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## Like Mother, *Not* Like Daughter: When You and Your Child are Very Different

By Kathy Chin Leong



Every summer, it's the same thing:

Me: Okay, gang. For vacation, we're going to Lake Tahoe: Horseback riding, biking and hiking! It will be fun.

Kids: How long will we be gone? When are we coming home?

While I revel in exploring hidden vistas, my two kids are hapless homebodies. It could be worse. For parents with children who march to their own drummer, life can be tense.

A few differences create some spice in life, but opposites often clash. This can, unfortunately, lead to misunderstanding and distance. And the bigger the divide, the more patience and love are



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required to bridge the gap.

Consider, for instance, the sportsman with anime-addicted kids. Or the mom who loves museums, saddled with a child whose thumb is chained to video games.

The potential for conflict is endless when raising a child with opposing temperaments and habits - whether the child in question is the easily agitated offspring of laidback hippies or the carefree, disorganized spirit living down the hall from a couple of neat-freak Silicon Valley engineers.

What happens when the things that make you happy do not work the same wonders on your child? When, indeed, the activities that make you *most* happy are the ones your child most dreads.

Get Me Outta Here!

Graciela Marques-Hahn of Santa Clara is all too familiar with that scenario. She's a longtime aficionado of scuba diving whose daughter is terrified of water.

Once, when Alison was 12, Marques-Hahn tried to wean her of the terror by slowly encouraging her to enter the water when it was still below her own knees. The plan went awry as the tide came in, terrifying Alison to the point where she refused to go into the water for the next nine years.

According to Marques-Hahn, the moment of revelation occurred when her daughter said pointedly, "Face it mom, I'm not like you."

"I had to apologize," she recalls. "I couldn't not imagine my children not enjoying the water, but I learned all children are different, and I have to respect that. I have to find the things they enjoy and participate with them. It was very hard for me."

Experts all encourage parents to understand the child's point of view through active participation. When you want to introduce new things, offer choices. Alternate activities and determine what is acceptable ahead of time.

Never force a child to do something that terrifies him. Some kids may recoil at the idea of a sleepover and never show any interest in joining a sports team. While you want to prepare your kids to take risks in life, do it in small increments, urges Anne Strumthal Bergman, a licensed clinical social worker based in Menlo Park.

That doesn't preclude some basic family courtesies.

"You must set rules early on," she emphasizes. "If you are cooking and they do not like what you are making, have backups but do not make two different dinners. If you indulge the kids too early, they feel like the world caters to them. Later in life, they are not able to be on a team or not subsume their wishes for a greater good. Everyone has to participate for the family to work."

## Taking Turns

On a recent school holiday, Janet Werner of Sunnyvale gave her junior high school-aged daughter the honor of selecting the family activity. Elizabeth chose pottery painting at a local crafts studio, an activity of which Janet is not particularly fond.

She made her distaste clear, causing Elizabeth to scold her, saying, "You need to stop complaining and stop whining and do it."

"I had nothing to say to that," recalls Werner. "She was in her element. Now the shoe was on the other foot. It was like seeing the mirror in front of your face. It turned out to be a good experience."

In Silicon Valley, where so many accomplished parents prize education and success, parental expectations often begin as early as pregnancy.



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"Parents tell me they want their kid to read at three, and then they want him to start cursive writing at age four," says Marques-Hahn, founder of Neighborhood Christian Center in Santa Clara.

School psychologists and preschool teachers in the area are well accustomed to helping parents dial down those expectations.

"It is natural that parents have a set of hopes and wishes and fantasies about who their children are to become," says Alisa Nowik Stern, licensed psychologist at the Children's Health Council in Palo Alto. "It is a sense of loss when we have a wish for the future that won't be fulfilled."

Indeed, accepting the different tastes and temperaments in your kids can actually draw a family closer.

"We think of things happening in lockstep: You want the kids to go to the best kindergarten, the best high school, and of course, the best college. We see what is considered a *normal* trajectory," says Bergman. "Parents may feel they failed in their parenting, but they need to take a step back and realize that the kids will be who they are."

