

Parents flocked to a talk by a Chinese-American couple who have four super-bright children. But there are no quick-fix formulas to turn kids into geniuses, as MARY ROSE GASMIER finds out.

Bringing up bright kids

HOW much is that genius in the window? What do you feed him? Can I get one?

Parents actually asked questions like these at a talk earlier this month, hoping for tips on turning children into geniuses.

For two nights, more than 1,000 parents, 95 per cent of them professionals, jammed the Singapore Labour Foundation Auditorium in Thomson Road to listen to a talk on Effective Parenting In An Achievement-Oriented Society.

The speakers: retired general practitioner Dr William Ho, 53, and his biochemist wife, Dr Esther Su.

The reason for the crowds: The Chinese-American couple have four children with very high intelligence quotients who entered university at very young ages.

Eldest son Sam, now 22, graduated at 13 and is a university lecturer. Youngest son Sean, 14, entered university a year ago.

In between are two girls, Adina, 21, who has degrees in music and chemistry and is doing a PhD in genetics, and Susanna, 19, who is reading for a double PhD in medicine and biochemistry at Harvard.

However, Dr Ho and Dr Su said both during the talk and an interview with Life! that they had not set out to create brilliant kids.

In fact, they had not realised their children were in any way extraordinary, even when Sam began reading tomes at pre-school age.

All they did was to nurture their kids' interests, answer all their questions and provide a loving, supportive environment.

After the talk, Dr Ho received a slip of paper: "Do you believe herbs can increase concentration?"

The burst of laughter died quickly as people cocked their ears for the secret recipe, which he delivered with a grin: "Nyeah... broccoli, cabbage, spinach. You

mean stuff like ginseng, right? Actually, I'm allergic to it."

More questions: "How to cultivate a genius like your younger son?" "How do you increase a child's intelligence?"

Behind the anxiety for quick-fix answers was a general concern to help kids do well in the paper chase.

Obviously, the Hos' methods worked. In the interview, a close scrutiny for any hints of faking showed that this family was not projecting a "successful, loving family" image to back up lofty statements about correct parenting. This was the genuine article.

Dr Ho and Dr Su cheerfully sat back while Adina and Sean, who came to Singapore with them, were grilled on whether their parents practised what they preached.

Yes, they said. For Adina, seeing her parents practise tolerance and respect for others had more impact than any preaching they did "because somewhere in the process of growing up, I acquired the ability to look as if I was listening when I wasn't".

Her parents chuckled at this ribbing, as they did later at Sean's explanations about why he spoke at about one-tenth of Adina's machine-gun speed. His brain was melting down in Singapore's heat so his systems were not operating, he said.

So how does one play Happy Family?

Well, read the two boxes on the right but remember these tips are not "expert" views, just personal experiences, say Dr Ho and Dr Su. And remember that child-rearing is a long-term process of growing with the child and nurturing his interests, not imposing quick-fix formulas.

The latter, added Dr Ho, is more likely to create a neurotic child instead of a happy or successful one.



Happy family (from left): Sean Ho, Dr William Ho, Dr Esther Su and Adina Ho.

WHAT TO DO

Nurturing gifts

■ Gifted children are not usually gifted in everything. Dr William Ho and his wife, Dr Esther Su, accepted their children's uniqueness and nurtured their varied interests.

■ Even children who do not seem gifted have distinct personalities and interests which deserve acceptance and appreciation. This way, the children learn esteem for self and others.

■ Expose them to alternative views, even if they differ from your own: They will learn to think logically, question claims and weigh evidence before arriving at decisions.

Trust your children

■ Parents should show trust in their children, even in circumstances that seem doubtful.

For example, Dr Ho's eldest son, Sam, was reading magazines the day before an examination. Asked to study, he flipped through his books for half an hour and went back to the magazines. Dr Ho refrained from questioning him.

Trusting them helps to build up their self-confidence, and it also teaches them to live with the consequences of their actions.

Incidentally, Sam got full marks.

■ Trust includes respecting children's decisions. For instance, Sean, the younger son, was invited to attend Washington University at the age of 12 with other bright teenagers, but he turned it down because "the students were behaving so arrogantly. They thought they were tons better than anybody else and I didn't want to become like them".

Dr Ho respected his decision, even though it meant paying US\$5,000 (S\$8,000) more in fees at his special school for another year.

If you preach it, practise it

■ Children learn what they see, not what they are told. Sean and his siblings saw their parents practise their teachings in daily behaviour, which reinforced what they learnt during their nightly family devotions.

Communicate on a daily basis

■ The Hos' family devotions, during which they had frank discussions on all subjects, helped to build values and helped the children understand that they could

take problems and questions to their parents.

■ Knowing they could trust their parents for honest answers built trust and helped the children resist peer pressures.

Earn children's respect

■ Parents often demand respect and obedience because they are parents: "No is no because I told you so!"

Children expect parents to earn their respect. Discuss options or reasons rationally with children, for example, why you are not buying something or allowing a particular course of action.

Practise the discipline of love

■ If children fight or quarrel or behave unreasonably, discuss options with them.

Dr Su recounted how her daughters squabbled over toys. She simply removed them until the girls had discussed and agreed on a way to share them.

They quickly learnt that fighting meant deprivation. Such inter-relating skills help children right into their teens and adulthood.

■ If you must spank, observe the rules: Never spank in anger or because the child did something accidentally. Warn them they will be spanked for wilful naughtiness.

Spank with your hand, so that you can feel the force of the blow. Beating with a rod can injure the child badly.

■ Before punishing a young child for, say, crying or not drinking milk, look for other causes which the child is not able to communicate, for example, a sore throat or illness.

Invest in your children

■ Dr Ho noted that more adults are willing to invest in a new car than in encyclopaedias for the children. Yet providing them such resources develops their knowledge.

■ Some Singaporeans at the talk said that here, one could not afford to relinquish a double-income lifestyle, as the Hos had. Dr Ho suggested they review their options.

For example, is there really a need to earn so much? Can they negotiate for more flexible hours or shorter working days? Can they juggle their hours so that their children get to see more of them?

WHAT NOT TO DO

Do not force-feed children

■ Parents can make it a point to discuss with children decisions that involve them, whether it is on something they want to do or stop doing.

■ There is no need to force children to take up specific pursuits.

All children have interests, provide opportunities to fulfil them. If the interests are in fields in which you lack knowledge, take them to the library.

Avoid fulfilling your dreams by proxy

■ A son of two engineers once told Dr William Ho he was very interested in engineering, but his parents preferred him to study medicine.

Dr Ho learnt later that the parents, who were Taiwanese, had not been able to fulfil their own dreams of becoming doctors, so they hoped to realise it through their son.

Children should be allowed to pursue a career that satisfies and fulfils them, even if it does not meet the parents' criterion of a "successful" career.

■ When parents expect children to excel for reasons other than the children's welfare, for example, to brag to friends or to seek fame for the family, the children will know they are not loved for what they are, only for their achievements.

Do not set impossible standards

■ Dr Ho's daughter Adina's classmates at the pre-university school included many brilliant students.

Many had highly-educated, intelligent parents with high expectations who were disappointed if their children failed to stay at the top of the class all the time.

She found such children tense and anxious.

"Their sense of their own worth depended on their academic achievements and if that didn't work, everything would fall apart," she said.