Spring 2008

Dear Family,

Hello from the Intercultural Family Study (IFS)! In this newsletter, we’d like to share with you some of the findings from our research project so far. As you know, the IFS is designed to better understand how Chinese parents and teenagers deal with the challenges they face after immigrating to Canada. Chinese and Canadian cultural values are quite different, and family members must figure out how to balance the two cultures in their lives. In some families, parents and their children are quite similar in their approach; in other families, parents and children take very different approaches. Our study aims to explore these types of similarities and differences. We’re also interested in how immigrant parents raise healthy well-adjusted children. Parenting teenagers is never an easy job, and it may be especially difficult for immigrant parents who are living in a new cultural context.

We are still in the process of analyzing all of the information that families shared with us. However, as you will read, we have already learned many interesting things! The information we present below highlights some of the challenges families face, as well as some of the strengths that are evident.

Thank you once again for your participation in our project. We hope you enjoy this newsletter, and we look forward to meeting with you again in the near future!

Sincerely,

Dr. Catherine Costigan and the IFS team

Who participated in the research?

A total of 183 families participated in this study. Fathers were, on average 47 years old (ranging from 37 to 68). Mothers were slightly younger than fathers, with an average age of 45 years (ranging from 35 to 61). Mothers and fathers had been in Canada for as little as 2 years to as long as 35 years. The average length of residence in Canada was 11 years for fathers and 10 years for mothers.

There was a wide variety of education levels, ranging from elementary school to graduate studies. On average, fathers had more years of education than mothers.

The children were an average of 15 years old (ranging from 12 to 18 years). Approximately half of the participating children were girls (52.2%) and half were boys (47.8%). Many of the children (75%) were born outside of Canada, and arrived in Canada around 8 years of age, on average.
Why did families immigrate?

There are many reasons why people may decide to immigrate to a new country. In our study, the most common reason parents decided to immigrate was so that their child could have an opportunity for education in Canada. The next two most common reasons for immigration were so that parents could pursue their own educational or career growth, or so that families could stay together or be reunited.

Do parents and children differ in acculturation?

When individuals move from one country to another, they face the challenge of adapting to a new culture’s values and practices, while at the same time deciding what to retain of their ethnic culture’s values and traditions. This process is called acculturation.

Our findings indicated significant differences among family members in the extent to which they stayed involved in Chinese culture. Specifically, parents engaged in more Chinese behaviours than children— for example, both mothers and fathers were more likely than their children to prefer speaking Chinese, watching Chinese TV, and spending time with Chinese friends.

Although children were more involved in Canadian culture than their parents, their sense of belonging to the Chinese group was actually stronger than their parents.

Differences in involvement in Canadian culture were even larger. On average, children engaged in more Canadian behaviours than parents. For example, they were much more likely to prefer speaking English, watching English language TV, and spending time with Canadian friends.

Some parents may be concerned that their children’s interest and involvement in Canadian society means that they will neglect being Chinese. However, our findings suggest that this is not the case. For example, children reported a stronger sense of belonging to the Chinese group than their parents did.
Do parents and children differ in their beliefs about adolescent independence?

In many cultures, adolescence is a time of life when children start to become independent from their parents. Parents and children sometimes have different ideas about how much independence and freedom adolescents should have. For example, parents and children may have different opinions about when children can date, or whether they can choose their own career paths.

Parents and their children answered these questions quite differently. Children (both boys and girls) wanted more freedom in their life than their parents wanted to allow.

Interestingly, fathers of boys had different opinions than fathers of girls. Specifically, fathers of boys endorsed higher levels of freedom than fathers of girls. Mothers, on the other hand, did not have different opinions about independence for boys and girls.

What issues do parents and children have disagreements about?

As children become teenagers, the number of disagreements they have with parents often increases. We asked parents and children to tell us in the past two weeks whether they had disagreements in 26 different areas. Overall, disagreements between parents and children were mild. Children reported disagreements about similar issues with their fathers and mothers. Both parents and children reported that they were most likely to have disagreements in the following three areas:

- getting low grades in school
- lying
- playing computer or video games

Interestingly, fathers and mothers reported more areas of parent-child disagreement than their children reported. Also, children reported more areas of disagreement with their mothers than with their fathers.
• **Who makes decisions about the children in the family?**

We wanted to know who decides things in the family, such as how children should wear their hair, whether they should stay home from school if they are sick, and who their friends should be. One thing we learned was that parents and children don’t always agree on which issues children decide in the family.

