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## Can a White L.A. Psychologist Teach Low-Income Blacks How to Be Better Parents? Yes, Say Some Prominent Black Educators Who Take Seriously His Views on Discipline and the Heritage of Slavery

# The Education of Kerby Alvy

By GARRY ABRAMS,  
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**I**t was a marathon grilling. For three days a group of black colleagues chastised, berated, debated, questioned and verbally pummeled white clinical child psychologist Kerby T. Alvy.

When it was over, recalled Charles W. Thomas, one of the group's members and a professor of urban studies at UC San Diego, they decided Alvy really was OK—despite the color of his skin.

By surviving that emotionally grueling test on his understanding of black experience, Alvy got some unofficial but crucial credentials, keys to his continuing work in a sensitive area—the way many black parents raise their children.

Since that encounter about eight years ago, and with the advice and support of those experts—as well as the support of public figures such as U.S. Sen. Alan Cranston (D-Calif.)—Alvy has researched and developed a comprehensive parent-training program directed toward the black community.

### Solutions Begin at Home

For Alvy, the Effective Black Parenting Program is the culmination of a long commitment to equal rights and the battle against racism. But the program is also an admission that solutions to some problems in the black community begin at home.

To Alvy and his supporters, making positive changes in child-rearing practices among low-income blacks may be the single most important factor in dealing with a host of problems, including juvenile delinquency and drug abuse.

Moreover, the ideas and parent training programs "orchestrated" by Alvy under federal research grants are finding official acceptance and support—within the Los Angeles School District and with Detroit city officials, who see parenting programs as a possible way of addressing the intimately connected problems of crime and drug abuse.

But while Alvy—who dates his concern with black social issues to his days working at a mental health center in Watts in the early 1970s—paints a positive overall view of black family life, he also offers in a recently published book a potentially controversial analysis of one aspect of child-rearing: Children from poorer black families are somewhat more likely to be disciplined by spanking and beating than are children from other racial groups of similar economic circumstance because of what is a cultural characteristic embedded in centuries of precedent.

One of Alvy's consultants, Donald K. Cheek, who was born in New York City's Harlem and is now a social psychologist at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, calls this emphasis on discipline "the Jim Crow halo effect," meaning that such discipline is a holdover from the time when blacks were injured or murdered for violations of the segregated social order.

Then, black children had to be "very careful about how they spoke, how they acted, how they behaved with white



PATRICK DOWNS / Los Angeles Times

Kerby T. Alvy, with Candi Milton and her children, Kamisha and Jeramie.

folks," Cheek said. Misbehavior might "end up in a lynching," he explained. "Therefore there had to be immediate obedience on the part of the black child. [Parents told a child] 'You don't argue with me about why you can't go in that bathroom. . . . It's not as important for a white child to behave immediately.'"

Thomas agreed. "One of the things we must never forget is that the system in the United States has never worked for black people—and that includes parenting," he said.

Alvy, Cheek, Thomas and other experts on the black family also believe, however, that this aspect of child-rearing must be "reassessed," partly because the historical reasons for its use no longer exist—at least to the degree they once did.

Alvy, a graduate of UCLA who holds a doctorate in psychology from the State University of New York at Albany, is a bearded, low-key, relaxed man who seems perfectly at ease with his chosen role as a bridge between cultural and racial chasms. He also seems not to worry that

publicity—until now rare—about his program and his research may expose him to critics. His backers seem resigned to the fact that publicity may prove a mixed blessing.

"All of us blacks are going to be condemned [for supporting Alvy]," Thomas said, referring to himself and others who have advised Alvy. Thomas, Cheek and others serve on an advisory council to Alvy and their names are used prominently in a brochure on the black-parenting program.

**A**lvy—who works on family issues through the private nonprofit Center for the Improvement of Child Caring that he founded in 1974—is well aware that his race is not an asset in his chosen field. In the black-parenting programs he has developed through the center, he stays in the background because "it creates a lot of dissonance" when parents learn that he is white, Alvy said. They frequently ask, ". . . are you blaming us again for our state in society? That comes up all the time," he added.

Candi Milton, a single mother of three who lives in the Crenshaw area, had that kind of reaction when she learned the identity of the creator of the black-instructed classes she took for 15 weeks.

