



# Parenting Styles, Academic Demands and Children's Psychosocial Well-being: Why Today's Hong Kong Chinese Students Are So Stressed

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## Abstract

In Hong Kong, suicides and other experiences of psychosocial challenges among youths have become increasing social concerns. Existing literature suggests that authoritarian parenting practices, including the high degree of parental strictness and lower provision of autonomy for school-aged children, worsen the psychosocial well-being among children.<sup>1,2</sup> Hong Kong parents emphasize the importance of traditional Confucian values, which notably necessitate children's academic excellence, as well as conformity with parental expectations and control. This article evaluates existing studies and examines the relationships between authoritarian parenting practices and children's psychosocial well-being. This article also addresses autonomy-granting parenting approaches, an emerging parenting style in Hong Kong, as an alternative parenting approach, and studies the relationships between such approaches and children's psychosocial development. The present article suggests measures, in accordance with evaluated findings, for adjusting parental practices within Hong Kong Chinese families for the purpose of improving children's psychosocial well-being

**Key Words** Confucianism; Authoritarian Parenting; Autonomy-Granting Parenting; Psychosocial

## INTRODUCTION

Existing literature suggests that poor parenting practices, including a high degree of parental strictness or a lack of parental involvement in children's personal and academic development, are positively associated with children's experiences of psychosocial and behavioral challenges. These challenges include higher levels of academic stress, as well as higher risks of self-harm and self-inflicted death.<sup>2,3,4</sup> Here, academic stress refers to students' feelings of worry, helplessness, and stress about their academic performance.<sup>5</sup> In 2011, Hong Kong's then-Secretary for Food and Health Dr. York Chow reported in a press release that 32.5% of Hong Kong youths below age 25 displayed symptoms of depression, a rate nearly four times higher than that of individuals aged 25 or above.<sup>6</sup> However, Dr. Chow's report failed to address the determinants of depression symptoms among children and adolescents, preventing a full understanding of the causes of their psychological stress.

In their examination of the contributing factors in the psychosocial challenges of youth in Hong Kong, existing literature studies the nuanced relationships between traditional Confucian values, parenting styles and children's psychosocial well-being. Traditional Confucian values address the importance of filial piety and harmonious relationships with family members, which entail that children have the responsibility to obey parental instructions and conform to parental respect, obedience, loyalty, material provision, and physical care for their parents.<sup>10</sup> Here, Confucianism places little emphasis on children's independence, assertiveness and creativity.<sup>11,12</sup> According to Confucian

values, Hong Kong parents of Chinese cultural heritage should focus on children's academic success, as academic achievements of the younger generations contribute to a sense of family pride.<sup>13,14</sup> While existing literature argues that Confucian values play an important role in today's Hong Kong Chinese parenting styles, autonomy-granting parenting styles, which are traditionally considered to oppose Confucian beliefs, are emerging in Chinese families in Hong Kong.<sup>15</sup> Here, an autonomy-granting parenting approach is defined as parental encouragement and respect and tolerance of children's opinions, even when children's opinions may not conform to parental expectations.<sup>7</sup>

Because the World Health Organization considers the mental and social well-being of children and adolescents essential to their health outcomes, it is crucial to elucidate how parenting styles are associated with youths' psychosocial well-being.<sup>16</sup> In doing so, their psychosocial well-being may be improved through adjustments to existing parenting practices within Hong Kong Chinese families.

