



Answer if you dare: Which moms are best?



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By Craig Wilson and Maria Puente, USA TODAY,

Eric Weiner is hesitating. He has just been asked whether Jewish mothers make the best mothers of all.

"I just want to make sure you get in one thing," the author and NPR contributor says. "I love you very much, and I promise to call often!"

The message is for his mother, Carole, whom he does love very much but doesn't call often enough.

"It's hard to talk about Jewish mothers without it being a cliché," Weiner says. "Guilt is the currency they trade in, and it's a very valuable currency. Stronger than the dollar right now. But I love her."

Ethnic stereotypes of mothers have been a mainstay of literature, theater, movies and TV. Mirror, mirror on the wall, who makes the best mother of all? That's a very tricky question. Maybe even a ridiculous one, in this age of cultural blending.

Is it Weiner's "you-never-call-but-I-still-love-you-very-much" Jewish mom? The Italian mom who trades in lasagna smothered in her homemade sauce? The Hispanic mother who is the best storyteller ever? Or the African-American mother who is the backbone of the family?

All clichés, yes, but all carrying a kernel of truth, too. It's a debate that will go on long after Mother's Day, which is Sunday.

There is no right or wrong answer to the best-mother question, of course, but it's fun to ask nonetheless. And Weiner is not quite done answering.

"I have non-Jewish friends with non-Jewish mothers, and there seems to be a certain coldness in the relationship," says Weiner, author of *The Geography of Bliss*, which has absolutely nothing to do with where his mother lives.

"With my mother, you always, always know where she stands and what she's thinking. Jewish mothers stew very loudly. Everything is on the table. Sometimes you wished you didn't see everything on the table, but --"

Motherhood by the book

Stephan Poulter, a Los Angeles psychologist who treats mother-daughter couples with conflicted relationships, perhaps wisely decided to remain neutral on the question of who's the best mother.

"Every ethnic group has its liabilities but also a wealth of strengths - attention to details, people skills, compassion, empathy, thinking ahead," says Poulter, author of *The Mother Factor: How Your Mother's Emotional Legacy Impacts Your Life*. "There's a plus side to every group."

Then again, he looks at the situation more analytically. "Good mothering has the ability to see children as separate and apart from the parent - and that's across the board culturally," he says, adding that it's not always viewed the same in different cultures.

"In Italian culture, when a daughter separates, it's viewed as treason, unconsciously," Poulter says. "But in Latino culture, if you don't separate, there's something wrong. In Asian culture, there's no tolerance for emotional dependency or neediness. If a daughter is not self-sufficient, it can be viewed as shameful."

James Beard Award winner Lynne Rossetto Kasper co-hosts *The Splendid Table* on American Public Media radio and is the author of three Italian cookbooks. She knows a few things about Italian-American mothers, too. She calls hers "a real character."

"She was a fabulous cook. I grew up with people always dropping by," says Kasper, whose newest book is *The Splendid Table's How to Eat Supper*. "There were always more at the dinner table than just family. It was like a continual open house."

Cooking good, looking good

Kasper's mother, Elda, was a first-generation Italian-American from a Tuscan family, serving up four or five fresh vegetables a night, along with green salads and a fish or meat dish.

Her fare was lighter than the traditional lasagna and pastas. There was another difference, too.

Though Kasper concedes that the Italian mother cliché is of "a woman wearing black stockings and standing over the pasta pot stirring like crazy," her mother was "always turned out. Under that apron was a great skirt and beautiful blouse. And there were always heels. Always heels and always earrings.

"My mother, until she died at 92, always looked like the older version of a Vogue magazine

cover."

Best-selling author Amy Tan's mother, Daisy, had other strengths.

"The best mothers are the ones who protect you and scare the hell out of you at the same time," says Tan, relaying what her Chinese-American mother said would happen to her if she ever kissed a boy: Basically nothing good would come of it.

She had other plans for her daughter, either to be a neurosurgeon or concert pianist. It wasn't to be. Tan instead became a best-selling author with her *Joy Luck Club*.

Even then, that wasn't enough. When the book hit No. 4 on the best-seller lists, her mom wanted to know why she wasn't No. 3, 2 or 1.

"But that was the love of a mother," Tan says. "She believed in me so much that I should have been No. 1. You always aim high when you're a Chinese mother."

Tan says that you "can't help disappoint in a way. And that helps keep you humble."

Tan is the mother to two Yorkshire terriers. "I'd never compete with my mom in the raising-the-daughter department," she says.

Such stereotypes about moms can flatten out families' real diversity and complexity, warns Stephanie Coontz, professor of history at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Wash., who studies American families, including the changing attitudes about mothering.

"When my 27-year-old son brings home guests, he might joke about the food I can whip up. But it's OK, as long as he doesn't overdo it, when it's part of the affection and warmth, when (preparing food) is not the only thing about our relationship," she says. "If you're only getting the jokes and not the respect, that's a problem. But today, both boys and girls now respect their mothers aside from their traditional female qualities."

'Back in the day' talk

Comedian Chris Rock's mother, Rose Rock, is author of *Mama Rock's Rules: Ten Lessons for Raising a Houseful of Successful Children*. Though her rules have all the earmarks of a strong, no-nonsense African-American mother, Rock says, she'd never think one mother was better than another.

"Never in my life have I separated mothers," she says. "I've always thought of mothering as universal. Mothers are mothers. Maybe because of backgrounds there's a difference, but the instincts should be the same. I've never thought of them as being different."

That said, she then spoke fondly of her late mother, Pearl.

"She was tiny and very quiet, but she had such a strength," Rock says. Her mother cleaned houses and worked in the fields of South Carolina. She also handed down stories of the family.

"In the black family, the oral history is very important. It's so hard for us to find out who we are, our beginnings," Rock says. "At Sunday dinners and family gatherings, you learned about all the people who went before. My mother did that for me."

She says her children call it "back in the day" talk. In the end, it seems as if all mothers might be the best. "There are stereotypes, and a lot come from some little kernel of truth," says Maria Perez-Brown, author of *Mama: Latina Daughters Celebrate Their Mothers*. "And they can be a double-edged sword, depending on whether you use them to celebrate or degrade a culture."