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**Amy Chua Is a Wimp**

**By** [**DAVID BROOKS**](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/opinion/editorialsandoped/oped/columnists/davidbrooks/index.html?inline=nyt-per) **Op-Ed Columnist**

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Sometime early last week, a large slice of educated America decided that Amy Chua is a menace to society. Chua, as you probably know, is the Yale professor who has written a bracing critique of what she considers the weak, cuddling American parenting style.

Chua didn’t let her own girls go out on play dates or sleepovers. She didn’t let them watch TV or play video games or take part in garbage activities like crafts. Once, one of her daughters came in second to a Korean kid in a math competition, so Chua made the girl do 2,000 math problems a night until she regained her supremacy. Once, her daughters gave her birthday cards of insufficient quality. Chua rejected them and demanded new cards. Once, she threatened to burn all of one of her daughter’s stuffed animals unless she played a piece of music perfectly.

As a result, Chua’s daughters get straight As and have won a series of musical competitions.

In her book, “Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother,” Chua delivers a broadside against American parenting even as she mocks herself for her own extreme “Chinese” style. She says American parents lack authority and produce entitled children who aren’t forced to live up to their abilities.

The furious denunciations began flooding my in-box a week ago. Chua plays into America’s fear of national decline. Here’s a Chinese parent working really hard (and, by the way, there are a billion more of her) and her kids are going to crush ours. Furthermore (and this Chua doesn’t appreciate), she is not really rebelling against American-style parenting; she is the logical extension of the prevailing elite practices. She does everything over-pressuring upper-middle-class parents are doing. She’s just hard core.

Her critics echoed the familiar themes. Her kids can’t possibly be happy or truly creative. They’ll grow up skilled and compliant but without the audacity to be great. She’s destroying their love for music. There’s a reason Asian-American women between the ages of 15 and 24 have such high suicide rates.

I have the opposite problem with Chua. I believe she’s coddling her children. She’s protecting them from the most intellectually demanding activities because she doesn’t understand what’s cognitively difficult and what isn’t.

Practicing a piece of music for four hours requires focused attention, but it is nowhere near as cognitively demanding as a sleepover with 14-year-old girls. Managing status rivalries, negotiating group dynamics, understanding social norms, navigating the distinction between self and group — these and other social tests impose cognitive demands that blow away any intense tutoring session or a class at Yale.

Yet mastering these arduous skills is at the very essence of achievement. Most people work in groups. We do this because groups are much more efficient at solving problems than individuals (swimmers are often motivated to have their best times as part of relay teams, not in individual events). Moreover, the performance of a group does not correlate well with the average I.Q. of the group or even with the I.Q.’s of the smartest members.

Researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Carnegie Mellon have found that groups have a high collective intelligence when members of a group are good at reading each others’ emotions — when they take turns speaking, when the inputs from each member are managed fluidly, when they detect each others’ inclinations and strengths.

Participating in a well-functioning group is really hard. It requires the ability to trust people outside your kinship circle, read intonations and moods, understand how the psychological pieces each person brings to the room can and cannot fit together.

This skill set is not taught formally, but it is imparted through arduous experiences. These are exactly the kinds of difficult experiences Chua shelters her children from by making them rush home to hit the homework table.

Chua would do better to see the classroom as a cognitive break from the truly arduous tests of childhood. Where do they learn how to manage people? Where do they learn to construct and manipulate metaphors? Where do they learn to perceive details of a scene the way a hunter reads a landscape? Where do they learn how to detect their own shortcomings? Where do they learn how to put themselves in others’ minds and anticipate others’ reactions?

These and a million other skills are imparted by the informal maturity process and are not developed if formal learning monopolizes a child’s time.

So I’m not against the way Chua pushes her daughters. And I loved her book as a courageous and thought-provoking read. It’s also more supple than her critics let on. I just wish she wasn’t so soft and indulgent. I wish she recognized that in some important ways the school cafeteria is more intellectually demanding than the library. And I hope her daughters grow up to write their own books, and maybe learn the skills to better anticipate how theirs will be received.