
IMMIGRANT TEENAGERS—HELPING THEM ADJUST TO THEIR FIRST YEAR: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARENTS

By Bradley Pilon, NCSP
Los Angeles Unified School District



NATIONAL
ASSOCIATION OF
SCHOOL
PSYCHOLOGISTS

Immigrant teenagers face adjustments that magnify the struggles of adolescence. In addition to normal adolescent rebellion, culture shock, a new language, and a different educational system compound the challenge of starting life in the United States. The situation is further complicated because in many cases the immigrant parents are unfamiliar with this country's schools and American culture in general. In addition, many parents are recently re-united with children they have not seen for years. These parents are highly motivated to re-establish influence over their children and thereby guide them toward the better life they believe this country holds for them.

This handout is designed to provide recommendations to the parents of immigrant adolescents to support and motivate newly arrived teenagers toward success as valuable, bilingual, bicultural members of society. Though the following parent recommendations were designed primarily to address the needs of the Latino population, most of these recommendations also apply to families of any culture. For example, advice regarding positive parenting principles, adaptation to American culture, and its educational system can be of benefit to all cultural groups. Conversely, specific advice related to family reunification issues is more frequently needed by Latino parents who have most often had to separate from their children for extended periods before bringing them to the United States for reunification.

Support Your Child's Culture and Family Relationships

Spend time alone with your child. There is no substitute for time alone, and outings with the entire family do not count. This is especially true if you are being reunited with your child after a long separation.

Give your child opportunities to tell the history of events during your absence. Many children do not want to mention the bad things that have happened to protect their parents, yet they also harbor anger that the parents were not there to protect them. They often appear to understand the need to separate in order for the family to immigrate, but still need reassurances to get beyond feelings of abandonment, no matter how logical and mature they may sound.

Money does not equal love. The fact that it may have cost a great deal to bring a family to the United States does not mean that your child feels more loved as a result. Adults and children alike need affection to come separately from the mention of money.

Keep details of your intimate life private. Children do not need the responsibility of knowing about marital difficulties, past or present, and may feel guilty or overwhelmed if they have taken sides. On the other hand, many children may judge their parents and their relationships, and this is part of the difficulty of raising a teenager. Remember, your child's opinion should not be used in place of communication between adults.

Establish routines in your life. Disruptions such as last-minute trips or overnight visitors can break your child's concentration and studies can suffer.

Review the basics of good discipline. Be consistent in your rewards and punishments, and be as specific as possible about what behaviors you expect and select rewards and punishments appropriate for the act. Remain current with what works best as a reward for your child and keep updating the rewards you give. Try to rely more on these positive consequences than on punishment or withholding things.

Demonstrate confidence. Delegate appropriate responsibility to your child whenever possible. Expect mistakes and make them part of the learning process. Give your child the benefit of the doubt whenever possible as opposed to being overly suspicious. Your spoken worry about what kind of trouble your child might get into could unintentionally lead your child toward those things you most fear if voiced often enough.

Be a good example of what you want from your child. If at all possible, try to attend adult school in the evenings and make an academic goal for yourself, whether it is to finish a specific level of English as Second Language (ESL) classes, to complete the eighth grade or high school diploma, or to attend college. This will say more than any lecture you can give your child about the importance of education.

Single out success stories and positive role models. It is important to be positive and to let your child know that there other many people who have been in your child's position and yet have gone on to become successful. Avoid pointing to failures unless you can point out a corresponding success. Gang members, girls with babies, and dropouts stand out as bad examples by themselves, and do not need to be emphasized. On the other hand, if people who represent positive examples are mentioned at specific times to reinforce good effort, chances are increased that your child will follow their example and succeed in the same ways.

Make future goals for yourself and your child. Your child needs to hear how long he or she is expected to study for a high school diploma without working to help support the family. Your child also needs to hear what your personal goals are for job advancement, living in your current dwelling and neighborhood, making trips back home, and bringing additional siblings and relatives to join the family.

Take pride in your immigrant status and convey this to your child. As immigrants you can be proud of the broad world perspective you share with your children. As bilingual, bicultural, and traveled members of society, you hold certain advantages over other people who only know American culture. There are many cultural and economic advantages that can be derived from these important assets.