## Authoritarian parenting styles vs autonomy granting parenting styles

### 1. Authoritarian preventing styles

A traditional Chinese proverb states, "Among hundreds of behaviors, filial piety is the most important one."<sup>21</sup> Filial piety, a core component of Confucian values, promotes restrictive, authoritarian parenting approaches.<sup>17</sup> Here, Confucian values argue children should respect their parents, as parents are responsible for developing proper conduct in their children.<sup>1,17</sup> The expression of independence and assertiveness by children is viewed as disrespectful and inappropriate.<sup>17</sup> This is because such an expression is contrary to conformity with parental expectations, as emphasized by the culture of filial piety.<sup>7,18</sup> According to Confucian values, children demonstrating independence and assertiveness are disobedient, resisting the development of proper conduct.<sup>7,19</sup> Relevant literature suggests that emphasizing too much or too little filial piety for young generations is detrimental to their psychosocial well-being, including increasing the risk of developing symptoms of depression.<sup>20,21</sup> Additional studies argue Hong Kong Chinese children might internalize the values of filial piety, positively interpreting parental control as a form of proper care.<sup>22,23</sup> In order to maximize children's academic excellence and families' sense of pride, Hong Kong Chinese parents often set high expectations and attempt to control children's academic performance, as compared with their Western counterparts.<sup>4</sup> Findings from a study conducted by Li *et al.* revealed that intensive parental educational and psychological control can facilitate positive adjustments in children, such as better development of self-efficacy in academic studies and a decreased level of depression symptoms.<sup>23</sup> However, Li *et al.* assumed children necessarily accept parental control over academic performance and failed to take into account children's disobedience, if any. Therefore, Li *et al.*'s study overestimates children's willingness to be, in whole or in part, controlled by their parents. The assumption that children must obey parental orders may be unrealistic; this might explain why the results of Li *et al.* contrast with existing findings previously mentioned in this article.

To further examine children's responses to high parental expectations of and control over academic achievements, Daniel Shek studied 365 secondary school students aged between 12 and 16 from a Hong Kong Band 5 school.<sup>24</sup> In Hong Kong, the Secondary School Placement Allocation system categorizes all registered secondary schools between Band 1 (schools of highest academic performance) and Band 5 (schools of lowest academic performance).<sup>24</sup> Shek's findings showed that the less autonomy adolescents enjoyed from their parents at home, the lower their mental health scores, and the more disciplinary problems they had at school.<sup>1</sup> Here, mental health scores were evaluated based on the Chinese version of the 30-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ).<sup>1</sup> While Shek characterized the association between parental control and mental and behavioral well-being among adolescents in Hong Kong, his findings could be biased to a certain extent. Shek failed to explain why he collected samples from only one Band 5 school. Additionally, from a methodological perspective, Shek's sample was composed of 294 boys and 71 girls; the proportion of female samples was significantly underrepresented. Yet, he failed to adjust the sampling weight by gender in the study.

In a more recent, better-structured study, Shek and Chan later investigated parental factors in Hong Kong children's academic performance.<sup>1</sup> 429 students from 20 secondary schools in Hong Kong, alongside their parents, were selected via the stratified-cluster sampling method.<sup>1</sup> Though Hong Kong Chinese students were unwilling to give up their personal interests to fulfill parental expectations, they were, nonetheless, inclined to live up to parental expectations as much as possible.<sup>25</sup> As a result, the over-expectation of obedience in children tended to result in greater numbers of parent-child conflicts, since children failed to maintain a balance between obeying parental demands and securing

their personal interests.<sup>1</sup> In addition, children with the highest parental expectations tended to express an insufficient sense of family support.<sup>26</sup> As Hong Kong schools are known for their academic competitiveness, and many Hong Kong Chinese parents espouse academic excellence as a prerequisite for career success, Hong Kong Chinese parents rarely consider whether they are over-expecting children's academic performance at the expense of their psychosocial well-being.<sup>27</sup>

Existing studies argue that children with high academic stress are more likely to experience stomach ulcers, high blood pressure and a higher risk of suicide.<sup>2</sup> While examinations, tests and excessive homework are all alternative contributing factors to academic stress, Leung *et al.* argued high parental expectations are primary facilitator of academic stress.<sup>2</sup> A failure to live up to parents' academic expectations is seen as a violation of filial piety, resulting in family shame and embarrassment.<sup>2</sup> Leung *et al.* found that compared to American counterparts, Hong Kong Chinese children with unsatisfactory academic records developed greater degrees of anxiety and disappointment, fearing their academic inefficacy and parental demands.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, American children are more likely to be treated as entirely independent and autonomous individuals by parents, governed far less by less filial piety than are Chinese children.<sup>28</sup> It is noteworthy that Leung's findings revealed Hong Kong Chinese children were more likely than their American counterparts to meet parental expectations of academic demands, though the former suffered from more academic stress.<sup>7</sup> Such findings inferred that the continual fear of disappointing parents, rather than the inability to achieve academically, should be a major factor in children's psychosocial suffering. Even if children have satisfactory academic records, a sociocultural emphasis on academic success—and perhaps ever-increasing parental expectations—would hamper children from releasing their academic stress.