## Mismatched Parents and Children

Instead, these parents with mismatched children often look enviously upon families who appear, at least from the outside, happy and connected. They respond with anger at a son or daughter who seems to require so much maintenance - a response that ultimately builds resentment.

And parents need to be attuned to their own triggers.

"This can be especially tricky when you see personality traits that remind us of someone else in the family, such as willful Uncle Ralph or your own mother," notes Stern. "We have to be aware of these feelings if our kids behave in ways where we are reminded of someone from our past. You may have some feeling about your grandmother or parent that you may be projecting on your own child."

The take-home lesson? Respond to your child as a unique individual. See her unique strengths. And support her interests - even when they are different from your own. Just because you never envisioned your son a lacrosse player, let him give it a try. It is an investment in your relationship.

Bich Hamilton, a San Jose family therapist and a mom of two boys, notes that communication is imperative, especially when a parent doesn't "get" why her child is interested in a particular subject.

In her case, that subject is video games.

Her son, Michael is wild about them. Hamilton doesn't only dislike them; she fears that his passion will stunt his ability to have real relationships in life.

"I realize that this evokes fear in me, and I have to be honest with myself about that," she says, reminding herself - in her therapist role - to explore the following questions with her son: "What do you enjoy about video games? What value do you see in them?"

Hamilton acknowledges that it is easy for such a conversation to slip into criticism. She says parents should aim to be sensitive, and then forgive themselves when they have blown it. "Sincerely apologize and try again later," she says, "Most kids are reasonable and will keep talking to you."

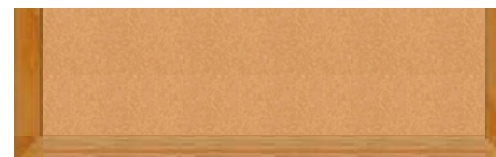
For her part, she has worked with Michael to come up with a solution to prevent overindulgence of video games by setting up a timer everyone in the family can hear. And while she doesn't play the games with him, he is happy when she sits in the room with him nearby.

Now, when Hamilton thinks of parenting, she is reminded of the tree in her backyard that began its growth with support poles strapped to the trunk.

"As the trunk widened, it busted apart the strap and the supporting poles fell away. Parents need to have that kind of willingness and flexibility like the straps and poles that let go when needed for the growth of the tree."

*Kathy Chin Leong is the editor of [BayAreaFamilyTravel.com](http://BayAreaFamilyTravel.com) and is the mom of two children - neither of whom like to travel.*

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How do you handle a child who has opposing opinions, ideas and ways of tackling life than you do? Family therapists and counselors offer these suggestions:

- Be a student of your child and nurture his/her strengths.
- Grieve over the dreams you have had for your child that will not materialize.
- Accept your children for the people they are.
- Don't pressure your children to enjoy the things you enjoy.
- Listen and communicate without judgment.
- Take turns doing things each person in the family likes without complaining.
- See your child as a unique individual and not like a miniature version of yourself.
- Don't equate your children's differences with failure in your parenting.
- Rather than pushing your own agenda, see what books and activities capture your young children's interests.
- When you have a child who has a very different temperament than yours, try to find an adult friend who has a similar temperament. Your friend may help you understand your child and give you insight.

-Kathy Chin Leong

## Read All About It

*Win the Whining War and Other Skirmishes* by Cynthia Whitham (Perspective Publishing, 1991)

*A Mind At A Time* by Mel Levine (Simon & Schuster, 2002)

*How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk* by Adele Faber, Elaine Mazlish (Collins, 1999)

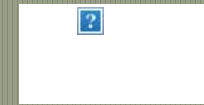
*Temperament Tools: Working With Your Child's Inborn Traits* by Helen Neville, Diane Clark Johnson and Dave Garob (Parenting Press, 1997)

*The Challenging Child* by Stanley Greenspan (Da Capo Press, 1995)

*The Way They Learn* by Cynthia Ulrich Tobias (Tyndale House, 1996)

*The Five Love Languages of Children* by Gary Chapman, Ross Campbell (Moody Publishers, 1997)

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