

To cane...

Today's parents let their children make choices but traditionalists fear the result is a generation of spoiled brats



Sandra Leong

When a gaggle of hyper-active children trips you up at a shopping centre, do you smack one of them and yell "kids these days" or hide them gently and gush "kids will be kids"?

If you did the former, chances are that you are a "traditional" parent who feels children should be seen and not heard.

If you gushed, you probably believe that children should be seen and heard.

Whatever option you chose, it shows a tug-of-war over different parenting styles in Singapore family life today.

As self-professed New Age parents adopt new child-rearing methods (such as positive parenting, with the use of non-physical punishments and encouragement over threats), others wonder: What is wrong with the disciplinary methods of yore, when spankings, scoldings and simply doing as you were told were par for the course?

And more critically, if parents are becoming "softer", will tomorrow's kids grow up to be a generation of spoiled brats?

With such debates already swirling around Internet forums, Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong last month commented that bubble-wrapped young people today risk becoming "fragile like strawberries".

Despite these touchy concerns, more young families here are eschewing the old for the new. A growing brigade of enlightened mums and dads are attending parenting courses and reading self-help books. Think Supermanny rather than say, Madam Tan, the cane-wielding Asian matriarch.

But how different are parenting styles now and say, back in 1970?

Ms Patricia Koh, principal of Pat's Schoolhouse, says: "In the past, children were told to keep very quiet and obey instructions almost immediately. They were seen as not being able to understand anything, were expected to respect elders and be in agreement all the time."

Conversely, parents these days allow children more freedom and spend more time reasoning with them rather than use the "just do it" approach, she adds.

Take mother-of-three Melanie Chan, whose seven-year-old daughter Emma came home one day and announced she wanted to be vegetarian. The 36-year-old child psychologist says: "Emma made the connection between meat and the animal it had come from."

Despite the rest of the family being meat-lovers, Mrs Chan says she supports her daughter's decision and has ordered a vegetarian meal for her on an upcoming flight to Canada.

"I want to raise her for what she believes in. It's not so much of a big deal as there are other foods she can eat."

Similarly open-minded is network marketer Alvin Yong, 44, who plans to take his only child, 12-year-old Robyn, out of school after her PSLE this year to travel the world together with him and his wife.

He says this is "experiential parenting". "Until you actually do something, you cannot know what you think you know. Going around the world will allow her to get in contact with the rich, the poor, the homeless... you can't know poverty from a storybook."

As for thoughts on the much debated issue of physical punishment, blogger Elaine Lau (thenewageparents.com) says that her two children, Ashton, four, and Ashlyn, two, have never been caned.

Rather, the 32-year-old believes in motivating them to make their own decisions. Daughter Ashlyn, for instance, gets to choose what she wants to wear to school or where she wants go on family excursions, within reason of course.

"It's not an open decision," says Madam Lau. "I ask her what she would like but whichever choice she makes is the outcome I want."

The idea is to encourage children to have a say, rather than have them merely follow instructions without understanding



"I tried the 'soft' method but it didn't quite work. I think they still need to feel some pain to learn."

MRS MAY GWEE (with husband Peter and children Gregory, 10, and Georgia, five) who uses the cane

New age vs traditional

The New Age Parent

- Young, first-time and educated parents in their 20s and 30s
- May refer to parenting resources such as Jane Nelsen's Positive Discipline and Dr Sear's The Attachment Parenting Book for tips on child-rearing
- Does not believe in physical punishment
- Adopts a more consultative approach with children, likes to give them choices in everyday decisions
- Says "I love you" a lot

The Traditional Parent

- Your regular auntie/uncle, typically baby boomers who have had their fair share of struggles
- May rely on age-old wisdom (read: what their parents did) and gut instinct for tips on child-rearing
- Always has a cane ready
- Prefers to say "do it because Mummy/Daddy says so"
- Says "I love you" ... maybe on your birthday or when you have done them proud

Jean Yip forced her daughter to return home >>10

... or not to cane a child



ST PHOTOS: LIM SIN THAI, DESMOND WEE

"If you encourage them, they recognise it and are motivated to do well. The more you scold them, the more they don't want to listen."

MADAM ELAINE LAU (with husband Mr Seow Poh Heng and children Ashlyn, two, and Ashton, four) who eschews physical punishment

them, she says. "If you encourage them, they recognise it and are motivated to do well. The more you scold them, the more they don't want to listen."

Last year, she started an online website Today's Motherhood to encourage discussion on parenting topics. It is for "modern mothers, modern methods", she says.

Indeed, the rise of the New Age parent has been bolstered by resources such as Singapore-based website TheAsianParent.com which has more than 50,000 members.

At Focus On The Family, about 32,000 parents have attended parenting courses since the group started them in 2003.

Interest groups under the People's Association umbrella have popped up for the exchange of parenting tips and mutual support. More than 80 grassroots leaders have been appointed as Family Life Champions.

Experts say the rush towards modern parenting boils down mainly to two reasons. Working parents do not want to spend the little time they have at home being harsh with their children and with exposure to different kinds of media, children now develop faster and must be taught differently.

For full-time mother-of-two Su-Lyn Meyer, 35, a book and course called Redirecting Children's Behaviour taught her about "empowered parenting".

To get her 3½-year-old boy Lucas to take his shower, she first empathises with him ("I know you would rather play with your

toys than go for a shower") and then gives him a choice ("Would you like to walk or do you want me to help you?").

She says: "He understands that he is being heard. A child of that age still likes to have control."

The desire among New Age parents to make a change often stems from unhappy memories of their own childhood.

Madam Maryam Shaistah, 29, grew up in a family where "spanking, pinching, screaming, belittling, labelling, criticising, shaming and instilling fear were the norm". She says she had low self-esteem.

Now, she uses the opposite approach with her two children. "No caning or scolding is used in our family," she says.

It worked on her two-year-old Misha, who went through a naughty spell where she would hit the family cat Kiki for no reason. Madam Maryam, a housewife, says: "We patted Kiki lovingly and guided Misha's hands to do the same. Showing a toddler what they should do instead of what they shouldn't has proven to be more effective."

While it all sounds hunky dory, the danger of New Age parenting is that kids used to a more lax environment at home may find it difficult to adapt when placed in a different system, says Mr Brian Yeo, a child psychiatrist in private practice.

"The trouble is, society has not gone that way. What happens when the kid goes into Primary 1 where the education system

is still quite structured?" Parents, he adds, have to tell their children that things might work differently outside home.

There is the risk of children becoming "over familiar with loose boundaries and the hierarchy of the family is lost", essentially how spoiled children are bred.

And ultimately, any parenting method has to adapt to a child's inherent characteristics, says Dr Daniel Fung, senior consultant and chief of child and adolescent psychiatry at the Institute of Mental Health.

But for every New Age parent, there are others who call themselves traditionalists.

Mrs May Gwee, a 39-year-old freelance public relations consultant, still canes her two children, Gregory, 10, and Georgia, five "especially when they did dangerous things like touching the light switches when they were younger".

"I tried the 'soft' method but it didn't quite work. I think they need to feel some pain to learn... I'm quite traditional in the sense that I believe you must honour your parents."

She adds: "I tell them: Yes, we can be friends but at the end of the day, I'm still your parent."

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Do you think a consultative parenting style will spoil children? Write to suntimes@sph.com.sg