

# REDEFINING SUCCESS

An Untigering Parent's Guide to Our  
Beliefs about Success, How We Came  
to Them, and How to Change Them



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# Introduction

Hi. I'm Iris.

I am a second generation Chinese American, and like many Asian Americans who are held up as the model minority of success, I learned to play the part well. Right from the start, I knew my role and my lines, skipping kindergarten even though English was my second language. In high school, I crammed my schedule with APs and became the class valedictorian. I went on to attend the best public university in the nation (and apparently the world)<sup>i</sup>, graduating with honors in less than four years. And I married another Asian American who had a comparably impressive résumé.

When we had kids, I assumed I would raise them on a similar path of success, but something just didn't sit right. For one, they were resistant to my attempts to ~~guide~~ control them. And as I considered my own life, I began to see all the negative outcomes of a childhood focused on achievement. I had spent my entire youth trying to fit into someone else's definition of a successful life and I'd lost myself in the process. I didn't really know myself or my own passions. I had sacrificed my joy, my curiosity, my playfulness, and my interests in order to do what was expected of me. I had internalized the belief that my worth was based on my achievements. I was afraid of failure and taking risks. This was the fallout of me trying to live by the traditional definition of success. Did I really want the same for my children?

Perhaps you are in the same boat. You've experienced the disappointment of climbing to the top of the ladder only to find that you've been leaning up against the wrong wall. You've seen how driving ambition and ruthless competition ravage lives. You've observed the skyrocketing competition, stress, relational strain, unethical behavior, depression, and suicide among students and you want a different narrative for your children. You want your children to be successful, but in a way that is wholehearted and authentic.

I wrote this short book to challenge our traditional definitions of success and inspire us to a new definition that is liberating for ourselves and our children. I hope you find it helpful as we learn together how to redefine the meaning of success.

# Traditional Definitions of Success

We all want our children to lead successful, fulfilling lives. Yet it's important to consider what that actually means. How do we define success?

According to Amy Chua—author, Yale professor, and original tiger mother—success is about excellence over enjoyment, receiving praise over honoring preference:

What Chinese parents understand is that nothing is fun until you're good at it. To get good at anything you have to work and children on their own never want to work, which is why it is crucial to override their preferences. This often requires fortitude on the part of the parents because the child will resist; things are always hardest at the beginning, which is where Western parents tend to give up. But if done properly, the Chinese strategy produces a virtuous circle. Tenacious practice, practice, practice, is crucial for excellence; rote repetition is underrated in America. Once a child starts to excel at something—whether it's math, piano, pitching, or ballet—he or she gets praise, admiration, and satisfaction. This builds confidence and makes the once not-fun activity fun. This in turn makes it easier for the parent to get the child to work even more.<sup>ii</sup>

In the eyes of Chua and other tiger parents, a child's personal preference, intrinsic motivation, and impulse to "follow their bliss" have no place in the pursuit of success. Instead, success is confined and defined by 3 S's:

1. **Status** – Recognition, praise, admiration; what others think. Our child's worth is based on where they stand in comparison with others. It's about position, prestige, and upward mobility. Pursuits that do not gain them status are frowned upon.
2. **Stats** – Their GPA, SAT score, or the ranking of the prestigious university they attend. Their trophies, awards, and championship wins. As they get older it's their impressive salary, fancy titles, or the postal code of the upscale neighborhood they live in. These are the outward markers of achievement; the numbers and rankings and measurements that tell them whether or not they've made it.
3. **Status quo** – Children are expected to do what is practical and what will get them ahead in life. They are not be encouraged to pursue their (pipe) dreams or take unnecessary risks. Instead, they are urged to stay in their lane and follow the tried and true paths that have worked for others: doctor, lawyer, or engineer.



Many of us grew up with these 3 S's, and while we may have gained a measure of success, we also found it stifling. We were placed on the hamster wheel of achievement to earn approval, and then we had to keep running in order to maintain it. It was more like a vicious cycle than a "virtuous circle."

How did we get here?

# Factors that Shape our Views on Success

The ways we think about success weren't conceived in a vacuum. We internalized these values through our social conditioning, cultural context, and personal experiences. Let's unpack how some of these factors shaped our views.

