

Love, discipline put children on right path

Hispanic parents help ninos to be bien educados

By SUE REILLY
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Less than three months ago, Trinidad Rodriguez was a little woman with a big problem. His name was Carlos.

Carlos was 6. Rodriguez was tired. To relieve her ongoing behavioral problems with Carlos, she turned to the Hispanic child-rearing program Los Ninos Bien Educados (The Well-Educated Children) sponsored by the San Fernando Valley-based Center for the Improvement of Child Care (CICC).

Familiarly known as the Bien Educado program, it is the Hispanic version of a course such as Parent Effectiveness Training re-modeled to accommodate the variety of cultural, socioeconomic and ethnic differences that determine if a program of this kind is generally or specifically effective.

Rodriguez, Trini to her classmates, says it works, which is why she keeps coming back to the 17-week course.

Rodriguez, now 44, had already raised George, 22; Richard, 20; and Walter, 17, when little Carlos came along. "My husband, George, and I were a little surprised," she remembered, "but happy."

"But by then I was working (as a packaging inspector), and Carlos was left with his brothers, who babied him. When I came home, I spoiled him, because I hadn't seen him all day," she added. "So his father would try to discipline him because he could see that no one else was doing it. It wasn't such a good situation."

A handful

By the time Carlos started school, he was a handful, Rodriguez said. She understood the problem. She just didn't know what to do about it — until she heard about the CICC program through a flier provided at her church.

"It has made a real difference in our family," Rodriguez said. "Carlos feels better about himself, and I feel better about myself. Everyone in the family thinks this program has made our family better," she said.

Rodriguez attends St. Rose of Lima Catholic Church in Maywood, where the Thursday evening sessions are offered in Spanish.

"What this course does is teach you other ways to behave with your child. Ways that don't mean hitting him when he is bad," Rodriguez explained.

She said that when her three older boys were growing up, if they were bad, she spanked them, and then they were better.

"But that didn't seem to work with little Carlos. I'm not sure I know why. I just knew that he didn't respond to spanking. It made him worse," she said.

She was worried about what was going to happen to Carlos. She didn't want to raise a child who would be difficult, and then maybe delinquent, and then possibly worse.

So when she saw a flier for the child-rearing class at church, she decided to check it out.

"At first I didn't know what to think. I didn't know what would go on. I was a little worried," she recalled.

But, she figured, how bad could it be? It was offered at the church hall, it would be with people she knew from church, and it would be in Spanish. If she didn't like it, she just wouldn't keep going.

She kept going. Rodriguez and the others in the Thursday evening group — about 20 women, two men and maybe five children, although it's hard to count the kids, who are everywhere at once — exude confidence and enthusiasm as the class is about to start.

The atmosphere is relaxed, familial, almost conspiratorial.

The 22 adults laugh easily and nod often as Magdalena Malagon, master of ceremonies, master of social work and project coordinator of the Carson Child Abuse Program, teaches this CICC class in effective parental skills.

At Malagon's suggestion, different groups of parents come to the front of the room and act out little dramas.

Everyone looks so comfortable in his or her involvement that it is difficult, at first, to grasp the urgency of what they are trying to accomplish here: learning how to mold bien educados.

A bien educado is a well-educated child, a well-educated Hispanic child, not just in the literal, book-smart way, but socially — with respect for his family, elders, teachers, the law and, most importantly, himself. It is a child with enough self-esteem, self-discipline, self-motivation that,



Los Ninos Bien Educados has provided help with family relations for people like Sofia Garcia, above, with younger brother Benjamin, and Trinidad Rodriguez, left, with sons George, Walter and Richard.

when he reaches his teens, he will not find himself a member of a gang, in jail, in any kind of a sociological hell.

A bien educado is a child raised with love and discipline.

The love is what brings these parents to this Thursday evening meeting.

Effective discipline is what the meeting is about.

The graceful simplicity and solicitousness of the course lessons are the result of years of sophisticated study by the Studio City-based CICC, which identified the need and sought effective ways to provide a culturally effective course, first for black parents and then Hispanics.

"It wasn't that courses like Parent Effectiveness Training — which can be so useful — were not cross-culturally relevant," said CICC director and psychologist Kerby Alvy. "It's that those kinds of programs could be adapted for specific groups with increased effectuality."

That sounds fairly simple, except that it took 10 years of research and field testing, with special funding from the Mattel Foundation, to come up with this course that seems to satisfy CICC, the instructors and the participants.

Three of the reasons for the high level of difficulty are people, perspective and place.

Study in diversity

The parents who come to these settings in Maywood are like the town itself, a study in diversity.

Maywood is a Southern California barrio. Surrounded by Vernon, Bell and Huntington Park, it is a place definable primarily by the aspirations and experiences of its people, people who may be newly arrived from Mexico or Central America, or who may be second and third generational in California but still undocumented, or who may be documented, English-speaking members of the Hispanic middle class and upwardly mobile.

