

**Mauricio Lim Miller** [Become a fan](#)

Founder and CEO, Family Independence Initiative

Posted: 09/02/2014 2:37 pm EDT

Helping Should Strengthen Relationships, Not Hurt Them: Three Perspectives (1 of 3)

NOTE TO READER: This is the first of a three part series appearing over the next three weeks, about an incident from the 1980s when I was Executive Director of Asian Neighborhood Design, a social services agency in San Francisco, California.

It was 1983 I was running a counseling program for refugees from the Vietnam War. My social worker and I had just left what I thought was a great counseling session with Myong, a single mom from Vietnam who raising three kids on her own. My agency also worked with gang kids and we knew that her 15-year-old son was getting recruited by a San Francisco Chinatown gang. Soon after our session with Myong, her son did join the gang, and Myong placed a significant part of the blame on our program.

Something happened right after that "great" counseling session, because from then onwards Myong refused to talk to us. This three-part series will present this story, first from the viewpoint of what our program set out to do. The second posting will present Myong's viewpoint and her reasons for breaking away from my agency. In the third posting, we will present what we gathered as the viewpoint of her teenage son, Tae.

The story is true and similar scenarios continue to this day.

What I hope to share is how many of us, in our efforts to be helpful, too often unintentionally harm those we are trying to help, and how we consequently add to the stereotype that low-income adults are not capable of helping themselves, their children, or others. The stereotype goes as far as to blame the parents or caring guardians if their children get into trouble without understanding that a paternalistic system of help is more likely to be the culprit.

*

Following the Vietnam War in the early 1980s, there was an influx of refugees to the United States. Many of them ended up in San Francisco. At the time, I was the Executive Director of Asian Neighborhood Design, a social service agency, and we had just received a federal grant to help refugee families assimilate into the country. From our point of view, most families

needed our help because they spoke very little English and didn't know our schools, social services, or other institutional systems and how to navigate them. Our job was to identify refugees and help them with their housing problems and related issues.

In the case of Myong and her son, my employment and youth social workers had already spent time ascertaining the issues they faced. But this visit by my new social worker to Myong's apartment was to better understand her housing situation. I went along since it was my social worker's first home visit.

Myong lived with her three kids in a small one-bedroom apartment in the Tenderloin, a pretty tough part of town. Tae, at 15, was her oldest son. Myong let us in and my worker sat with her at the only table in the room. I sat on the couch listening and available to provide help if needed. My worker asked Myong about her housing situation, how much rent she paid, how the building was maintained, and whether it suited her needs. Myong was clear that the building manager was a problem and was looking for an excuse to kick them out. She hoped we could help. My social worker was well trained and was able to give her a list of low-cost housing options and tell her about her rights as a tenant. She also asked Myong to set up some goals and said our agency would help her meet them.

As Myong complied with my counselor's direction, her son Tae stepped out of the shadows and leaned against the door of the only bedroom in the place. As the session went on, a look of disgust came over his face. I assumed his disgust was aimed at my young social worker. Finally the session ended, goals and timelines were set, and Myong thanked us as we left her apartment.

But within a few minutes, just as we were leaving the building, Myong sprinted up after us and angrily said that she didn't want us to come back. "My children are losing respect for me," she yelled in broken English. Then, still agitated, she ran back up the stairs. My counselor and I were startled because Myong had always been so grateful for our help. Even though my counselor was new, she was properly trained and had been very sensitive during the session. We didn't know what we had done wrong.

Later, we tried calling Myong several times but she wouldn't talk to us. What we did learn is that a couple weeks later Tae had ran away to join the Chinatown gang that was recruiting him. In next week's posting, I will share Myong's criticism of our help and what we learned about the incident.

**Mauricio Lim Miller** [Become a fan](#)

Founder and CEO, Family Independence Initiative

Posted: 09/16/2014 3:16 pm EDT

Helping Should Strengthen Relationships, Not Hurt Them: Three Perspectives (2 of 3)

In [my first post](#), I introduced the story of Myong, a refugee from Vietnam who was receiving counseling from the social service agency, Asian Neighborhood Design, which I ran in 1983. During what I thought was a great counseling session about Myong's housing situation, I noticed that her 15-year-old son had a very disgusted look on his face as he listened to my staff counsel his mother.

