Mother Knows Best: Differences in Parenting Around the World

“Mother knows best; listen to your mother,” says Mother Gothel in Disney’s *Tangled* (2010). All around the world, mothers – and fathers – raise their children every day, but each country has its own unique practices that differ from the others. The United States tends to believe their way is the only way, regardless of what that way may be. However, there are many child-rearing practices around the world – from Europe to Asia – with the people of each country having their own ideas about the correct way to raise children. While each country’s parents have their own traditions for raising their offspring, Americans might be wise to adopt some of these practices in order to rear a well-behaved, cultured, and educated child.

**United States**

Here in the US, there is no one way to raise a child, and parents are allowed to raise their child as they see fit. Each parent has the privilege of determining what he or she thinks will be the most effective way to rear a child. Choices begin immediately after the birth of a child with the subject of food; should one breastfeed or use formula? Breastfeeding is a hot topic in this country at the moment. Breastfeeding appears to be the best option for a child, but there is still stigma attached to doing so in public. A breastfeeding mother’s only option is feeding her baby inside a restroom. Once a child graduates to real food, Americans allow their kids to be picky about what they eat, going so far as to having separate children’s menus at restaurants. Snacking occurs at all hours of the day, contributing to the pickiness at meal times. The choices continue
when it comes to sleeping arrangements. The accepted practice for sleeping is to have the child inside a crib in a separate room. However, co-sleeping, which is when a baby sleeps with mom and/or dad, is also an option. Daycare is unregulated, causing the quality of the care and cost to vary greatly. In some cities, the cost of daycare can exceed the price of a year of college tuition!

Once a child enters school, the quality of their education often depends upon the family’s location. Perhaps, due to this fact, Americans tend to over-praise their kids, turning every small deed into a huge accomplishment. American parents tend to baby their offspring well into their school years as society seems to instruct them that they can’t tell their children “no.” US parents try to make sure that talents are groomed for success, but sports are overemphasized. Beginning as small tots, parents try to make sports seem fair to everyone; indeed, there are no winners and losers because most games don’t even keep score!

American children lack proper respect and manners, often interrupting when adults are talking or throwing tantrums when they don’t get their way. They seem to always need to be entertained and no longer make use of their imaginations. Sadly, it is becoming more and more common to see parents pulling out their phones or tablets to keep their broods occupied while out in public. The parents are “letting electronics be babysitters, instead of the parent being involved in their [children’s] lives” (Owens, 2015). It almost seems as if the children are the ones making the rules as parents focus too much on attempting to be their friend instead of their parent. While there do seem to be many problems here in the US, at least Americans do value and promote individuality more so than some other countries.

**Europe**

Parents in the United Kingdom have a more relaxed approach to parenting than the helicopter style of Americans. Breastfeeding is common, even in public. Parents don’t go crazy
childproofing their homes, as they believe that children should be allowed to fall and hurt themselves; the parents see this as a learning experience. When it comes to schooling, most British youngsters start at an earlier age than their American counterparts; they also wear uniforms, which improves discipline and focus. Outside play is emphasized, and the parents don’t hover, but allow the kids to work out squabbles on their own. Children are taught never to brag; parents deflect compliments and often tend to deprecate their own offspring in front of them, so that the kids learn to get along with everyone. However, family time is important, and the average family takes two or three two-week vacations each year. Remembering to take a rest and keep family time sacred is just one of the ways that America can learn from the British.

In Norway, parenting is all done in the same way. The government sponsors daycares as the society feels that if one is not working, one is not contributing. The daycare, called *Barnhage* or “Children’s Garden” in Norwegian, begins when babies are a year old and allows the children to spend large amounts of time outside, focusing on play and socializing. In fact, they even eat outside; “they only go inside if it’s colder than 14 degrees” (Goddard 2013). When it comes to food, options are very utilitarian, with little choice; often lunch may be bread with some type of cheese. The idea of *janteloven*, which “means that you’re part of a group—you’re not assumed to be better than anyone else” (Goddard 2013) is the guiding star of Norwegian society. You don’t want to boast or stand out; it is considered gauche. While stoicism and toughing it out on your own is valued, equally valued is family time. The country as a whole works less hours, and the entire family comes together to eat supper together around five. Keeping outdoor playtime and family dinnertime is something that all parents should strive for, just like the Norwegians.