## 2. Autonomy- granting parenting styles

Authoritarian parenting styles fail to fulfill children's psychological needs for autonomy. They may sacrifice their points of view and personal interests to satisfy parental demands.<sup>7</sup> In doing so, children are more likely to develop higher anxiety levels, lower self-esteem and self-efficacy, and symptoms of depression.<sup>29</sup> A recent meta-analysis of longitudinal studies suggests that the higher the degree of autonomy parents grant their children, the less likely their children are to suffer from anxiety and depression symptoms.<sup>7</sup> However, existing literature rarely studies the relationship between children's enjoyment of autonomy and their psychosocial well-being in the context of Hong Kong Chinese families. This means that the causal relationship between a higher degree of autonomy and psychosocial well-being has not yet been confirmed in Hong Kong Chinese children specifically. It is noteworthy that Western studies argue that optimizing autonomy levels for children maximizes the psychosocial well-being of children.<sup>30,31,32</sup> Similar research should be carried out within Hong Kong Chinese contexts to examine the optimal level of autonomy granted to children by parents in order to maximize children's psychosocial well-being.

One of the very few existing studies addressing the granting of autonomy in Hong Kong is a cross-sectional survey conducted by Chai *et al.*, in which 439 primary school students in Hong Kong filled out a questionnaire.<sup>8</sup> The level of autonomy-granting was measured by the Chinese version of *The Perception of Parenting Style and Practices*, a qualitative study conducted by Save the Children Sweden Regional Office for South and Central Asia, in collaboration with its partners in South Asia, that examines the perception of girls and boys on parenting styles.<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, Chai *et al.* asked students such questions as "My parent listens to my point of view even when we disagree." Responses were given on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Chai *et al.* found that the level of autonomy-granting is positively correlated to children's sense of hope and negatively correlated to children's depression symptoms.<sup>33</sup>

Existing literature suggests that children with a stronger sense of hope are more likely to develop strategies to cope with stressors and negotiate with their parents for personal interests.<sup>34</sup> This suggests that autonomy-granting parenting practices facilitate children's psychosocial well-being. Yet, it is noteworthy that parents denying children's demands do not necessarily mean they are restrictive, especially if those demands are financially, socially and morally unrealistic and inappropriate. Therefore, *The Perception of Parenting Style and Practices* may not accurately measure the levels of parental autonomy-granting to which children are entitled. While there are signs that show that autonomy-granting parenting styles are beneficial for children's psychosocial well-being within Hong Kong Chinese families, further conclusions cannot be made unless more relevant studies are conducted in Hong Kong.

## Recommended Social Policies and Future Research

Although existing literature suggests authoritarian parenting styles worsen the psychosocial well-being of Hong Kong Chinese children, such parenting approaches remain popular in Hong Kong for multiple reasons. These include parents' emphasis on traditional Confucian values and their lack of knowledge of alternative parenting practices.<sup>34,35</sup> Currently, the Family Health Service of the Department of Health, The Parent Channel Hong Kong Education City, Hong Kong School Net and the Whole Person Education Foundation have been providing free online parenting courses, targeting Hong Kong-based parents and children.<sup>35-37</sup> Furthermore, the Child Development Center, Effective Parenting and Parenting Dialogue in Hong Kong offers multiple parenting courses, teaching parents appropriate attitudes towards and expectations of their children.<sup>36,37</sup> In the future, the Hong Kong Government should encourage more parents to participate in such parenting courses to learn how to better accept and appreciate their children's behaviors. For example, the Hong Kong Government could consider subsidizing low-income families who live under the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme, a safety net for those who cannot financially support themselves in Hong Kong, to attend such parenting courses.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, more local social scientists should research how autonomy-granting parenting practices impact children's psychosocial well-being within Hong Kong Chinese families. These research findings would help local children and family centers develop suitable and effective parenting courses accordingly.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

The author is responsible for the concept, design, data retrieval and analysis of the research.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares that the submitted work was not carried out in the presence of any personal, professional or financial relationships that could potentially be construed as a conflict of interest.

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