



Taming THE TIGER PARENT

"Tiger parenting" describes an overly strict parenting philosophy designed to foster an academically competitive spirit. But what does this pressure do to a child's psyche and wellbeing? Here, Eve Douglas delves into Tanith Carey's book *Taming the Tiger Parent*.

We've all met her. Or him. The Tiger Parent. They accompany their 5-year-old to the classroom and ask the teacher for extra homework. They need to know how the reading age of their child measures up against others in the class. After school, they rush to piano lessons, judo, Mandarin, and swimming – and that's just Monday. We've all met her or him. Sometimes, in our own bathroom mirror.

But what could possibly be wrong with exposing your child to music and foreign languages? Why wouldn't you want to encourage your child to do the best they can in sports and schoolwork? The answer lies in the old saying that everything is good in moderation. If we disturb the balance between working hard and having free, unstructured playtime, the consequences can potentially be disastrous for the child and the whole family. *Taming the Tiger Parent*, by Tanith Carey, is a response to the *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* by Amy Chua, a story of a strict

parenting style called "tiger parenting". Tiger parenting aims to maximise children's potential of success by developing their skills and strong work habits at the cost of having a carefree childhood.

Both authors are mothers who want only the very best for their children. However, while advocates of tiger parenting choose to raise their children to be competitive and successful, Carey argues in favour of putting a child's wellbeing and happiness ahead of success at school.

In its extreme form, tiger parenting can give children the impression that academic accomplishment is everything and should be achieved at any cost. It can make them think that they have to excel in order to earn their parents' love. It can lead to unhealthy competitiveness and ruin friendships. And while this style of schooling and parenting does seem to produce pupils who do exceptionally well in exams, Chinese universities are now realising this system produces students who are not creative enough, and who cannot work well in teams. In New Zealand, we're fortunately sheltered from the

worst cases of tiger parenting gone out of control, but Carey quotes horrific examples of cheating, bribery, and even murder that happen abroad.

But even in its mild form, tiger parenting can lead to a lifestyle that's so crammed with homework and extramural activities that children have no free time. They do homework before breakfast, eat dinner on the way from piano lessons to karate, and can't go to sleepovers because their weekend swimming starts at six in the morning. While this keeps them away

from the PlayStation and breaking the neighbours' window with a misaimed ball, it also keeps them away from time to be creative, play unstructured and imaginary games, and have fun and socialise with their peers. What's more, having their days heavily scheduled prevents them from learning how to organise their own time, because there is nothing left for them to organise.

Children who are raised by tiger parents sometimes believe that they are stupid and not good enough. They may experience unacceptable amounts of stress due to the expectations placed on them. They may even stop trying to do well altogether in case they fail and disappoint their parents. Or they may turn into perfectionists who live their whole lives with the fear that nothing they achieve will ever be good enough.

So how do competitive parents change their parenting style? Carey understands that when we're in the heat of the moment, it's easy to lose perspective and inflate the importance of your child's school project or their performance in a sporting event. It's also scary to let go if you think that other parents

are pushing their own children and providing them with extra opportunities that yours aren't getting. The simple truth, though, is that being good at everything is an impossible goal, and there are many different ways in life to flourish. Re-examine the difference between your child's achievement and your child's wellbeing, and if they are not aligned, think of ways to restore the balance.

By moving the emphasis from high achievement to happiness, you will, Carey assures us, provide your child with a better guarantee of success in life than any number of exam results.

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ARE YOU... A TIGER PARENT?

IF YOU ANSWER YES TO ALL THESE QUESTIONS, YOUR PARENTING STYLE MAY BE EXCESSIVELY COMPETITIVE:

- When you see another child excel at something, do you think, "Why can't my child do that?" or "Mine can do better!"?
- Are you very nervous before your child's exam or sports race?
- Have you ever exaggerated your child's achievements to other parents?
- When another parent shares their child's success story with you, do you feel compelled to offer excuses for your child's performance, or to trump their story with your child's success story?
- Do you turn things into a competition for your children when they don't need to be, like "Whose room will be the neatest be the end of today?"



Unlike tiger stripes, you can change your parenting style.

HOW TO BECOME LESS COMPETITIVE

- Ask yourself what you're competing over and why.
- Accept that another child's success does not imply your child's failure.
- Don't show off your children by asking them to sing or play the piano for your friends.
- Get perspective: For a child to flourish, they don't need to be in the top maths group or bring home sports trophies. A balanced, self-accepting child will be happier than a superficially successful one.
- Realise that you are a wonderful parent who wants the best for your children, and you don't need any external validations of your worth as a parent.