A common problem faced by many modern families is the issue of communication, especially communication across different cultures. Every family deals with interpersonal relationships, and not all relationships are smooth running. Relationships are not always clear-cut and simple, there are many controversies between people regarding the proper way to act. Many times people feel that they must treat family members in a certain way, even though they feel that it is not the most desirable choice. In *Pushing Hands* we see a family made up of two cultures, and the communication issues and problems they face. The movie *Pushing Hands* shows many issues in family relationships, and how these problems are dealt with by different individuals.

The first relationship we see in this movie is the one of Martha and Master Chu. Martha is the epitome of today’s modern American working-woman, constantly busy with her job and responsibilities. When her father-in-law moves in with the family after he retires, Martha becomes very frustrated with having him around. This is evident by the way she treats him. She goes out of her way not to speak to him, and when she does speak to him, it is only in a short, aggravated tone. An example is when Grandpa puts aluminum foil in the microwave, and Martha runs in the room, screaming “NO METAL IN THE MICROWAVE!” She is beyond annoyed, and does not take time to be understanding of the fact that he is unfamiliar with this technology. In her eyes, Grandpa is putting additional stress on her already stressful life. He has moved into her work-room, he does Kung Fu all day, and generally just gets in the way. It is impossible for the two to communicate because they speak different languages, and this really aggravates Martha. Martha only wants one thing: That grandpa moves out. She is not familiar with the fact that some cultures take care
of their elderly once they are retired, and she cannot relate to this at all. She expresses her irritation to her husband, Alex Chu, and is therefore putting pressure on their marriage.

Another relationship we can look at is that of Alex Chu and his father, Master Chu. In Alex’s culture, a child works hard so that he can grow up and support his parents, who have supported him for his entire life thus far. So it is obvious that once his father is ready to retire, he will move in with Alex. Alex loves his father very much, and goes out of his way to make a comfortable living environment for his father. In China, this is a normal relationship that one has with one’s parents, however in America, it is more common that people put their elderly in an old folks’ home. Alex seems to have inner conflict with the two cultures that he is a part of. The Chinese part of Alex wants to keep his father around. This is shown when Alex tells Martha, his wife, “My father is a part of me. Why can’t you understand that?” It is very evident that he feels obligation to the man who raised him. However, the fact that his father is around is putting strain on his marriage. This is shown in the example where Martha loses track of Master Chu. Once Alex comes home and realizes that his father is lost, he is livid. He is angry that his wife, the woman he loves, cannot manage to show any concern for his father, the one man he loves. Alex expresses his displeasure by overturning a table, and dumping all the dinner on the floor. He makes his wife cry, and comes home intoxicated, banging his head into the wall and vomiting. He cannot understand why two people who he loves very much can find no way to relate to each other. He is torn between his Chinese obligation of filial piety, But also of the obligation to his wife, whose happiness he swore to pledge himself to.

We can also look at things from Master Chu’s point of view. Upon coming to America, he is thrown into a culture completely different from that which he is used to. His goal as an elderly man is to relax and practice his Kung Fu everyday. He does
not understand Martha’s reasons for things, as shown when he asks his son in Chinese, “Why does this American woman eat only vegetables?” The high stress lifestyle of Americans is not a lifestyle that Master Chu enjoys. He is used to life relatively stress free. Master Chu attempts to relate to Martha when she has stomach problems, and he rubs her hand to make her feel better. This ultimately backfires when her stomach starts bleeding, and she blames the entire thing on him.

    Master Chu is struggling with his own issues, including that of feeling “old and useless”. He feels no one wants him around in his old age, and his feelings are hurt. He expresses these feelings with the woman cook he meets at Chinese school (whose name I cannot remember, oops!) When the two are walking in the park with the young people and they cannot keep up, the woman begins to cry, saying she is old and useless. The two elderly people have poor communication with, and do not understand the younger generation. They feel lonesome and isolated. They find it hard to express their feelings, because they feel like their children cannot relate to them.

    Another character we can look at is Jeremy. Jeremy is only a child, and most likely confused about what to think. He seems to love his grandpa, who plays with him, teaches him Chinese, and draws him pictures. However he may be confused when he sees his parents fighting. Jeremy thinks his grandpa made his mother’s stomach bleed, when he tells him, “You broke mommy!” Jeremy most likely does not know what to think, especially when he walks in on scenes like his father puking in the bathroom. Jeremy is also left in the dark on many of these situations, because he is only a child.

    I have just discussed the nature of some different relationships in one particular family. Towards the end of the movie, Alex is pulled towards his American culture, and farther away from his Chinese culture. This is shown by the fact that he moves into a bigger house, and tries to set grandpa up with the woman cook, so he
will leave, but not feel like he was forced. Alex exhibits poor communication with his father, and this choice backfires. Alex feels terribly guilty at the choices he made, going against his Chinese culture and disrespecting his father.

Most of the family problems in this movie are a result of lack of communication and understanding. Martha, for example, refuses to learn any Chinese, to try to speak to her father-in-law. She cannot understand the Chinese culture, because she is not familiar with it. She is being selfish by refusing to give the new living situation a chance, and making her husband’s life more stressful. The only thing she desires is a bigger house. She is looking to get more space so she can be more separated from her family, instead of focusing on how to solve the problems and live close together.

Master Chu is also being stubborn. He refuses to learn English, and will not attempt to understand the American culture, saying things like “American culture is for the young.”

Alex is caught in the middle of these feuding two. He does not understand why they can’t get along, and takes his problems out using negative solutions, such as drinking and destruction.

The solutions to some of these family problems are attainable. Martha and Master Chu might be able to get along better if they would both take a little time out of their lives to learn some words of the other one’s language. Communication is the key. If the two could find some way to communicate, they may be able to learn to tolerate each other, possibly appreciate each other. Alex also needs to learn how to communicate better, both with his wife and father. By being sneaky and trying to “trick” his dad into hooking up with the woman cook, he is exhibiting bad communication, and ultimately ends up hurting his dad’s feelings.

If each family member would take a little time to try to understand where the others are coming from, and make a strong effort to increase communication in the
family, many of their problems may be solved. As it turns out, Martha begins to appreciate the old man at the end of the movie. Once he is on the news, she begins to understand him a little bit more, and appreciate him. She asks her husband about Kung Fu, and seems to have an eager interest in learning.

Alex tells his father how he truly feels the night he goes to pick him up from jail. This is a good example of improving communication between the two, and despite the fact that Master Chu still chooses to live in his own place, he better understands Alex, and Alex better understands his father.

It is obvious that communication problems between family members and cultures can be solved, but it takes understanding and time to do so. If people are willing to take the time, many more family relationships would run smoothly, and there would be fewer fights. This movie is a good example of understanding across cultures, and people working together to make their families closer.