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## Aunts, uncles are key role models

By JANET BEIGHLE FRENCH

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Rose Wong has a significant role in raising her nieces and nephews.

"I teach them to play poker and pinball machines, take them to R-rated movies, and fill them up on junk food," she laughs.

But she and her two sisters and brother don't take their extended family relationships lightly.

They live out a Chinese tradition inspired by their mother, caring for their combined nine offspring, ages 1 to 13.

Each sibling has a role, particularly the sisters, whose children are older and closer in age. Eldest sister Margaret, a lawyer, organizes the children's educational and trust funds, teaches good citizenship and stresses education, career planning and hard work.

Cecilia, co-owner of a pharmacy, tends to spiritual and educational needs, including school, camp and lessons. She checks on church attendance, picks piano teachers, insists the kids swim and play team sports, even looks after grooming.

Restaurateur Rose, owner of Pearl of the Orient in Shaker Heights, calls herself the fun aunt.

But every game has a purpose. Playing poker teaches you when to hold, fold and bluff, she said. Rose also directs any manual labor. The children tend their grandparents' garden and clean their residence, and work up through small jobs in her restaurant.

Because most of the children are together three times a week, they are growing up like brothers and sisters. All are encouraged to talk to an aunt or uncle if they don't feel comfortable talking to parents.

They appear to be far from the typical American extended family, but aunts and uncles play important roles in this country, says Wendy Weiss, a Tucson, Ariz., family therapist. But it's a largely invisible phenomenon.

After welcoming her orphaned niece and nephew into her own family in 1979, Weiss began to study such interrelationships, illustrated strongly in extended ethnic families.

She found little literature on the subject and decided it deserved scrutiny.

Calling on personal experience and clinical practice, she developed workshops, then collected stories from participants. Last year, Weiss and three fellow faculty members at the Center for Family Studies in Springfield, N.J., co-authored an article, "The Aunt-Niece Connection," for Family Therapy News. Weiss is now planning a research project.

Aunts and nieces, in particular, often have very strong, enhancing relationships, Weiss said recently.

The therapists reported that sisters tend to stay in touch because women are raised to value relationships. If marriage weakens the bond, a child's birth often rekindles it. Single sisters particularly



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Aunts and uncles play important roles in the Wong family. From the left, top row, Steven Chan, Margaret Wong, Rose Wong, Lily Hwang, Vincent Hwang and George Hwang; second row, Allison Chan, Catherine Lee, Theresa Lee, Stephanie Fungsang and Cecilia Fungsang; first row, Joseph Fungsang, Jacqueline Hwang and Francis Fungsang.



Weiss

take an interest in nieces. Later, a niece may ease family re-entry for an aunt ostracized for such a reason as divorce or lesbianism.

Children learn about their families from seeing adult sisters interact, in both positive and negative ways, said Weiss. And a mother and aunt can offer girls role models that may represent different sides of their own mother; one may be careful and considerate, the other flamboyant and adventurous.

Weiss also noted the role mentioned by Rose Wong — of potential surrogate parent, who can listen to family problems and give independent, unemotional advice.

If the aunt has no children, or only sons, said Weiss, she is likely to pass on family lore and memorabilia to nieces, because "women are the keepers of connection."

"And when aunts see themselves through their nieces' eyes, they get a different experience of themselves and feel enormously valued," said Weiss.

You hear about similar experiences with uncles, but less often, she said.

Basically, nothing is written about either connection, agreed Anastasia Toufexis, a New York writer who explores psychological issues and is considering writing a book about aunts and uncles. Her uncle functioned as a surrogate intellectual and emotional father, she said.

"You have to dig for the information, but it's there somewhere," said Toufexis.

In the early '90s, Arthur Naperstek, professor of social work at Case Western Reserve University, did a comparative study of extended Jewish families in the Polish village where his father had lived and a Western African tribe. They bore many similarities, he said.

Aunts and uncles contribute greatly to such families, he said. They help instill strong family values, because nieces and nephews can study many family role models and the choices they represent. And extended-family members tend to get and keep better jobs, said Naperstek, because they share knowledge of opportunities and often provide transportation or child care.

Naperstek said family support also was critical in helping his father start a business after escaping from Poland just before World War II, and significant for him.

"I could go to my aunts and uncles if my parents were mad at me, or too busy or I needed a little money," he said. In turn, he and his wife knew their siblings would have cared for their children, if necessary.

As family size decreases, successful families will need to develop surrogate extended families, perhaps through religious communities, said Naperstek.

"The aunt and uncle connection is one of those horribly underestimated situations, because people have not concentrated on it," said Toufexis. "This country is so hooked on the nuclear family that we never talk about the broader family."