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# Insights from Dewey's Pragmatic Educational Thought for Family Education in China

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**Abstract:** Family is the first classroom of life. Family education directly shapes adolescents' thinking patterns and worldviews and indirectly affects the prospects of the nation and society. In China, family education often neglects its distinctive role and functions, either becoming a mere extension of school education or echoing it uncritically. As a result, many children grow up amid improper or absent family education. Dewey's pragmatic education, marked by openness, continuity, and practicality, provides an apt guide for family education in China and helps it fulfill its relatively independent educational functions.

**Keywords:** Dewey; pragmatic education; family education

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## 1. Introduction

The family constitutes the foundation of the nation, and the nation, in turn, sustains the family; accordingly, family education not only profoundly shapes individual growth but also undergirds social and national development. As the earliest site of education in a person's life, it forms initial character and lays the groundwork for values, serving as a primary arena for cultural transmission, moral cultivation, and the nurturing of civic consciousness. Through daily modeling in word and deed, emotional interaction, and value guidance, family education exerts a deep influence on children's cognitive development, emotion regulation, and interpersonal competence—an influence that formal schooling and broader social education cannot substitute. However, significant problems persist in contemporary family education in China. Many parents embrace a grade-centric mentality, placing excessive emphasis on academic performance and skill acquisition while neglecting non-intellectual factors such as children's interests and strengths, emotion regulation, willpower, and social interaction. This utilitarian tendency toward a narrow pursuit of scores and rankings has consequently produced imbalanced development, heightened mental health concerns, and insufficient cultivation of creativity and critical thinking. In response to these challenges, a new theoretical lens is needed to redirect family education to its educative essence and to effect a shift from cultivating talents to cultivating whole persons. John Dewey, the most influential foreign scholar in the history of modern Chinese education, offers a rich and distinctive educational teleology that provides a fresh perspective for research on family education in China in the new era.

## 2. Core Tenets of Dewey's Pragmatic Education

Grounded in pragmatic philosophy, child psychology, and sociology, Dewey's pragmatic education starts from education-as-experience [1]. It integrates educational activity with lived practice and holds that the purpose of education is to better adapt to society.

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### *2.1. On the Nature of Education*

Building on his critique of traditional schooling for being detached from lived experience, Dewey advanced three interrelated theses: “education is life,” “education is growth,” and “education is the reconstruction of experience.” These propositions complement one another, reflect Dewey’s distinctive insight into educational problems, and run through his lifelong educational practice [2].

### *2.2. On the Purpose of Education*

After elucidating the nature of education, Dewey proposed what is often called his “no fixed ends” view. This does not mean that education proceeds without aims or direction. Rather, educational aims should be immanent to the natural process of development: “educational aims should arise from within the educational process itself, rather than being externally imposed as rigid and extrinsic goals.” Dewey argued that the attainable goals children can foresee in their striving constitute the real aims of education. Such aims guide sustained study, patient observation, and the pursuit of success, making “education its own constant reward.”

Accordingly, he criticized traditional conceptions that center teachers and textbooks while neglecting learners’ individuality and self-worth, thus placing learners in a passive position at odds with their growth under strict social constraints and prescriptive rules [3]. Genuine educational aims should organize activity-based teaching around learners’ needs, interests, and current capacities. They should be present, specific, and contextual, not ultimate, external, or generic.

### *2.3. Basic Principles of Teaching*

“Learning by doing.” This is a foundational principle in Dewey’s method and the core of his comprehensive critique of traditional pedagogy [4]. He argued that direct transmission of book knowledge in fixed classrooms, detached from students’ social lives and practical needs, cannot meaningfully mobilize interest or stimulate imagination and creativity. Instruction should therefore pivot from one-way inculcation to experiential participation through which students acquire knowledge and experience. Practice should be treated as a key mode of teaching, content should not be confined to textbooks, and the teacher’s role should shift from didactic authority to a facilitator and advisor of student activity. Through “doing,” classroom and text connect with students’ activity and experience, bridging direct and indirect experience and avoiding the disjunction between knowing and doing.

Teacher–student relations. Dewey viewed the school as a miniature society in which teachers and students stand in an egalitarian relationship. The child is the center of instruction; all teaching should revolve around children’s needs. While child-centered, Dewey did not diminish the teacher’s role or advocate laissez-faire. As he put it, “The teacher is entitled to be a teacher precisely because he best understands children’s needs and possibilities and can plan their work.” In child-centered education, teachers should create exploratory and developmental environments and act as participants, guides, and organizers.

Dewey not only placed “educating through practice” at the heart of his thought but also implemented it consistently. He advocated aligning school education with society and life by establishing laboratories, school farms, kitchens, and workshops; by assigning work such as drawing, weaving, gardening, cooking, and planting; and by encouraging students to join activities of interest so that they learn and grow through labor and observation. Such practical teaching cultivated interest, aroused curiosity, and promoted holistic growth; it also dissolved the divide between school and society, nurtured a spirit of mutual aid among students, and laid foundations for vocational life.

