangerous situations at work-sites where security is a top priority. Even the very common insecurity which parents feel about their parental role tends to influence efficiency and focus. In my company, Family-Lab International, we are now in dialog with companies that wish to support the family unit by offering seminars, lectures and counseling to their employees as a preventive measure.

New paradigms, old certainties

There is no doubt that discipline, in the form of self-discipline and obedience by choice, is an important quality not only for schoolchildren, but executives, bookkeepers, drivers, and secretaries as well. Joy in learning is not something which children have to be taught, but we urgently need to find new ways of encouraging this joy and keeping it alive past the third grade. Brain science and the psychology of human relationships are currently showing us the next steps forward. What Chua forgot in relation to her older daughter was the importance and significance of choice. Children as well as adults are competent individuals. They can be

disciplined and obedient in order to serve their country, their employer, their teachers and their parents if treated with respect and dignity. The old-fashioned substitute for this is fear and anxiety – whether it is fear of punishment or of losing love.

The first rebellion against management by fear came in the 1960s and 70s. The movement was carried by strong “anti” feelings and opinions, which in hindsight were productive in several ways, but limited by their oppositional nature. This comes only too naturally to our brains, which are constructed to think in opposites – unless taught otherwise. We are now in the process of internalizing a completely new paradigm, strongly supported by several scientific disciplines. In the meantime we must live with ourselves, our children and employees without the support of old and outdated absolutes. It is time for creative thinking. This is what all levels of society need the most.

RESUMÉ Jesper Juul



Jesper Juul was born in Denmark in 1948. After completing secondary school, his jobs included ship's cook, excavator and barkeeper. He went on to study history, religion and the history of ideas and then worked as a teacher and social pedagogue before qualifying as a family therapist. He is co-founder of the Kempler Institute of Scandinavia and founder of the Family-Lab International program, which is offered in six countries (www.family-lab.com). He has published numerous works that aim to support parents in raising and building relationships with their children. His influential book *Your Competent Child* appeared in 2001.