Be aware of the legal age. The legal age of majority in the United States is 18, and make decisions as to what this will mean for your family in terms of transitioning your teenager to adulthood. A shift from parent supervision to self-reliance by the 18-year-old should be accompanied by increased home responsibility in terms of chores and finances.

Support Your Child's Success at School

Provide a calm atmosphere in which to do homework. A clear table and quiet environment during a consistent time period each evening are absolutely necessary. If this is impossible at home, arrange and oversee study time at alternate locations, such as the library, a friend's or relative's home, or after-school tutoring programs.

Stress the importance of reading. Promote reading by making interesting reading material available, such as books, magazines, comic books, or newspapers in any language. Library cards are usually free or inexpensive and provide limitless access to materials. Do not push material that your child finds uninteresting, and never censor without good cause. For example, comic books can be an excellent, non-threatening way to practice reading and should generally be allowed.

Limit television. Too much television dulls interest in reading and promotes unrealistic attitudes about success and problem solving in real life. If your child insists upon electronic entertainment, music with printed words is better than television.

Attend all school functions. Only through meeting teachers and learning about your child's schedule can you effectively talk with your child about progress in school. Teachers usually remember parents they have met and may be more helpful to your child if they know you are genuinely involved.

Expect the same academic success of both girls and boys. Girls in this country are not necessarily going to be getting married and be housewives after graduation, and boys will have to give priority to their homework in order to graduate on time. Overprotection of girls and machismo both conflict with success in many ways. Girls and boys should be equally encouraged to explore all career paths, regardless of perceived sex roles assigned to these careers before coming to the United States. Sex roles assigned to specific careers are less rigid in this country.

Ask for assistance. Do not hesitate to ask school assistance to closely supervise your child's attendance or school performance if your child is experiencing difficulties. If need be, request daily attendance and progress reports. This can usually be arranged either through your child's counselor or directly with the teacher. Most secondary schools have a psychologist, a counselor, a school nurse, an English as a Second Language department, and numerous teachers and administrators who may have valuable suggestions for how to deal with academic, behavior, health, or communication problems, as well as advice regarding low-cost community services.

Summary

You will not be able to avoid the hardships of raising a teenager. Expect your child to be at times rebellious and at other times require nurturing, to sometimes behave maturely and at other times to do silly things or to be moody, or occasionally to be predictable and then surprise you with something unexpected. They will awaken memories of your own

experience as a teenager and you will grow in the process.

Resources

Multicultural Education Training and Advocacy (multilingual site)—

www.buscapique.com/latinusa/buscafile/oeste/meta.html

National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs (NCELA)—www.ncela.gwu.edu

Bradley Pilon, NCSP, is a school psychologist working with immigrant students and families in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

© 2004 National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814—(301) 657-0270.



The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) offers a wide variety of free or low cost online resources to parents, teachers, and others working with children and youth through the NASP website www.nasponline.org

and the NASP Center for Children & Families website www.naspcenter.org. Or use the direct links below to access information that can help you improve outcomes for the children and youth in your care.

About School Psychology—Downloadable brochures, FAQs, and facts about training, practice, and career choices for the profession.

www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/spsych.html

Crisis Resources—Handouts, fact sheets, and links regarding crisis prevention/intervention, coping with trauma, suicide prevention, and school safety.

www.nasponline.org/crisisresources

Culturally Competent Practice—Materials and resources promoting culturally competent assessment and intervention, minority recruitment, and issues related to cultural diversity and tolerance.

www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence

En Español—Parent handouts and materials translated into Spanish. www.naspcenter.org/espanol/

IDEA Information—Information, resources, and advocacy tools regarding IDEA policy and practical implementation.

www.nasponline.org/advocacy/IDEAinformation.html

Information for Educators—Handouts, articles, and other resources on a variety of topics.

www.naspcenter.org/teachers/teachers.html

Information for Parents—Handouts and other resources a variety of topics.

www.naspcenter.org/parents/parents.html

Links to State Associations—Easy access to state association websites.

www.nasponline.org/information/links_state_orgs.html

NASP Books & Publications Store—Review tables of contents and chapters of NASP bestsellers.

www.nasponline.org/bestsellers

Order online. www.nasponline.org/store

Position Papers—Official NASP policy positions on key issues.

www.nasponline.org/information/position_paper.html

Success in School/Skills for Life—Parent handouts that can be posted on your school's website.

www.naspcenter.org/resourcekit