Dewey’s pragmatic education strips away doctrinaire transmission and moralistic preaching, resists extreme abstraction and symbolization, and integrates the real world

and society into students' development. In so doing, it renders knowledge education practical and life education aesthetic, avoiding fragmented knowledge and alienated conduct during formative years. Hence, Dewey's thought holds significant implications for strengthening ideological and political education in China.

### **3. The Connotation and Importance of Family Education**

#### *3.1. What Is Family Education*

Family education refers to the purposeful and planned education and influence that parents exert within family life. It is a bidirectional interaction: parents, guided by their expectations, influence children through multiple means—home environment, psychological climate, and elders' speech and behavior—while children, through their performance, in turn influence parents. In the United States, it is commonly called family life education. In the 1960s, most American scholars regarded family education as an internal family matter—education about roles and responsibilities, with each member fulfilling obligations to ensure harmony. In the 1970s, emphasis shifted to enhancing interpersonal relationships, defining family life education as “an educational program that enhances family life and helps individuals better understand themselves within diverse interpersonal relationships.” By the late 1980s, scholars increasingly framed family life education as a means to elevate overall living standards and quality of life: “preserving and improving human quality of life through examining interactions among individuals, families, and their multilayered environmental resources.” Since the late 1990s, the paradigm has absorbed lifelong learning, proposing that family education is not merely intra-familial interaction but the learning and growth through which all family members adapt to society. Thus, family education is not simply an extension or supplement of school education; together with school and social education, it constitutes an integral component of modern national education, closely connected yet maintaining its own independent system.

#### *3.2. Why Family Education Matters*

Family education is the most consequential education across the lifespan, the first environment for nurturing a healthy personality, and the child's first school. The educator Sukhomlinsky likened a child to a block of marble whose transformation into a valuable statue requires the collaboration of six sculptors: family, school, the child's collective, the child, books, and chance factors. This analogy underscores the primacy of the family's influence. The family is the first socializing unit encountered from birth and plays an irreplaceable role throughout development; however excellent school and social education may be, they cannot substitute for family education. Parents are children's first teachers; their words and deeds are early models that exert decisive influence over children's long physiological and psychological development. Children also spend more time under family education than under any other form of education. In this sense, parents are lifelong mentors and the family is a lifelong school. A person's temperament, mental outlook, and principles and methods for relating to others are deeply shaped by family education.

In short, family education molds children's thinking patterns, which in turn shape their behaviors and responses to external stimuli. It is therefore critical to the formation of habits and to both psychological and physical development.

### **4. Problems in Contemporary Family Education in China**

#### *4.1. The Coexistence of Authoritarianism and Indulgence*

Influenced by traditional culture, many families take “obedience” as the foremost criterion of a good child [5]. This deference to parental authority erects an invisible wall—a “generation gap.” Children seldom have choices or a voice in their own development and must comply with parental wishes in matters large and small. Privacy is often denied: schoolbags are searched regularly, diaries are read secretly, and movements are monitored. Some parents also embrace “rod-based discipline” (corporal punishment justified

as loving correction), believing that “a strict rod produces filial children.” At the slightest mistake, they resort to hitting and scolding without meaningful communication, construing punishment as love. Children raised in such settings tend to be submissive and indecisive, lacking courage and self-confidence. Emotional distance persists, making genuine communication difficult and undermining educational effectiveness.

Unconditional parental provision further deprives children of opportunities to learn and practice independently. Influenced by the former family planning policy and rising living standards, many parents indiscriminately satisfy children’s demands without considering their reasonableness, allowing care to slide into indulgence. Children are treated as too precious to deny, creating an excess of familial affection in which children ultimately become victims. Overindulgence fosters self-centered personalities, weak perspective-taking, and acquisitive, hedonistic, and wasteful outlooks. When families or society cannot satisfy their demands, such youth may become anxious, angry, and resentful—emotions and behaviors that can have disastrous consequences for individuals and society.

#### *4.2. Substituting for Children’s Growth and Eroding Childhood*

Parental love is pure and noble, yet in practice it is often narrowed by misinterpretation. Determined to be guardians who will do anything, parents may assume that selfless devotion guarantees correctness. Seeking to equip children for society—or out of regret over youthful mistakes and anxiety about children’s naivety—some try to transmit all their experiences. This is perilous: not all experience merits transmission, and no formula can perfectly pass one generation’s experiences to the next. Thought must evolve with age; some virtues and wisdom are bound up with maturation. When children display precocity and shrewdness far beyond their years, their psychological development has already been distorted—an outcome indicative of failed family education [6].

#### *4.3. A Disjunction Between Education and Life: Knowing Without Doing*

A familiar parable tells of a ship capsized by wind and waves. The philosopher, poet, and mathematician—displaying their learning—perished, while the unlettered boatman reached shore safely [7]. The story highlights a flaw in China’s family education: it has obscured its distinctive role by morphing into an appendage of school education. Given China’s population and constraints of economics, numbers, traditions, and practical conditions, schools often concentrate on collective cognitive training. Family education should therefore coordinate with schools while exercising its unique, life-anchored functions. Yet many parents remain fixated on “intellect,” hoping for examination success, thereby cultivating high scores but low competencies—“prodigies” who cannot peel a boiled egg. Such harsh realities invite parents to regret not allowing children to experience life firsthand at every stage. More tragically, many remain willfully blind even after recognizing the problem. By severing “learning” from “doing,” they sharpen children’s intellect while stunting their souls. If not remedied, this problem in family education may escalate into a broader social tragedy.