"I thought, 'This white man can't tell me a damned thing,'" she said with a laugh, adding that she had assumed the classes were developed and sponsored by a black organization.

However, Milton said she soon cooled off because what she had learned in the classes had helped in her relationships with her two sons and daughter. Mainly, she said, there is now more discussion and less dictating—and spanking—within the family, she said.

In the Effective Black Parenting Program developed by Alvy and his colleagues, instruction for parents includes training on how to improve family communications, establishing a healthy black identity for themselves and their children, how to set and promote goals for their children and how to more effectively manage children.

"I let them [the children] know exactly what I want from them and they let me know exactly what they want from me," Milton said.

### Refined Reactions

Milton now uses more refined judgment in disciplining her children, she said, noting that there is "a difference between dropping a glass of milk on the floor and breaking a window."

Marilyn Marigna, a social worker who has worked for one of Alvy's federally funded pilot projects, confirmed that Milton's reaction to Alvy is fairly common among parents who have taken the classes. Parents are "shocked, surprised," and have "some anger, some suspicion," she said. Marigna said she too has taken heat from parents who ask, "What am I doing up there working for that white man? I tell them I'm working in the interests of black children."

Robert L. Martin, superintendent of the Los Angeles school district covering the south central part of the city, is another backer of Alvy. He said he agreed to let Alvy's organization use classrooms at his schools for 17 parenting classes taught from 1985 until last summer as part of a pilot project funded by the National Institute for Drug Abuse because "there was a decline in parent involvement" in his district and because "children who are coming from homes with positive parenting skills tend to do better in school." He added, "We tended to see kids who reacted to kids in negative ways."

In the two years, 114 parents completed the course work of 15 weekly three-hour sessions.

Martin said he was impressed with the impact of the classes, particularly parent response. "Those parents were absolutely elated about the results," he said.

Writing in his recently published book, "Black Parenting: Strategies for Training," Alvy acknowledged that "conducting research on black family life is fraught with ethical and political dangers." Research similar to his has been

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Continued from Page 1 used "to characterize black families as disorganized and pathological units incapable of coping with the demands of modern life." Some studies, he wrote, have "focused on the poorest and most vulnerable black families, and their results tended to be interpreted in such a way as to blame the victims of racism and discrimination. . . ."

Alvy's point about black family discipline has been made by others, particularly black scholars of the black family. Alvy, however, apparently has conducted the only research supporting this aspect of black family dynamics.

## Trouble Finding a Publisher

In his book, Alvy reports on a study of 100 low-income black parents of Head Start students and 200 lower and upper income white parents that he and co-workers conducted in Los Angeles in the late 1970s as part of project funded by the National Institute of Mental Health. The research is only now becoming public, partly because he had trouble finding a publisher interested in black parenting. Alvy said, noting that of the 1,000 copies of "Black Parenting" printed, he has agreed to sell 500. Alvy also noted that books by black experts on black parenting, which enjoyed a brief boomlet in the last decade, are now out of print.

In "Black Parenting," as well as in interviews and other writings, Alvy emphasizes that he is impressed with the strength of black

parents in a generally hostile world. Strengths of the family, he points out in the book, include "strong kinship bonds," "a strong work orientation," "sharing of family roles in work and child-rearing," and "high achievement orientation."

But there are also problems, Alvy said, which should be addressed, including the issue of discipline in child-rearing.

While "the vast majority of parents in all groups indicated they spank," Alvy wrote in the book, the research also found that "more black parents indicated they hit than did white parents: 99% of [low-income] black parents indicated hitting their preschool child, 95% of white low-income parents indicated hitting and 82% of the white higher-income parents indicated they hit their young children."

Among black parents in the study, 24% said they believed hitting improves behavior, compared with 8% each of lower- and higher-income white parents. Twenty percent of the black parents said they hit their children to teach right and wrong, compared with 9% of white low-income parents and 6% of higher-income white parents.

Twenty two percent of black parents said they hit to teach obedience, compared with 6% of low-income whites and 2% of higher-income whites, according to Alvy's statistics.

. . . it is clear that more black parents use hitting as a teaching method," Alvy wrote of this study. "They believe that it improves the child's behavior and that it helps in

teaching obedience and right from wrong."

However, the study also found that in some instances, whites are more likely to use force. Thirty eight percent of high-income whites said they had struck their children when angry while only 3% of blacks indicated they had hit their children out of anger.

