

Topic in Human Development:

Self-Regulation in Japanese and American Children

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The development of self-regulation amongst children is complex and influenced by a large number of factors such as attunement, family routine, language development, and social interaction, to name just a few (Kopp, 1982). Given self-regulation factors are likely influenced by early parent-child interactions, and since it's widely known that culture influences parental values and beliefs, one can expect to notice a large difference when comparing parental styles between two contrasting cultures, such as Japan and the United States. Furthermore, it would be expected to find a difference in the development of self-regulation between Japanese and American children.

Why is *Amae* important? *Amae* is a Japanese word lacking an English equivalent, however, in short, is defined as “passive love” and is often used when describing the most important relationship in Japanese culture: the parent-child relationship (Doi, 1973, p. 18). The concept is very much hierarchical and the verb form, *amaeru*, means to seek to fill the desire to be taken care of by someone of authority (Doi, 1973, p. 29). Though the concept of *amae* is not exclusive to Japanese culture, Japanese is the only language to have a word for it, shedding light to its value amongst the Japanese (Doi, 1973, p. 18). *Amae* is important to understand because it's at the core of Japanese culture, and is an essential piece to the Japanese definition for love, extending beyond the mother-child relationship and being valued and accepted in any type of adult relationships (Doi, 1973, p. 21).

What are the general beliefs about raising children for both Japanese and American Parents? Japanese are generally born into families that believe the baby is perfect from day one, lacking the need to be “reshaped by adult control” (Fogel, Stevenson, & Messinger, 1992, p. 37). The mother feels heavy pressure from society to be by her baby at all times, proactively predicting needs before they are shown, and ultimately making all effort to prevent fuss before it

happens (Morelli & Rothbaum, 2007, p. 517; Rothbaum, Pott, Azuma, Miyake, & Weisz, 2000, p. 1126). This preventative style doesn't stop after infancy however, and from a Westerner's perspective, is viewed as spoiling a child, creating a major barrier to learning the crucial skill of self-expression, which is heavily valued in the U.S. (Morelli, 2007, p. 517). In general, Westerners view a child as very dependent, needing to be taught independence, while Japanese view children as initially disconnected from family, needing to be swayed into full dependence of mother (*amae*) (Doi, 1973; Fogel, 1992, p. 36). This integration versus independence goal of Japanese and American parents is representative of the well-known distinction between East and West culture: collectivism and individualism. Perhaps what isn't as well-known or, at least not acknowledged enough, is that from very early on in life, children begin to internalize cultural values and adapt their behavior according to its ethics (Morelli, 2007, p. 512).

How does Japan's emphasis on empathy impact self-regulation? Empathy is at the core of Japanese culture, given its collectivistic nature and the value it places on group harmony (Morelli, 2007, p. 513; Rothbaum, 2000, p. 1128). Given this, it should come as no surprise that empathy is at the core of the mother-child relationship, as well (Morelli, 2007, p. 513). According to Clancy, Japanese instill this value in their children by consistently reporting to the child "what others are thinking and feeling in various situations" (as cited in Morelli, 2007, p. 514). Furthermore, in many ways, Japanese mothers demand empathy from their child and the result is an almost merging of the two minds (Rothbaum, 2000, p. 1126). From a Westerner's perspective, the Japanese take empathy too far and sacrifice too much of the self by merging minds and placing an extremely high value on restraining emotions (Rothbaum, 2000, p. 1129). This creates a flexible, constantly moving Japanese self, which changes according to each situation and adapts to the needs of others in order to preserve harmony (Morelli, 2007, 512).

While a flexible self is valued in Japan, a consistent self, regardless of situation or social setting, is highly valued in the West (Morelli, 2007, p. 518). In many ways, Japanese are the masters when it comes to self-regulation because they are so adaptable, even from early on in life. Considering the heavy emphasis on empathy in Japan and the fact developmental timing in children is directly tied to the importance and to the degree a certain skill is valued within a culture (Keller et al, 2004, p. 1755; Morelli, 2007, p. 516), it can be inferred that Japanese children develop self-regulation skills sooner than American children.

What are the main differences between Japanese and American parenting styles?

According to Barratt, Negayama, & Minami, Japanese infants spend only 2 hours per week away from mother compared to American infants spending around 24 hours away (as cited in Rothbaum, 2000, p. 1127). In addition, prolonged physical contact between mother and child is noticed more often in Japanese culture than American (Fogel, 1992, p. 44; Rothbaum, 2000, p. 1127). For example, sleeping habits, particularly the concept of co-sleeping, is a noticeable difference between Japan and the U.S. (Rothbaum, 2000, p. 1127). Japanese mothers have a long tradition of sleeping with their children, which Ohkubo found is just as common today as it was in the 1950's (as cited in, Shimizu, Park, & Greenfield 2014, p. 2). This extensive touch is so important, even beyond child and mother, the Japanese created their own word for it: "skinship," pronounced, "skinushipu" (Gregory, 2011, p. 180; Rothbaum, 2000, p. 1127). Caudill, Weinstein, and Barratt et al. highlight other "skinship" activities commonly found in Japan, such as children bathing with both mother and father, and breastfeeding that continues long after a child finishes feeding (as cited Rothbaum, 2000, p. 1127).

Keller et al. (2004) separates the style of parenting commonly found in Japan from the style found in the U.S. by using the terms proximal and distal; a proximal parenting style (i.e.,

central focus on touch and body contact) is usually found in Japan, while a distal parenting style is typical in the U.S. (Morelli, 2000; Rothbaum, 2000). The distal parenting style is less centered on touch and physical closeness, and instead, focuses on communication through words, eye contact, and facial expression (Keller, 2004; Morelli, 2000; Rothbaum, 2000). In addition, in distal parenting, play is more centered on objects rather than the interactions with others (Keller, 2004; Morelli, 2000; Rothbaum, 2000).

How do these different parenting style impact development? Keller (2004) supports the hypothesis of self-regulation being influenced by early mother-child interactions, and goes further to conclude there is a strong correlation between proximal parenting style and the early development of self-regulation (p. 1755). Harlow, Montagu, and Spitz also remind the reader “the relation of touch and body contact to socioemotional development has a long tradition in psychology” (as cited in Keller, 2004, p. 1755). Furthermore, Keller (2004) brings to light a strong correlation between distal parenting style and the early development of self-recognition (p. 1755).

In conclusion, research supports that culture influences parenting style, which directly influences self-regulation development in children. In addition, given the link between proximal parenting style and earlier development of self-regulation (Keller, 2004), and the fact Japanese adopt mostly a proximal parenting style (Keller, 2004; Morelli, 2000; Rothbaum, 2000), research supports earlier development of self-regulation within Japanese children relative to American.

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