

China's 'Little Emperors'

Children in country tend to be indulged by families

BY JOCELYN EIKENBURG
For The Journal

It was Chinese New Year 2003 when I first met Yu Kaiqi, the boy who would become my nephew. Almost a year old, he was bundled up in endless layers, like a silkworm cocoon — and just as precious to my future father-in-law, Yu Huimin, 61, who carried him everywhere. I was stunned. If this boy were in the U.S., his parents and grandparents would have been letting him teeter and totter on the floor, taking his first steps to explore the world. But not here. For almost the entire day, he was tucked safely away in his doting grandfather's arms.

Today, Yu Kaiqi, now 7 years old, is still the family's center of attention — but for all the wrong reasons. Throwing objects at the teacher. Lying. Sassing his parents. Daily temper tantrums. Not going to bed on time.

Unfortunately, Yu Kaiqi is no anomaly in China. Some studies, including a 2006 paper from Jinan University, suggest that 11 percent of young Chinese children misbehave. Others, including a 2002 Qingdao University paper, put the figure at 23 percent. Suppose you apply that lowest estimate — 11 percent — to the 2000 China census count of 95 million 2- to 7-year-olds. That adds up to as many as 10 million Chinese children troubling their families.

And when they're vexed by a naughty child, families look for explanations. Jin Genxiu, my 55-year-old mother-in-law, believes Yu Kaiqi's bad temperament is the cause. Yu Huimin blames the school environment and declining standards in society. But there's a culprit more close

two parents agreeing on child discipline. But if both sets of grandparents help, that's six adults dealing with the child, and potentially six parenting styles. Also, most grandparents, like Jin and Yu Huimin, tend to coddle children more than the parents. Where inconsistent parenting goes, child misbehavior follows. That's because the child doesn't know what to expect, since the rules change depending on who's in charge.

But with grandma and grandpa in charge of the child, the family changes in other unexpected ways. Sometimes, the child feels more attached to their grandparents, so they may not respect mom and dad's authority. Parents, feeling distant from child care, don't help matters when they forget to model good behavior in front of the child. Meanwhile, the children miss out on critical adult-child interaction because their grandparents don't usually play with them, preferring to supervise from afar, and their parents can be too exhausted from office demands.

Yet, the most demanding thing in the household is often that little child — thanks, in part, to the one-child policy. If both parents are only children, that means the entire family — including the grandparents — focuses their attention on that one boy or girl, imbuing the child with a dangerous sense of power. No wonder



to home: parenting.

To understand why, just consider the modern family structure in China. With real estate hitting exponential highs, both young parents have to work to pay the mortgage. So who will care for baby? None other than grandma and grandpa. This saves on day care costs, and eliminates the fears of leaving their child for the day with strangers. Plus, in China, there's nothing strange about turning to the family for something like child care. Family has been the only reliable support to the Chinese for thousands of years, because comprehensive public services — such as good health care, pensions and free public schools — haven't been guaranteed to all, even today.

Nevertheless, too many parents can spoil the child. It's hard enough to get

they're called "little emperors."

Tired of the endless temper tantrums of "one-child rule," more and more young, educated Chinese want help. But where, and how? China has a growing roster of parenting books and Web sites, but few experts to back up that advice. "There are no child clinical psychologists in China, and few child mental health professionals," said Su Linyan, professor of child psychiatry at Second Xiangya Hospital in Changsha. "When parents need help with their child's mental health problems, they usually go to pediatricians or child neurologists." And when they do go, it's because the child is seriously falling behind in school, or showing extreme behavior, such as violence or suicide threats. Sometimes, that's too late.

See China C4



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jocelyn Eikenburg is a writer and Chinese translator residing in Pocatello. A native of Cleveland, Ohio, she has lived and worked in China, first as a teacher and later as a writer, for five and a half years, and is married to a Chinese national. Her blog can be found at www.speakingofchina.com.

EDITOR'S NOTE

This is the conclusion of a four-part series of articles providing a snapshot of modern life in China in observance of Oct. 1, 2009, the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. Part one ran Sept. 20, part two on Sept. 27 and part three on Oct. 4.

ONLINE

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MANY GRANDPARENTS IN CHINA HELP RAISE THEIR YOUNG GRANDCHILDREN. HERE, YU HUIMIN HOLDS HIS GRANDSON, YU KAIQI, DURING THE CHINESE NEW YEAR.

ISJ INSIGHT



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Here in a park in Zhengzhou, Henan, China, grandmothers, helping with the child care during the day, have taken their grandchildren out for some fresh air.

China

Continued from C1

Still, even when help comes in time, it's useless if the grandparents won't listen. "I don't like my mother-in-law's parenting," said Chen Xiaoqin, 31, after watching her mother-in-law chase her son around the apartment with a spoonful of food. "But we rely on her so much. If I criticized her, it might hurt our relationship." Yu Huimin still believes that his indulgences, from carrying Yu Kaiqi to kindergarten to sending him freshly laid eggs on demand, never harmed the boy. "I'm the only one who really cares about him," he maintains, adding that Yu Kaiqi named "grandpa" as his favorite person in the family. And for many years, Jin dismissed her grandson's rambunctiousness with the false hope that he would grow out of it.

Still, if Jin is any measure, some grandparents are willing to grow and change in how they parent. During lunch this past summer, she admitted it was wrong to feed Yu Kai-



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Though many parents know grandparents can be too indulgent to only-child grandchildren, they are afraid to speak up. Chen Xiaoqin, right, does not want to criticize her mother-in-law's parenting because they rely on her for child care, and it might harm their relationship.

qi as a toddler, instead of letting him do it himself. "I didn't want him to dirty his clean clothes," she explained. "But I should have let him feed himself, and get dirty, so he could

learn how to be independent."



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