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## In Bucks, parenting classes that cater to culture

*The lessons are designed specifically for African American parents. "This is a blessing," says one mother.*

By Kathy Boccella  
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Queenie Newkirk can remember getting beaten with a belt if she talked back to her parents when she was growing up.

When she bore her own children, she treated them much the same way, hitting them more often than she hugged them.

She didn't want to mistreat her children, but she didn't know how to treat them any other way. So when

she heard about an innovative parenting program aimed specifically at African Americans, she eagerly signed up.

Newkirk is now learning to praise instead of punish, to reach out instead of lash out.

"This is a blessing," said the 31-year-old mother of three.

Newkirk and a dozen other Bucks County parents are enrolled in the Effective Black Parenting Program, the first parenting program geared

specifically to the black community. The program grew out of a belief that most parenting courses are aimed primarily at middle-class white parents. Its goals are similar to those of other courses, but its approach is different, framed by the African American experience.

Besides teaching parents literally to put their arms around their children, the program includes training on improving family communications, establishing a healthy black

identity for parents and their children, setting and promoting goals, and more effectively managing children.

The last category raises a sensitive subject in the black community today — corporal punishment. Most parenting programs stress that it is always wrong to hit children, but this one teaches that when all else fails, it's OK to spank a disobedient youngster.

Spanking "has a long history in the

African American community," said Kerby Alvy, a white child psychologist who developed the program in 1988. "If you want to move parents away from that, you don't say spanking is verboten."

That's exactly what a white parenting instructor told Michelle Akins last year. Akins said it turned her off.

"It wasn't the way we raise our kids," said Akins, 30, a recidivist mother of three who is now taking

See PARENTING on B5

# Parenting class caters to black culture

**PARENTING** from B1  
the Alvy program in Bucks. "We didn't get anything out of it."

Nearly all parents hit their children at one time or another, the experts say. A recent study by the Family Research Laboratory at the University of New Hampshire found that 97 percent of all parents spank their preschoolers. The percentage drops as the children get older.

Some experts don't see race as a factor in how often parents hit children, but Alvy said his studies indicate some low-income blacks strike their children more frequently than other racial groups of similar economic backgrounds.

That is, he believes, a cultural characteristic embedded in years of history, a legacy of slavery, when blacks used force to teach their children to respect authority and save them from beatings or death at the hands of white slaveowners.

"It became a part of the way black people raise their kids," said Alvy, who heads The Center for the Improvement of Child Caring in Studio City, Calif.

"When you look at it from that perspective, you feel: I'm kind of rearing my kids like a slave master," he said. "The program gives them a good reason to move away from that, to gain cooperation without having to hit kids."

About 47,000 people in 40 states have taken Alvy's black parenting program, and 1,000 people have been trained as instructors.

"It's an excellent first step," said Bea Wilson, who has run several black parenting courses in Seattle. "It's well-received in the community. People are still calling and asking for it."

Although Alvy's efforts at bridging cultural and racial chasms have been widely applauded, child welfare scholars disagree on the wisdom of giving parents license, however restricted, to strike their children.

"It's archaic," said Alvin F. Poussaint, a highly regarded child psychiatrist, Harvard Medical School professor and co-author of the book *Raising Black Children*. "I see it all the time, parents who beat their kids with switches and ironing cords. You ask them about it and they say, 'It's new; it's culturally acceptable; it's the way we rear our children.' That's an excuse and rationale that has been used in the black community for parents to wallop their children around and abuse them."

"It seems to me that it's almost as if we're accommodating and appeasing the black community because we don't want to tackle this cause," said Poussaint, who served as a consultant to *The Cosby Show*.

Frederick C. Green, a black pediatrician and past president of the National Committee to Prevent Child



For The Inquirer / HINDA SCHUMAN

**The Effective Black Parenting Program** is a boon, say Michelle Akins (left) and Marlene Clark. Between them is Clark's daughter, Terressa LaSalle, 7. Clark holds Akins' daughter, Quincetta Moore, 7.

Abuse, agreed: "The Model-T was certainly OK years ago, too. But behavior and mores evolve."