## *Immigration*

Whether documented or undocumented, for those of us who are immigrants or children of immigrants there is often an unspoken pressure to prove ourselves and our worth. We need to show that we are upstanding citizens and contributing members of society so we're not branded as lazy freeloaders. We're expected to keep our heads down, know our place, work hard, and earn our right to be here. Furthermore, when our immigrant parents have given up so much, we feel like we have to make them proud and achieve a certain level of success in order for their sacrifice to be worth it.

Immigrants also face untold obstacles that may limit their opportunities to achieve success, like language barriers, cultural differences, lack of accessible resources, and degrees and qualifications that were earned in their home country but not recognized in the States, just to name a few. Perhaps there were only certain fields and niches that opened the door for immigration or provided a

livelihood. Whether the nail salon, the donut shop, the farm field, or the graduate school, these experiences influence our beliefs about the kind of success that is available to us.

### *Parents' education*

When my mother was just a teenager, her father passed away. She was forced to quit school to work and support her family. As a young girl, her education was deemed less important than her brothers', so she dutifully dropped out and began earning money so that they could go to school. That didn't stifle her love of learning, though. She was so determined to continue with her education that she attended night school after a full hard day's work to keep up with her studies. She was a bright student, eventually leaving her native Vietnam to study in Hong Kong where she graduated at the top of her class.

For many of our parents, education is not something to be taken for granted. It is a hard-won privilege, the key to opportunity and upward mobility. They may overvalue formal education and be bewildered if we don't want to pursue it, seeing it as a necessity for success. Especially if they are highly educated themselves, a bachelor's degree is the absolute bare minimum for their children.

In contrast, parents who have learned to survive without a college degree may undervalue higher education and academics. They may be more focused on the daily grind of making money and think that studying Sociology or English Literature is a complete waste of time.

Our parents' lack of schooling, pursuit of schooling, or regrets about schooling shape how they communicate success to us and whether higher education is a necessary piece of the puzzle.

### *Poverty*

Poverty has huge negative impacts on our life outcomes, often creating stressful home environments and affecting self-esteem as those who are disenfranchised compare themselves with those who seem to have “made it.” The lack of opportunities and resources shape how we see ourselves and our ability to achieve success.

Furthermore, if we or our parents grew up impoverished, material wealth may be an important element of success for us. We may desire the stability, status and safety that money affords. We may wish for all the things that we were deprived of in our childhood.

### *Capitalism*

The capitalistic mindset sees people as commodities, judging us on our worth based on our productivity. We are not intrinsically worthy; we are only valuable because of the profits we can bring in. Traditionally, this has fueled all kinds of oppression—from enslavement to child labor—as those with power exploit the vulnerable. Akilah S. Richards, unschooler and podcast host of *Fare of the Free Child*, had this to say about Black families: *“For so many in Black culture, the way that we identify success and validation is through how much we produce or perform, and that goes back to*

*enslavement, [when] our safety relied on how much we produced... There is a genetic and social imprint.<sup>iii</sup>*

This drive to produce and perform has been conditioned into us; we associate success with toil and a relentless ambition to achieve and impress. Rest, play, and contentment are antithetical to this definition of success.

### *Lack of representation*

When we don't see people who look like us represented in certain professions, it makes it hard to believe those careers are within the realm of possibility for us. Fields like professional sports, music, film and TV, and the arts have so few Asian Americans represented. We're often discouraged from pursuing these interests before we even really start; we doubt we would ever make it past the gatekeepers.

Conversely, over-representation in certain fields can condition us to presume that those paths are the only ways to succeed. Indian American kids train for the National Spelling Bee, Filipinx Americans go into nursing, and Black students pursue athletic scholarships. While these are stereotypes, there is nothing wrong with them except when we mindlessly follow these tracks just because others have.

### *Family obligations*

Many immigrants have family to support back in the home country, or extended family around who are relying on them. When my parents first came to the States, they sent all their earnings back to my grandparents who

then gave them a small stipend to live on. This was not uncommon for that generation, and I'm sure it influenced the kind of success my parents pursued. When you have more than just yourself to think about, you can't be reckless and risky with what you do with your life. You have to consider your responsibility and choose your path wisely. To do otherwise is selfish.