Parents in France have a very unique style of parenting. When it comes to breastfeeding, French mothers focus on getting their baby on a feeding schedule, so they soon switch to bottle
feeding. Once their babies transition to adult food, their feeding schedule is still very strict: three meals a day and just one snack after school. Their offspring eat the same food as the adults; there are no special menus for children in France. At crèche, French daycare, youngsters are fed a four course meal consisting of a vegetable dish, the main course, a different type of cheese each day, and a dessert of fresh fruit or fruit puree. Crèche is where they learn to socialize, and the care is of the highest quality. French parents demand respect and believe that authority is a form of affection, and that their offspring bloom because of it. They expect their progeny to be respectful, patient, self-sufficient, and, above all, well-behaved in public and social situations. Children are allowed their own opinion, but the adults make the decisions. French mothers learn to have a balanced life and don’t make their broods their whole focus. Mothers teach control using baking, with requires measuring and sequencing for edible results. Parents use the same exercise to teach patience. The baking is often done in the mornings, but they “…wait and eat the cake or muffins as…[the] afternoon snack” (Druckerman 66). Children are expected to play by themselves; they don’t need to be constantly entertained. Maintaining that balanced life and teaching patience is an area that Americans can learn from the French.

Asia

In China, where couples are limited to one child each, offspring are doted upon. Raising children is considered a team effort, with the grandparents helping as well. Family outings often consist of the parents and both sets of grandparents, with all six adults focusing their attention on the single child. Babies in China do not wear diapers, but split-pants which leave their bottoms bare. They are trained to pee and poop at the sound of a whistle, and will stop and go wherever – even on the sidewalk! Once youngsters enter school, however, expectations are high. With a safe environment, where guns are illegal and kidnappings are rare, mothers focus their concerns on
their progeny’s education. Chinese mothers expect children to focus whole-heartedly on their schooling because education leads to good jobs, success, stability, and the ability to support themselves and their families. A lesson all parents could learn from the Chinese is ensuring that education and self-sufficiency are made a priority.

In the People’s Republic of South Korea, there is a less casual parenting style. Modesty is valued, so breastfeeding mothers will pump at home and bottle feed their babies while in public. The traditional dish of kimchi (fermented vegetables such as cabbage and radishes) is said to cure anything and the spicier, the better! Children are taught that food is best as a shared family experience. South Korean society is very traditional where the fathers work and the mothers stay home and raise the families. The mothers receive help from extended family as the fathers work long hours, and may only see the kids on weekends. With low crime rates and a love of children, there are many supervised play-zones where parents can drop off their offspring while they do a little shopping. Koreans feel that a parent’s primary role is that of an educator, which is a huge difference compared to the United States. Academics are taken very seriously, and new technology allows parents to track school day activities and progress in real time. While Korean parents can be strict, they are involved in their children’s education and take responsibility for being their first teacher, something that is lacking here in the United States.

A bit further to the east lies the Land of the Rising Sun, Japan. Here modesty is again valued, so stores will often offer nursing rooms to allow mothers to nurse their babies in private. Even as a baby, Japanese mothers will keep their offspring close at meal times because eating is a communal matter. As they grow older, children are given the same foods as the adults. Parents feel that if the food is appealingly prepared and well laid out, the child will be more likely to eat it. When it comes to sleeping arrangements, Japanese mothers don’t want their babies to feel
alone, so they keep them close. Space is at a premium in Japan, so kids will often continue to sleep with their parents until the age of ten, which seems to foster later independence. Due to low crime rates, youngsters in Japan are often seen out alone, even riding the subway at young ages. In fact, “Japanese parents expect their kids to be independent by taking care of themselves and being socially responsible” (Gross-Loh 26-27). Children are expected to contribute to the household by being self-reliant. Kids in Japan are held to high standards when it comes to strength of character and resilience. At school, the curriculum is demanding, requiring students to learn large quantities of new information each school year and proceed swiftly from one concept to the next. Year round school that progresses smoothly from one grade to another helps keep this fast-paced education style achievable. This focus on education keeps the Japanese ahead of many countries, including the US, on test scores.

There are many styles of parenting across this world of ours, with differences that could fill oceans. Should a parent co-sleep or breastfeed? Should one use daycare or hire a nanny? What is the best way to teach manners and respect? What is the best parenting style for one’s child? There is no one right answer for everyone. Instead, investigate and discover all of the different choices the world offers. Choose what works for one’s family, for one’s individual child. Instill the desire for individuality that is so prevalent in the United States in children. Learn from the British, who feel that taking a tumble is a learning experience for a child. Americans should have family mealtimes like the Norwegians, and mimic the French as they use baking to teach control and patience. Remember to put children first and cherish him as Chinese parents do. Learn from the Koreans and become the child’s first teacher. Show kids the value of education, independence, and self-reliance like the Japanese. Make choices and create an all new parenting style. After all, “Mo-ther knows best!” (Tangled, 2010).
Works Cited


*Tangled*. Dir. Nathan Greno and Byron Howard. Walt Disney, 2010. DVD.