In the parents’ opinion, the top three items that children decide in the family are

- what clothes the child wears to school
- when the child does homework
- how much time the child spends on homework

Children agreed that they most often decide what clothes to wear to school. However, unlike their parents, children also thought they were the primary decision-maker when it comes to which friends to spend time with and which TV shows, videos, and movies to watch.

What are the issues that parents are most likely to decide? Parents and children agreed that parents are most likely to decided whether the child can stay overnight somewhere away from home. From the children’s perspective, the next two issues that parents were most likely to decide were when the child can begin dating and the age at which the child can leave school. In contrast, from the parents’ perspective, the next two issues that parents were most likely to decide were what time the child has to be home on weeknights and on weekends.

• **What are parents' child-rearing goals?**

Many parents have specific goals for the qualities that they would like to see in their children. For example, some parents hope that their children show a lot of independence, while other parents think that respecting others is the most important quality to develop. In our study, we found that mothers and fathers placed greatest value on the same child-rearing goals:

- be strong minded and independent
- establish harmonious relationships in a group
- respect other people
- be friendly and get along well with others
• **Who influences children more: Parents or friends?**

As children grow older, their friendships may take on greater importance. Despite the growing role of friends, parents also often remain a very important influence on adolescents. We were interested in learning about the areas of life in which parents are still the most influential, and the areas of life in which adolescents are more oriented towards their friends.

Children reported that they prefer to spend their free time with their friends. They value their friends’ opinions the most when making a new friend or choosing clothes.

However, when it comes to their values, children reported that they identify most closely with their parents. They want to model themselves after their parents. They also reported that they felt that their parents understand them more than their friends do.

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**How are children doing?**

• **What is children’s level of school achievement?**

The majority of children were doing well in school. The average grade point average (GPA) was B+ / A-. In addition, children said that they had strong motivation for school achievement. Doing well in school, getting good grades, going to university after high school, and being one of the best students in class were pretty important to them. Children also reported that they felt fairly confident in their academic abilities. On average, they perceived their level of achievement to be high. Girls reported higher levels of perceived achievement than boys. There were no differences in any of these school measures based on whether or not the children were born in Canada.

• **Are children bullied at school?**

Sometimes children pick on or hit other children, or hurt their feelings. Children may feel that they are bullied for no reason, or they may feel that they are bullied because of their ethnic background. The children in our study said that they were rarely, if ever, bullied. Being bullied because of their ethnic background was even less common. Boys and girls reported similar experiences in terms of bullying. However, the experience of bullying was related to children’s age. Older children reported being bullied or picked on because they were Chinese more often than younger children.
• Do children experience challenges in Canada?

Children may face challenges in Canada because of their language abilities (for example, their English ability is not good enough) or acculturation conflicts (for example, their parents don’t quite understand Canadian ways). Overall, in our study, children reported that they never or rarely felt these types of challenges.

However, children who came to Canada after they were 6 years old experienced more language-related difficulties, such as more difficulty getting good grades because of problems in understanding English, than children who were born in Canada or who immigrated at an early age. In addition, there was a correlation between children’s age and their reports of acculturation conflicts within the family. It seems that the older the children, the more conflicts they experienced within their family because of differences between parents and children in their preference for Canadian culture.

• How satisfying are parent-child relationships?

Both parents and children reported that, on average, their relationships were positive. For example, they reported fairly high levels of agreement on their aims and goals in life, and a high level of satisfaction with their relationship overall. Interestingly, parents reported higher levels of satisfaction than children did. Boys and girls reported similar levels of satisfaction with their relationships with their fathers and their mothers.

Once again, we are grateful to all of the families who participated in this research project.

We truly appreciate each family member’s willingness to share their experiences with us, and we look forward to meeting with you again soon!