At the other end of the spectrum is Augustus Rodgers, director of the National Black Family Summit, an annual forum that examines issues affecting black family life. He says that for many blacks corporal punishment is rooted in spirituality and is a "healthy kind of thing."

"There's no reason to change that," he said.

Alvy is aware of the criticism — and of the irony of a white man telling black people how to raise their children. But he said he wanted to give black parents the same training opportunities that many white parents have had for years.

"It was an issue of equality," said Alvy, who worked with black parents, scholars and educators for a decade to develop the program. He also has a parenting program for Latinos — in which corporal punishment is not permitted — and is working on one for Native Americans. Bucks plans to offer the Latino program next year.

Alvy strongly believes, he said, that making positive changes in child-rearing practices may be the single most important factor in dealing with a host of problems, including school failure and juvenile delinquency.

"Effective parenting," he said, "can help solve most of the social and health problems of our times."

The women seated around a table one recent day at the Norton Avenue First Baptist Church in Bristol had much more modest goals, such as getting their children to clean their rooms or take out the garbage with-

out a major hassle.

They were one-third of the way through the 15-week course, which is being offered by the Bucks County Drug and Alcohol Commission to parents enrolled in No Longer Bound, a voluntary drug-and-alcohol prevention program. Their assignment for the previous week had been to try to change a specific behavior in one of their children by praising instead of punishing.

Queenie Newkirk, who wanted to stop her 13-year-old son from being sassy, was astounded by the results.

"I was shocked. I found out that when I praise him I get more respect. I just had to say something one time and he did it," she exclaimed, adding that it had been the first time she complimented one of her children. So it went for most of the mothers.

Michelle Akins, who had wanted her son to clean the dishes, came home one day to find him cleaning the whole house. "I gave him high fives," she said proudly.

Marlene Clark's daughter managed to keep her room and desk neat all week. "Now I do more praising than yelling," Clark said.

But the mothers weren't ready yet to spare the rod totally. When the talk turned to discipline, most of the women said they still sometimes hit their children when they misbehaved.

"Back in my day we got whupped and we survived," said Dorothy Peterson, 38, a sturdy woman who has three children. When her children disobey her, she said, she usually talks to them first. "But when I get tired of talking, I whup them," she said.

Sybil Henderson, one of four Bucks County social service workers

trained as program instructors, nodded sympathetically when a parent said she had hit her son for cleaning his room. "The key to everything is to be consistent," she said. "Whether it's consistent with praise or consistent with whuppings."

White people, the women said, are too quick to criticize approaches child-rearing that differ from theirs. "They would say that we're hard, too cruel and mean," Newkirk said. "They're quick to say we child abusers."

But in the view of some women in the room, white children don't respect their elders as they should. Nanette Moore mentioned a white friend whose children "curse a call her stupid."

Akins let out a holler. "If we do that, we'd get in big trouble. We'd be walking around with no teeth," she said.

During a break, Henderson said racism and discrimination make it harder for black parents to raise their children. "It's a fact of life. We have to try to protect our children from it," she said.

Hitting is not necessarily wrong, she said, but it's not as effective as other discipline techniques.

Alvy, the program developer, and others say white parents often hit their children out of frustration, while black parents are more likely to use spanking as a considered tactic, "something that's good for you."

The notion that spanking can be helpful is anathema to Poussaint, who said he believes hitting makes children angry and violent. On the other hand, you give parents permission to hit, he said, "you lose complete control. If you give them license to not only hit their children but to cross over in the area of child abuse."

Many child experts now believe there is a link between corporal punishment and child abuse, which has soared since 1985.

"We live here in America where violence is the rule," said pediatrician Green. "And we should do everything we can to indicate that this is not a valid approach to solving problems."

In Seattle, many parents put away the belts and switches after taking the black parenting course, said Bea Wilson, who teaches the course. "There was an awareness of, 'Hey, don't have to beat my kids to be a good parent.' They were receptive to other ways of parenting."

So, too, is Queenie Newkirk. She used to hit her children all the time but they still misbehaved, she said. Now she talks to them and gets much better results. She hopes that by becoming a better parent, she will help her children become better adults.

"I want my children to be something in life," she said. "And I want them to know their mother tried her best."