

Introduction: Parenting Between Worlds

Parenting is a journey of love, uncertainty, and deep hope. As immigrant and Iranian-American parents, we hold a profound desire to see our children thrive, anchored in the richness of our heritage while confidently navigating the world around them. Yet, just as our own or our parents' immigrant journeys were unpredictable and shaped by lessons we never saw coming, our children's paths will unfold in ways we cannot fully control.

The world they are growing up in is different from the one we knew, shaped by social media, evolving societal norms, and increasing cultural blending. This reality can awaken both fear and longing: fear that our children will drift too far from what matters to us, and longing for them to carry forward the values and traditions we cherish.

Instead of asking, *How do I make sure my child stays tied to my cultural values?* we might gently shift the question to: *How do I help them discover their own, while staying connected to where they come from?* When we move from controlling to guiding, from enforcing to modeling, from fearing to trusting, we create space for our children to build identities that are both deeply rooted and uniquely their own.

Raising children in a bi-cultural family does not have to be about choosing one culture over another. It is about learning how to live in the space between, with curiosity, compassion, and connection.

The Acculturation Gap: Naming the Invisible Tension

Immigrant families often encounter unique challenges as they navigate the complexities of adapting to a new culture while preserving their heritage. One common source of tension is the acculturation gap, the reality that parents and children often adapt to the surrounding culture at different speeds.

Parents may hold tightly to traditional cultural values, while children, influenced by school, peers, and the broader society, naturally absorb the norms and behaviors of the culture they are growing up in. This gap can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts around values, expectations, independence, relationships, and identity.

When this dynamic goes unnamed, it can quietly erode trust. When it is acknowledged with compassion, it can become an opportunity for deeper understanding rather than division.

Creating a Solid Foundation in Early Childhood

Early childhood is a distinct and formative period, one where intentional exposure to language and culture plays an important role. At this stage, consistency does not feel restrictive; it feels like belonging.

For many immigrant families, this means integrating culture into daily life in simple, steady ways. Speaking Persian at home, even alongside English, helps children develop familiarity with the language's rhythm and emotional tone. Persian storybooks, songs, and shared cultural experiences allow identity to take shape naturally rather than through instruction.

Celebrating Iranian holidays with intention also plays an important role. Explaining the meaning behind traditions, such as Nowruz or Yalda, gives children a narrative they can carry with them as they grow. These explanations do not need to be elaborate; age-appropriate stories are often enough to build pride and connection.

For families who have the capacity, teaching reading and writing in Persian in addition to conversation can further deepen this foundation. Literacy offers children a direct relationship with their heritage and can become a source of confidence over time.

A strong foundation in early childhood is not about fixing identity in place. It is about giving children something familiar and steady to return to, so that as they grow and begin to question and choose, they do so from a place of connection rather than absence.

Model Cultural Values Through Everyday Actions

Children absorb who we are more than what we tell them. If we want them to cherish cultural traditions, they need to see us engaging with those traditions with joy, not obligation.

Speak your native language with warmth, not pressure. Invite participation, but don't shame children if they mix languages. Language is learned through love, not force.

Engage in traditions in ways that feel alive. Instead of insisting that customs be observed exactly as they were in the past, create new traditions together that honor both cultures.

Demonstrate values such as hospitality, kindness, and respect through everyday interactions. These qualities will live in children not because they were instructed, but because they were witnessed.

By making culture something children experience with joy rather than something they are required to preserve, connection grows naturally.

Educate Instead of Demand

When fear arises that children may drift away from cultural or social values, parents may turn to rigid rules and restrictions. While structure can feel protective, cultural identity is not preserved through control, it is nurtured through understanding and choice.

Instead of saying, "You must only marry someone from our culture,"
try: "Our culture values family and connection. What feels important to you in a partner?"

Instead of saying, "You shouldn't have American friends because they don't share our values,"
try: "It's meaningful to stay connected to our roots while also building diverse friendships. How do you experience that balance?"

When children feel trusted to think and reflect for themselves, they are far more likely to carry cultural values with pride rather than resist them out of frustration.

Remembering Our Children as Separate Human Beings

Many immigrant parents carry a deep, embodied memory of what it felt like to want freedom, to choose a path that felt meaningful, even when it did not fully align with what others expected. For some, that freedom came through immigration itself; for others, through education, career choices, or life decisions that required courage and risk.

And yet, when it comes to our children, that same longing for self-determination can quietly fade into fear.

Caring parents want the very best for their children, not out of ego, but out of care. They know what financial stability can provide. They have seen what education can open up for people. They are familiar with paths that are "tried and tested," and it is natural to want to protect children from choices that feel uncertain, unfamiliar, or risky.

When anxiety takes the lead, however, guidance can slowly turn into control.

When children are young, this dynamic may not be immediately visible. Parents make decisions, children follow, and the family system remains intact. But as children move into adolescence and young adulthood, their developmental needs shift. They are no longer just learning how to behave; they are learning who they are.

If there is little room for exploration, missteps, or unconventional interests, children may respond in one of two ways: they may grow emotionally distant from their parents, or they may choose a path that looks "successful" on the outside but feels deeply disconnected on the inside. Neither outcome is what parents hope for.