These are just a few of the factors that influence our definitions of success. While these experiences are nothing to be ashamed of, it's important for us to consider how we came to our beliefs about success so that we're not subconsciously controlled by them. Instead of just continuing with our workaholic, overachieving tendencies or our limiting beliefs about ourselves, we can dig deeper to what is driving our behavior; we can deconstruct these definitions and motivations and evaluate so that we can move forward with more intention.

Since you're reading this book, you're probably finding that the traditional ideas of success have not served you well. Maybe you hit all those benchmarks of accomplishment but ultimately found them dissatisfying; you realize that much of what you did was driven by others' expectations rather than what was true about yourself. As untigering parents, it's time that we redefine what it means to be successful so we can offer something more life-giving and liberating for our children.

# Redefining Success

Maya Angelou once said, “*Success is liking yourself, liking what you do, and liking how you do it.*”<sup>iv</sup> In other words, redefining success means that we empower our children to **define it for themselves**. However good our intentions or wise our perceptions, it's not our place to impose our own ideas of success onto our children. They must discover what it means for themselves as they explore who they want to be, what they like to do, and how they like to do it.

## *Liking Themselves*

We want our children to have self-confidence and healthy self-esteem, but there are ways that we create obstacles to this through our parenting. One way we do this is by focusing on outward achievement. Whether we mean to or not, this makes our love feel conditional because our approval is dependent on *what they do* instead of *who they are*. Instead of communicating unconditional love and regard, our attention on their performance says to them, “You are only valuable if you \_\_\_\_\_.” They are not free to just *be*. How else can they respond except with deep insecurity, anxiety, and perfectionism? We have taught them that they are not good enough. We have trained them to not like themselves as they are. Our kids may turn out to be high achieving athletes, musicians, entrepreneurs, and experts, but how much of their drive for success is driven by the desire to be good enough and worthy of love?

If we are constantly suggesting to our children that they need to succeed in order to please us, we are forcing them to hide away their authentic selves. They feel they must perform and perfect themselves in order to gain our approval. They can't show us their weaknesses, their failures, their quirks, their passions. Any love that we do show them feels disingenuous because we just love the false version they present to the world. They doubt we would accept them if they showed us what was behind the persona; indeed, we have given them little evidence that we would.

In order for our children to truly like themselves, Dr. Eileen Kennedy-Moore, in her book, *Kid Confidence: Help Your Child Make Friends, Build Resilience, and Develop Real Self-Esteem*, suggests three fundamental needs that must be met: **connection**, **competence**, and **choice**.<sup>v</sup>

**Connection** is a sense of belonging and meaningful relationships with others and is the foundation for a healthy self-concept. As parents, we are that first intimate connection in our child's life. We have tremendous power and influence to shape our child's sense of self. *Our children learn how to see themselves through our eyes*. We can drive them to achieve, making them believe that they are not accepted as they are; we can be disappointed in them when they fall short, causing shame and anxiety; or we can delight in them, reflecting back their worth and beauty apart from anything they do. Instead of overemphasizing behavior and performance, we can focus on creating an environment of unconditional acceptance. While a parent-child connection is crucial, extended family,



friends, and communities where they feel a sense of belonging are also needed. This chorus of loving connections can help combat all the critical and judgmental messages out there.

Another fundamental need our children have is the need for **competence**. Untigering parents often feel good about this area—we sign them up for classes, find them tutors or coaches, help them gain skills and feel effective. Unfortunately, we also thwart our efforts through either our impossibly high expectations or our low estimation of their capabilities. While our high expectations and critical comments may be meant to help them improve, it really just makes our kids feel like nothing they do is ever good enough; it fosters more frustration and fear of failure than competency. And hovering over and rescuing them from difficulty instead of trusting that they can figure it out robs them of the ability to develop proficiency; it makes them feel incompetent. We can avoid these pitfalls by stepping back, managing our expectations, avoiding evaluation, and focusing on the process rather than the results. We can also break things down into manageable steps to set our kids up for success and encourage them to push through the challenges.

I'll admit, I'm not great at this. I can be very demanding and exacting and not the most patient of teachers. My kids help me with dinner once a week and it often devolves into one of them walking away in frustration because of my yelling or me just taking over because I want things done my way. I'm either an exasperated control freak who micromanages their every

move or I'm so annoyed I leave them to figure things out on their own. Neither feels like a great way to help them build confidence or competence. I'm realizing that if I hope to instill in them a strong sense of their own abilities, I need to take my own advice and learn how to support and encourage them rather than make them feel inept.