I thought his disgust was aimed at my young social worker, but it turned out he was disgusted with his mother. After, as we were leaving the building, Myong ran after us and angrily told us to never come back. From then on, she refused our help. This post shares Myong's perspective on what happened. We will share her son's point of view about the incident in the last of these three postings.

*

My social worker and I were stunned by Myong's change of mood between the end of the session and our exchange just outside the building. We were even more surprised by her refusal to have anything to do with us after that. We began asking her friends what they thought had happened.

They shared more background on Myong. Her husband had been killed in the Vietnam War, after which she made it to a Thai refugee camp with her three children in tow. Three people in her party died during the crossing to Thailand. After a couple years she was able to get passage with others on a boat to Hong Kong, fighting off pirates along the way.

Once in Hong Kong, she managed to get herself and her kids to San Francisco. She was obviously smart, resourceful, and determined, and clearly the authority figure and leader of her family. But in the three years she had been in the U.S., her parental authority had diminished and her older son had begun to rebel.

Myong shared with her friends that while she needed some of the information our social service counselors provided, her children were beginning to believe that, without our help, she couldn't make it and that she was not smart or resourceful. In addition, the ongoing put-

downs her children heard at school and on TV about refugees and people of color were making them feel ashamed of her and their culture.

Right after we left Myong's apartment that day, Tae had called her "stupid." This dynamic had been going on for a while. She could see how following direction from professionals only confirmed his view of her. She resented that every counselor asked her to set goals, which sometimes were in conflict with one another, and then monitored her as if that would help. Yet she complied and was grateful, but just to be polite.

Her son joined some youth programs and would often contradict what she wanted him to do by saying that the youth counselors wouldn't agree or that "it wasn't done that way in America." None of the youth counselors from any of the programs ever talked to her or asked for her advice. The problem was that others, both the youth programs and the gangs, seemed to be able to offer more to her children than she could.

While she barely was able to put food on the table and pay rent, youth programs offered mentors, excursions, and scholarships. She also knew that Tae thought that being a part of a gang commanded respect and offered ways, legal or not, for him to earn money and buy what other kids seemed to have.

Some time after our last session with Myong, we learned that Tae had run away and joined a Chinatown gang. Her friends said that she was devastated and cried for days. She turned away from our program, and all other programs. Instead, she forged friendships with other families like hers, seeking help from those who had successfully navigated the systems she needed access to.

Spending time with those families not only helped her gain knowledge and examples of how to make things work for her in this country, but it also provided emotional support. This new community of friends gave her two younger children more of a sense of a village, the kind she had left behind in Vietnam. With this new village, she hoped to win Tae back.

*

As I learned more about Myong I came to realize that if we had wanted to be of help we should have learned more about her. This would have allowed us to recognize and honor her skills and her resourcefulness, especially in front of her kids. Instead, since her son was starting to get into trouble, we quietly assumed that she was probably not a good mother and did not know how to make good decisions.

This type of internal assessment makes programs feel more important and necessary. Sadly, most youth programs seldom prioritize getting to know the parents. If the kids have problems, programs assume to have the best solutions and replace some of the parental role.

The more I have learned about the hundreds of families I have tried to help in my 35 years in the social sector, the more I realize that most low-income parents or guardians should be approached with admiration and respect. Surviving in our worst neighborhoods with almost nothing takes an enormous amount of resourcefulness. I have also come to learn that rebuilding a sense of community with friends and peers seems to provide better and more sustainable solutions.

In the last posting of this series, I will share Tae's perspective of the incident.

**Mauricio Lim Miller** [Become a fan](#)

Founder and CEO, Family Independence Initiative

Posted: 09/17/2014 11:21 am EDT

Helping Should Strengthen Relationships, Not Hurt Them: Three Perspectives (3 of 3)

This is the last in a series of three posts sharing the story of Myong, a refugee from Vietnam who was receiving counseling from Asian Neighborhood Design, the social service agency I ran in 1983. (Read [part 1](#) and [part 2](#).) After one of our counseling sessions, we found out that her son ran away and joined a gang in San Francisco's Chinatown.