### **5. Insights from Pragmatic Education for Family Education in China**

#### *5.1. Make Effective Use of Life Contexts to Cultivate Autonomy*

Traditional family education tends to construe parenting as a one-way duty, neglecting children’s status and agency as independent individuals. Given the contextuality and appropriateness emphasized in Dewey’s view of educational aims, parents should balance both dimensions: avoid replacing children’s efforts regardless of context, and avoid the opposite extreme of laissez-faire. In early childhood, as children’s first teachers, parents should employ suitable everyday contexts, respect children’s needs as subjects, and provide ample opportunities for them to voice their needs to foster autonomy. Parents

should show respect, tolerance, and understanding; advocate egalitarian dialogue in concrete situations; and intentionally create a harmonious, congenial family atmosphere so that children develop autonomy through participation in self-directed, lived practices.

### *5.2. Build a Democratic Family to Restore Selfhood and Creativity*

Parenting styles include authoritarian, permissive, and democratic, among others. The democratic family best supports healthy development. In such families, parents treat children as independent individuals and respect their dignity. When children encounter difficulties, parents serve as guides and helpers rather than decision-makers or bystanders, express positive emotions in communication, and listen attentively to children's inner voices.

When parents expect children to reach certain goals, they should base plans on children's current conditions, craft development pathways suited to their growth, and present a forward-looking vision. They should create enabling conditions for happy growth rather than compare them constantly with others' children, which triggers negative emotions. As children enter middle school and adolescence, self-awareness intensifies. The rapid development of the information age diversifies channels of information acquisition and dilutes parental authority, heightening the risk of tense parent-child relations. Parents should adjust their approaches in a timely manner, build a democratic family, and offer quiet, gentle care that helps children navigate adolescence smoothly. Parents should understand children's physical and mental development, adopt an egalitarian stance toward their ideas, and resolve issues through consultation. Through parental listening and guidance, children move through cycles of conflict and reconciliation, gradually achieving socialization—an essential stage of growth.

Regarding learning, parents should identify root causes from children's accounts; help them internalize the importance of study for youth in the new era; strengthen intrinsic motivation; and guide them to set stage-based learning goals that allow for self-assessment, timely adjustment, and clear direction. While tracking academic performance, parents should also cultivate non-cognitive factors and promote comprehensive development in morality, intellect, physique, aesthetics, and labor, thereby enhancing overall quality. The family setting is a fertile field: seize everyday situations to nurture virtue in moral education, refine aesthetic sensibility in aesthetic education, strengthen physical fitness through sports, and cultivate work ethic through labor practice. Adolescents often vacillate; parents should learn to understand and tolerate, view behaviors through an appreciative lens, and balance strictness with kindness. Given the multidimensionality of family education in the new era, challenges are inevitable. By constructing a democratic family, creating a harmonious atmosphere, and forming close parent-child bonds, parents can guide middle school students to set development goals suited to personal growth across stages and domains, thereby steadily improving comprehensive competence through integrative practical activities.

### *5.3. Learn Through Practice: Let Children Reconstruct Experience by Doing*

To engage children actively in learning, parents should organize practice activities aligned with developmental law so that children encounter concrete things in life. Practice bridges subject and object—precisely why Dewey stressed learning by doing. All knowledge arises from subject-object interaction; cognition forms largely through the internalization of activity. Therefore, children must take part in concrete practices to acquire knowledge. In family education, parents should guide children to explore the external world and to continually reconstruct and refine their knowledge systems through exploration and practice. Only such growth can withstand society's tests.

Yet some conservative families dismiss children's "trial and error" as useless, insisting that book learning alone suffices and thereby "work behind closed doors." Though well-intentioned, this stance is ultimately selfish and irresponsible. It deprives children of

the joy of firsthand experience and leaves them flustered when facing real-world demands. Only through personal practice can children form concrete concepts and coherent knowledge structures, appreciate the effort behind attainment, savor the joy of achievement, and face social challenges with composure. Parents should therefore encourage active participation in social practice and provide ample hands-on opportunities. Regardless of correctness or success in these endeavors, children merit timely encouragement and praise.

## 6. Conclusion

Drawing on Dewey's pragmatic educational philosophy, family education should focus on children's experiences and practical life, and it should uphold the principles of learning by doing and education as life. Parents should not merely focus on the one-way transmission of knowledge; rather, they ought to respect children's interests and agency, guiding them to explore, reflect on, and address practical problems arising in family life so as to cultivate critical thinking and practical competence. At the same time, family education should advance in concert with schooling and social education to create synergy in educating children, thereby playing a distinctive role in emotional support, character formation, and value guidance. Only in this way can we, on the basis of respecting children's nature, promote their all-round physical and mental development, facilitate the high-quality development of family education in the new era, and ultimately cultivate builders and successors who can shoulder the task of national rejuvenation while meeting the needs of society.

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