Alvy concluded that, on the whole, higher-income white parents seem to be "ambivalent" about the use of hitting and its effectiveness. "They tend to hit when their children have angered them and nothing else seems to work, and they want to let their children know that they mean business. They also tend to justify hitting young children as a means of teaching them about personal safety," Alvy wrote.

## 'Very Useful' Method

On the other hand, the low-income black parents of Head Start students, Alvy found, "tend to see hitting as a very useful and necessary method for achieving many important child-rearing and family goals and rarely as just an expression of frustration and anger. The main goals toward which their hitting seems to be directed is the teaching of appropriate social behavior, obedience to authority and right from wrong."

Thomas, who is a psychologist as well as a specialist in urban studies, said the use of force frequently lands black parents in legal trouble.

In his private practice, Thomas said he sees more black parents who have been referred to him for counseling for child abuse than any other ethnic or racial group. These

parents spend much of their time with him "agonizing over 'How do I give this kid some discipline' without spanking," Thomas said.

At least in some cases, child abuse charges probably have been unfairly brought, Thomas said. "The courts are not at a place where they recognize cultural differences," he said.

Alvy said there are no easy answers to the child abuse versus culturally sanctioned discipline dilemma. "That's one of the major challenges of the whole child protective services field," he said. ". . . Traditionally, 60% of the people reported for child abuse are poor."

The central question, he said, is "should a child be hit? I mean, we don't allow adults to hit adults." On the other hand, "the reality is that they have been doing this for centuries. . . ."

In addition to the research, Alvy said his counseling experience, talks with colleagues and his reading of black family experts such as James P. Comer and Alvin F. Poussaint contributed to his emerging portrait of the low-income black family.

A key point was that "there is a need for black families to rethink the way they're disciplining their children. . . . Alvy said in an interview. These same experts also "charted the history of a certain approach to discipline, which is traditional black discipline of the slavery era—complete control of children—including beatings of children—because otherwise people could get killed."

"That's simple, that you had to have unconditional obedience from

your kids and [the black experts] said: 'That's fine for an era of slavery when you have to keep the kids obedient and passive to survive. And it might even have been fine after emancipation when the majority of black families had to deal with poverty and racism and discrimination and they really didn't have time to refine their parenting. But [now] things are different, there are more opportunities and we've got to raise our kids to take advantage of them. You've got to raise kids who are thinking, [who] believe they can achieve.'"

In the parenting approach he has developed, Alvy emphasizes teaching parents a "modern black self-discipline" child-rearing model. This model began to emerge after the Civil Rights movement "when black psychiatrists, psychologists, pediatricians and educators began to rethink traditional black discipline," Alvy noted in his book.

## Delayed Gratification

The goals of this model, as outlined by Alvy, are: To produce a self-disciplined child who "can control anger and aggression so that they can work for the child and black people rather than against them," who has learned to live with delayed gratification, "who is respectful and considerate of others," who behaves within standards of accepted social conduct and "who resists temptations to engage in unhealthy or illegal behaviors or life styles."

Alvy's parenting program emphasizes "regular and frequent" feedback from parents—praise, encouragement, hugs, kiss-

es or other rewards. When discipline is called for, Alvy recommends discussion, verbal disapproval or confrontation, restriction and taking away privileges—with spanking as a last resort.

Alvy also pointed out another "big issue" the research turned up. ". . . when we asked them what do you discuss with your kids about being black, we found that 50% of the parents had never directly discussed those issues with their kids," he said. As a result, Alvy has included emphasis on "pride in blackness" in his effective black parenting program.

So far, the parenting program promoted by Alvy has seen relatively limited use. Federal grants from the National Institute of Mental Health and the National Institute for Drug Abuse helped Alvy and the staff at the center's offices in Studio City develop two pilot projects. But the money from the latest grant has run out and Alvy is winding down some operations. As in other programs developed with federal funds, the problem, Alvy said, is finding local interest and money to continue developing and implementing the program.

Meanwhile, officials in Detroit's city government are considering using Alvy's programs as one means of combating drug abuse and related crime.

Although no commitments have been made, Bradford Nichols, assistant director of the Bureau of Substance Abuse of Detroit's health department, said, "It appears that nationally he is way ahead of anybody else we've discovered [in black parent training]."