Recognizing children as independent human beings does not mean withdrawing guidance or abandoning values. It means remembering that, just like their parents once did, they need space to test, question, and author their own lives.

When parents soften their grip, not by disengaging, but by trusting, the relationship often becomes the bridge that keeps children close, even as their paths diverge.

Encouraging Open Conversations About Identity

Growing up bicultural can feel like standing between two worlds, never fully belonging to one or the other. Many children wrestle quietly with questions such as:

- Am I more Iranian or more American?
- Why do my parents see the world differently than my friends' parents?
- How do I honor my family's expectations while still being true to myself?

These questions are not reflective of our parenting as a proud Iranian immigrant. They are in fact reflection of a normal process of self-discovery for a healthy child. Parents can support their children by creating spaces for open, judgment-free conversation.

Ask: "What do you love about our culture? What feels challenging?"

Allow frustration to be expressed without dismissal or correction.

Share your own journey, letting children know that navigating identity is not a one-time task but a lifelong process. A child who feels heard and understood will often feel more connected to their roots than one who feels pressured to conform.

Balancing Tradition with Flexibility

Culture is not something we preserve unchanged, it is something we carry forward and allow to evolve. The traditions we pass down are strongest when they are meaningful, adaptable, and alive.

Children may engage with traditions differently than we did. They may not want to wear traditional clothing for a holiday, but they might love setting up the Haft-Seen or participating in the gathering itself.

Accept that their experiences will differ from yours. They are growing up in an environment that often emphasizes independence more than collectivism. Rather than demanding replication of your upbringing, help them find balance between the two.

Being Iranian, or belonging to any culture, does not have to look just one way. Identity is not diminished by evolution; it is strengthened by authenticity.

Prioritizing Connection Over Expectation

More than shared language or traditions, the strongest bond between parent and child is emotional connection. A child who feels deeply connected to their family is far more likely to carry their heritage with them, not as a burden, but as a gift.

Spend time together that isn't centered on expectations or correction. Be present in their world, whether through music, movies, conversations, or shared curiosity.

Show genuine interest in their passions, even when those interests fall outside what feels familiar or traditionally cultural.

Celebrate their unique journey. The more children feel accepted as they are, the more open they become to embracing where they come from.

Embracing the Changing World with Mindful Guidance

With social media, peer influences, and shifting societal norms, raising children exactly as we were raised is no longer possible. Rather than resisting this reality, parents can step into the role of guide.

Teach critical thinking about media and cultural messages instead of banning exposure altogether.

Encourage meaningful online and offline experiences, community events, cultural gatherings, creative spaces, and friendships that foster identity beyond screens.

Be a source of wisdom, not restriction. Help children evaluate choices rather than making decisions for them.

In a world filled with constant external influence, the most enduring anchor in a child's life will always be the quality of their relationship with you.

Final Reflections: Trusting the Process

Raising bi-cultural or multi-cultural children is less about holding on tightly and more about learning how to let go with intention and faith. When parents shift from control to guidance, from fear to trust, and from rigid tradition to living heritage, children are given the freedom to grow into grounded, confident individuals.

What ultimately stays with children is not how perfectly they followed cultural rules, but how deeply they felt seen, trusted, and connected.

That sense of belonging, rooted in relationship, becomes the bridge that allows them to carry both their heritage and their evolving identity with pride.

A Moment for Reflection

The questions below are not meant to be answered quickly or perfectly. They are invitations to pause, reflect, and notice, without judgment.

- When I imagine my child's future, which parts feel rooted in their unique nature, and which parts reflect my own fears or hopes?
- What paths felt "safe" or "acceptable" when I was younger, and which ones did I long to explore more freely?
- How do I typically respond when my child shows interest in something unfamiliar or unconventional?
- Where might trust strengthen our relationship more than control?
- What would it look like to stay emotionally close to my child, even if their choices unfold differently than I once imagined?

Parenting across cultures asks us not only to guide our children, but also to continually examine ourselves. This reflection is not about letting go of care, it is about letting care take a wiser, more spacious form.

Closing Invitation: Support is Here

Parenting across cultures often brings questions that don't have simple answers—especially for parents who care deeply, think critically, and want to offer their children both opportunity and

belonging. Many families find that having a thoughtful, culturally attuned space to reflect on these questions can be deeply supportive.

Negar, the founder of [Your Power to Thrive](#), brings both personal and professional insight to this work. As a mother herself, she has navigated the same tensions explored in these pages—balancing guidance and trust, holding cultural roots with care, and learning how to stay connected as children grow into their own independence.

In addition, through her long-standing leadership of a reputable Persian language school in the US, Negar has witnessed these dynamics unfold across many families and developmental stages. She has seen, firsthand, how children respond when culture is offered with warmth rather than pressure, and how parents can remain a steady presence even as their children's paths evolve.

Coaching with Negar is not about being told what to do or how to parent "correctly." It is about having a space to think clearly, reflect honestly, and make choices that align with your values, while honoring both your children's individuality and your cultural legacy.

If you are seeking support in navigating parenting across cultures, managing the anxiety that can arise around your children's futures, or strengthening connection as your family evolves, Negar offers life coaching grounded in cultural understanding, science, and deep respect for the complexity of immigrant family life.



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