In the previous post we explained that, from Myong's perspective, our counseling and the fact that we could provide resources she couldn't, led her kids to have less respect for her, which reduced her authority as a parent. She turned away from our programs and instead built a set of personal relationships around her that helped and sustained her family more effectively than programs could.

*

Tae's father was killed in the Vietnam War, but when he was around nine years old his mother was able to get him and his siblings to a refugee camp in Thailand. They arrived in the U.S. when he was twelve. Through school in the U.S., Tae was able to advance his English-language skills much faster than his mother could advance hers, which made him important in translating for the family. At school, he also got access to programs for refugee children and, in turn, learned about other programs for families like his. When Myong turned to the counselors of these programs, their help was useful but also had unintended consequences.

Some of these programs provided general counseling, while others offered specific advice or services for employment or housing, like my program did. Each service had different eligibility criteria and requirements that Myong had to fulfill. Almost all required her to set goals and timelines, which were often in conflict with one another. As Tae saw his mother jumping through these hoops, he began to internalize the broader negative stereotypes that existed about refugees and started to look down on his mother and their culture. While in the past his mother had clearly been in charge of getting them from refugee camps to the States, now his mother seemed dependent and powerless. Also, he was becoming a teenager with a tendency to rebel.

The second thing that Tae recognized was that the staff at school and the youth programs seemed to have more things to offer than his mother. His first excursions to the zoo or museums were with youth counselors. These programs offered him books and experiences that his mother couldn't provide. He realized that he could use those experiences and advice to contradict his mother whenever they had arguments. For example, when Myong asked him to watch over his younger siblings, as he had done in Vietnam, now he could say that his school or counselors required him to be out with them. The counselors rarely spoke with Myong, which meant that he could push their voices to sound more authoritative than hers.

But Tae was also introduced to another option. Gangs in Chinatown were still very active in the early 1980s, and most young men his age were being pushed to join. Tae and his peers saw gangs as one way of getting protection, but also respect (even if it came as a result of violence or violent threats). Respect and a sense of pride, both personal and community, is what Tae and most young people wanted. Gangs provided the camaraderie and community that the village in Vietnam previously offered.

Tae ultimately chose to join a gang and leave his mother. What I understand is that after the last counseling session with Myong in her apartment, Tae called his mother "stupid" for taking advice from yet another counselor. They had had similar confrontations before but sadly my agency's effort to help may have been the last straw in a broader conflict that many others played a role in. In Tae's eyes, everyone in America looked down on his mother; why shouldn't he?

*

This is not an isolated incident. A similar dynamic happened in my life as I was growing up when my older sixteen-year-old sister rebelled and married what turned out to be an abusive and controlling man. Parenting is hard, very hard, whether you are rich or poor, but my mother resented the added burden that in being poor and Mexican others assumed she was a bad mother because of the trouble my sister got into. Sadly this country holds a very negative view of low-income adults. If you are an adult and you haven't "made it," then society looks down on you or looks for professional programs to replace or train you.

I shudder every time I hear that someone is forming a "fatherhood" program for low-income fathers. These generally target Black or Latino fathers. Because negative images of men of color are so prevalent, these programs reinforce the idea that fathers of color don't want or know how to be good fathers. This message is sent not only to society but also to the fathers' own children. Similarly, financial training programs aimed at low-income adults suggest to society and the children of these adults that they are in this situation because they don't know how to manage money. It could be said that I'm making too much of this because there are some bad fathers and people who manage their finances poorly. But we don't have programs or messages that look at low-income communities through the lens of their

strengths and accomplishments to point out how many good fathers or great financial managers there are in these communities. Consequently, these helping programs just add to the dominant negative stereotypes. In some way, they also become self-fulfilling.

Through my current organization, the **Family Independence Initiative**, families share stories from their perspective and we are able to see that the stereotypes are wrong. We are excited to continue sharing these kinds of stories, which come "through a different lens."