The final need that Kennedy-Moore puts forth is a child's need for **choice**, which she describes as the ability to "make decisions, figure out what matters, and choose to act in ways that are consistent with personal values."<sup>vi</sup> Our kids need to be able to express their personal power and feel a sense of significance. This cannot happen when we rob them of self-determination. Sadly, too often their lives are tightly scheduled and closely monitored, whether at school or at home. There is no room for self-expression. Our kids end up feeling helpless and frustrated instead of confident and resilient. If we want our kids to have a healthy self-concept, they need the autonomy to do significant things and make significant decisions. They need the freedom to express and experience their life in a way that emanates from the inside-out instead of molded from the outside-in, in a way that resonates with their own personal values.

While we cannot control how our children feel about themselves, there is much we can do to create an environment where their self-esteem will flourish. As we throw off the outer accoutrements of success and offer unconditional love, encouragement, and autonomy, our children can grow up knowing that they are worthy, capable, and loved as they are.

### *Liking What They Do*

As mentioned above, a sense of personal power and autonomy is foundational for true success. If our children are to feel successful, empowered, and competent, it has to be on their own terms. That means giving them space to pursue and self-direct their own learning objectives, interests, and activities. That means giving up our compulsion to conform them to our own desires and definitions of success. For my family, that means we unschool.

If we think back to our own childhoods, how many of us took advanced classes, participated in extracurricular activities, or went into a field simply to pad our college application or please someone else? Did we actually like what we did, or were we just doing it to gain approval? Would we choose to do it again without any extrinsic motivation?

My husband studied to become an electrical engineer, not for any great love of microchips but because he got into a good program at a good university and his parents strongly encouraged him to try it out. It was a respectable and stable career (not to mention very well compensated). He worked in Silicon Valley for a number of years and paid his dues, but it wasn't until we moved to China to become English teachers that he discovered his love of teaching. Hanging out with the students, instilling a joy for language and learning, and telling the same funny anecdotes year after year felt much more satisfying to him than his office job. His is just one example of how doing

things because of other people's expectations or definitions of success doesn't satisfy us in the long run.

If success means liking what they do, our children need the freedom to pursue what they like. They need the freedom to dabble, play, and explore. For one child, it may be spending much of their day outside kicking a ball around. Another may like to spend it curled up on a couch reading. My kids love to play video games and draw. Whatever the case may be, there needs to be intrinsic motivation instead of extrinsic punishments or rewards. They should be free to live out their true unique selves and not squeezed to fit into arbitrary molds.

That's why I don't believe in having kids taking violin lessons, joining sports teams, or attending language immersion programs without their **enthusiastic consent**. Consent applies to more than just sex and bodily autonomy; just as children have the right to determine how they use their own bodies to show affection and intimacy, they also have the right to determine how they use their body, soul, mind, intellect, and spirit to engage with the world. Whatever they do, they should be motivated to do without us pushing and pulling them where they don't want to go. Otherwise, they are just doing it to people-please or avoid punishment and will lose steam the minute we stop incentivizing them.

### *Liking How They Do It*

Liking how they do things means that our children aren't beholden to arbitrary standards or schedules. They

can follow their own learning styles instead of just being book smart. They can go at their own pace instead of competing with others to be first to the finish line. They can honor their need for rest instead of feeling like they'll fall behind. They can align with their own values instead of driven by social pressure. And they can even quit if it's not a good fit instead of persisting in a bad situation to their own detriment.

Not every child wants to be the starting point guard or a concert pianist or the high school valedictorian. Not every child is ambitious or has boundless energy. Some may be more contemplative or sensitive and are turned off by competitive environments. Others are playful and want to pursue their interests simply for the joy of it, not for the accolades. As parents, it's our role to observe our child and listen to them so that we can honor their personality and personal goals.

We see nowadays that many kids are very driven and successful, but they often pay a heavy price to achieve that kind of success. They willingly sacrifice their physical health, mental health, relationships, and their own integrity to reach their goals. A member of our Untigerling parent group told us a disturbing trend among students: her niece, a premed in college, found that it was very common for students to hide the resources in the library so others couldn't access them! I was flabbergasted at the lengths to which students were willing to go to get ahead.

