

THE PARENTS' CHAT ROOM

By: Dr. Maulik Trivedi



Q: *Dear Dr. Trivedi,*

1) Our 12 year old daughter was caught shop lifting in the mall. We have done everything we can to instill the best of Indian values and culture. We think she is influ-

enced by her friends and want her to stop being friends with them. We do not want her to grow up a crack addict thief. Should we move back to India? Or send her to India?

- *Rajish Shah, Fort Lauderdale*

2) I am recently divorced and have two boys, 10 and 11 years old. They are both very good boys and they are well behaved on normal days. However, when they have friends over they become very rowdy. They refuse to eat Indian food, they only want to talk to me in English when their friends are around and it is almost as if they don't want to accept their own Indian identity. I don't know if I am making a mountain out of a molehill, but I have seen a lot of Indian kids that do not want to identify themselves as Indians and I would really like to prevent my children from going through that.

- *Sunita Verma, Jacksonville*

A: Both questions in this month's column present very similar dilemma for the parents; how to raise children who make decisions based on solid family values.

While it has always been true that most preteens and teens are under significant peer pressure, the job of a parent has become ever more important in recent years. With advancement of technology and diluting of traditional family life, kids in today's generation have a much broader exposure to information as well as opportunities for independent choice. On one hand, parents struggle to instill family values that they identify as basis of their Indian heritage. On the other hand, the children often feel isolated and have difficulty identifying with their inherited culture. As a consequence, situations such as the ones described in the questions above arise. Let's look at some of the roots and implications of this family dynamic. As we do that, we will also explore possible solutions to bridge the gap for those families facing these complex issues.

No matter what age, children are influenced by their environment. What is even truer is that as children grow up, they are less and less influenced by the at-home environment and more and more likely to be influenced by the environment outside of their home. Nonetheless, early influences do carry more weight in shaping the child's value system and their character. Therefore, in the bigger picture, rather than pointing the finger at one specific incidence as the result of poor outside influence, all parents can benefit from taking a broader look at their child's problematic behavior. Build your children's character through repeated guidance and positive influence at home.

First, it is of tantamount importance to recognize that making mistakes is a way for children to learn. Rather than seeing poor behavior choices (i.e. shoplifting) as a precursor to punishment, it must be viewed as an opportunity to educate and refine the child's decision-making capacity. It is always better to mold than it is to scold. More simply said, it is easier to praise good

behavior choices and reinforce them than it is to address problem behaviors through punishments. Catch your children doing the right thing, and praise them for making good choices. Correct their poor choices as soon as you come to know about them, but do not dwell on them. Give your child repeated opportunities to prove to you that they know how to make better choices.

Also, be careful not to take one event and see it in the most 'catastrophic' light. It is easy to conjure up future negative images when you discover your child acting outside of the 'value' system you thought you had instilled in them. But, in reality, a child's upbringing is not shaped by a single choice. It is the total sum of all experiences, good and bad, which they have undergone. A child's ability to make good choices is determined by the variety and richness of their experiences growing up. Therefore, allow your children to learn from all of their experiences. Do not harbor negativity based on a handful of poor choices in behavior. Accentuate their positives.

For most parents, having direct access and involvement in their children's growth will prove most empowering in the long run. While sending the child to India may appear to be a quick fix to a situation, please acknowledge that you are surrendering all of the control over shaping your child's future by sending them away. Not to mention, you are creating a great distance in your relationship with your child. It would be much easier to refocus your time and energies towards positive parenting than to surrender your ability to influence them by sending them away. You must weigh the risks against the benefits of sending your children to India. You must do so without having false expectations or fantasies about children being raised in India, especially when they are away from their parents.

Finally, please note that what children see and experience as joyful and uniting is what they will carry on. Thus, if their sense of belonging is greater outside of their home than it is inside, you can be certain that they will grow up with a value system that is closer to the culture outside of their home. The best antidote is to create and maintain a circle of friends and family that can provide a culturally balanced atmosphere for the growing child. A healthy mix of Indian activities with American activities can reinforce Indian pride while allowing the child to mingle successfully with the American culture that surrounds them entirely once they leave their home.

Ultimately, if as parents, you have helped your child merge their Indian identity with their American life demands, then you will have successfully completed your job as a parent. If you get caught up in labeling Indian versus American, you will find yourself lost in a maze and discover your relationship with your child to be very distant and aloof. Although this may be difficult at first, over time, you too can develop this balanced approach to parenting.

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Please send your questions to
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