Some of the people in the town have a hunger for assimilation, struggling to master a foreign language and foreign customs.

Others want to make money to send to relatives at home, hoping to return there as well some day. Assimilation is not a positive concept for them.

Others own property, maybe a business, but they may wish to move to another place, maybe Long Beach or the Valley, where the climate is perceived as promising a greater opportunity for mainstream success.

In Maywood, there is a syncope to the tempo of life, a strange diffusion of energy that marks a stopping-off place where people are in transit to a different way of life, a different cultural ethic or a different social class.

It is also a town like all others in Southern California in that people worry about the mortgage and car payments, about fixing up the car, about crime and if the Lakers can make it three in a row.

And they worry about the kids.

In Maywood, as in pocket barrios in the Valley and other parts of the Southland, the numbers of youngsters dropping out of school, dropping out of society, is markedly higher than among many other ethnic groups. There are many reasons. A lack of parental caring is not high on the list.

In this particular class there are

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two or three young couples, young enough and Americanized enough to be able to enjoy the instruction. It is a big step for Hispanic men to participate, in any more than a backhanded way, in the rearing of their children, instructor Malagon said. The men who are in the class don't look like revolutionaries, but they most certainly are.

Three young women in the class — teen-age girls, actually — say they have come with their mother so that they, as well as she, can deal with their littlest family member, Benjamin, almost 5.

The Garcias — Angelica, 15; Teresa, 16; Sofia, 17; and Teresa, 42, their mother — all agree that Benjamin has been a different boy since they have taken the classes. "He was really spoiled," Angelica said. "A brat," murmured a sister, and they all burst out laughing. "Yes, he was," Angelica said.

"But we have learned how to behave with him so that he isn't

like that now," said Sofia. "Instead of yelling at him or hitting him, we tell him how sad we feel when he is bad, and we put up a sad face on the refrigerator."

"At first he didn't pay any attention to us, when we brought home what we had learned in the class. But now he really is an entirely different child," the elder Teresa said.

Rodriguez has had a similar experience with Carlos. "I got called to school the other day, and the teacher said she just wanted to tell me what a big change she sees in Carlos. She wanted to know why he is so well-behaved in class. She wanted to know what I was doing."

"I saw a flier for the parenting class on a wall behind her, and I pointed to that. I told her what I learned in the class is the reason Carlos has become a good student, a bien educado," Rodriguez said.

"The teacher said she had forgotten to pass out the notices to everyone, but the next time the class was offered, she would be sure to do it."

Rodriguez said having a better behaved child, one who is now doing so well in school, has made her feel better about herself. She feels more confident, and "I like having control with Carlos without having to be mad and hitting him. He likes it, too."

The Garcia girls said they figure the class is not only going to help them with Benjamin, but with the children they will have when they marry one day.

"I would want the man I am going to marry to take this class," said Angelica. "Too many Hispanic men only know to yell and hit. That was how they were brought up, and they figure that is the way to do it. I don't want to bring up children that way. And I don't want to have two different ideas about how children should be raised."

The three girls nod at that. They explain that although all the women in the family are taking the class, their father is still disciplining little Benjamin in the same way he was disciplined. "It makes it harder," Angelica said. "It would be better if he would

have taken the course too."

The teacher would certainly agree. She knows, however, the world is an imperfect place. She is happy for the people who do come.

"OK," said Malagon, "let's review."

"This time, let's practice ignoring bad behavior. Remember, we only use this technique if the child is not responding to praise," she said.

"We always try to react with praise to a child's good behavior, and not react to behavior that makes the child appear to be a mal (bad) educado."

The instructor gets 12 parents to form two rows in front of the class. One row will be the "children" acting bad, the other, their "parents," who will not respond. Then the "children" say something good, and their "parents" will smile happily. After each pair, Malagon nodded warmly, and the audience applauded appreciatively.

These simple, easily understood lessons are basically a form of behavior modification using

positive reinforcement.

Malagon, who is a counselor with abused children during the day, is grateful for the inroad, for the start that the program has brought.

"This program is very good, and it helps people to learn new, better ways to deal with children in this time and place," she said.

Bien Educado is a course aimed at making you feel good about yourself, whether you are a parent or child, she explained. It teaches you to respond in a positive way to positive behavior.

"I came to this class to learn how to handle my brother," said Sofia Garcia, "and maybe learn some things for when I am a mother."

"But it's funny, in a way, I find myself using what I learn here in other ways. At school and with my friends."

"I have learned to be more reasonable. To reason things. To talk so I make things better instead of worse," Sofia said.

"It's never too late to be bien educado," said Rodriguez.