Unfortunately, these are not isolated incidents. There was the recent college admissions scandal in the States where rich parents like Lori Loughlin and Felicity

Huffman falsified information, cheated on entrance exams, and bribed school officials to get their children into elite colleges.<sup>vii</sup> Things are not so different in China, where cheating is rampant and parents are often co-conspirators. A Chinese friend once told me how she had coached her grown daughter to cheat on an important certification exam. She instructed her daughter on where to sit, how to peek at her neighbors' answer sheets, how to avoid detection.

I was appalled, but not surprised. When all that matters are the results, the ends justify the means. When children and their parents feel like everything is riding on that test score, that admissions letter, or that championship award, they will go to any length to secure that outcome. Sadly, that often leads to anxiety, depression, and even suicide when the pressure becomes too great.

The Dalai Lama XIV said, "*Judge your success by what you had to give up in order to get it.*"<sup>viii</sup> Success that is worth having is done with integrity and authenticity. Our children should not have to compromise themselves or their values in order to achieve it. They shouldn't have to sacrifice themselves at the altar of success.

If we want our children to like how they do things, we have to **lower the stakes** and emphasize the process rather than the results. We have to let them know that there are many paths to success, and many ways to live a fulfilling life. Showing our unconditional love and support for them no matter what their achievements gives them the freedom to fail and learn and grow. Instead of the frenzied drive to succeed, we encourage them to offer their gifts to

the world in a way that feels honest and true. Instead of idolizing the cut-throat nature of high achievers, we model the importance of service, humility, and cooperation.

For many years, I was the quintessential picture of tiger motherhood: a woman with her arms crossed and her brows knitted, standing over a forlorn child perched on a piano bench. My kids had initially shown enthusiasm about learning piano, but long after their initial interest had waned I continued to force them to take lessons. Many slammed doors and pounded keys later, I finally realized that making them continue was disrespectful to them and damaging to our relationship. I told my boys that they could stop learning piano if they wanted, fully expecting them to take me up on my offer.

Lo and behold, when given the choice, they actually wanted to continue; they just wanted to negotiate the terms. Noah, my oldest, told me he got overwhelmed when too much was expected of him, so he wanted to learn fewer songs each week. Caleb liked the challenge and got bored when the songs were too easy. Instead of sticking to my own or the teacher's expectations, we adjusted so that Caleb would have a longer lesson than Noah. Although he was 2 years younger, he would learn more songs and progress more quickly. That didn't bother Noah; he felt no need to compare or outperform his younger brother. For each of them, it was about enjoying and developing at their own speed, whether that speed was *allegro* or *andante*. I had originally thought that they didn't like *what* they were doing, but it turned out they just didn't like *how* they were doing it.

As parents, we need to honor our child's process. Not all children are going to be on the same timetable, hitting those milestones right on schedule. Some take longer, some speed through, and some have no intention of going down that path at all.

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Parenting with an anti-oppression lens means that we do not overstep our bounds and colonize our children's lives with our own dreams and definitions of success. We can provide support and be a sounding board for them, but our children have every right to determine for themselves what a beautiful, meaningful, and successful life looks like. In fact, instead of hyper-focusing on their achievements, one of the best things we can offer our children is to *pursue success for ourselves*—to like ourselves, like what we do, and like how we do it. As we cultivate our own passions and curate our own life, the need to live vicariously through our children will slowly ebb away. Parents and children alike will be liberated to live fully into how they define success for themselves.

Liking ourselves, liking what we do, and liking how we do it—this is a kind of success that is expansive rather than limiting, freeing rather than burdensome, inclusive rather than exclusive. It's a definition that says **there is no one definition**. We each get to define and redefine what success looks like for ourselves.

There's no day like today to begin.



# Notes

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## About the Author

Iris Chen is an Asian American writer, unschooler, and founder of the Untigering movement. After seeing the negative effects of tiger parenting in her own life, she began to deconstruct from her authoritarian ways. Now, she's on a mission to empower others to untiger by promoting self-awareness, gentle parenting, and educational freedom for children. She recently moved back to California with her husband and two sons after 16 years of living in China (land of the tiger parent!).

This is just one chapter in her upcoming *Untigering* book which will be published in the near future. [Subscribe](#) to her mailing list to get more blog and book updates.

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