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 Bocella
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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 Alvyn, 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 Atkins last year. Atkins said it turned her off.

"It wasn't the way we raise our kids," said Atkins, 30, a reed-thin mother of three who is now taking See PARENTING on B5
Parenting class caters to black culture

From B1

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 says his studies indicate that 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 to obey 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 treating 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 Leila 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 black and white social classes have been widely applauded, black welfare scholars disagree on the wisdom of giving parents license, however restrained, to strike their children.

"It's archaic," said Alvin P. Poussett, 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' butts and get away with it." It's become so "out of control" that it's "hot to wear our children." That's a phrase and a rationale that has been used in the black community in parents to avoid their children's treatment and avoidance.

It seems to me that it's almost as if everyone's culturally accepted behavior in the black community because it's "hot to wear our children." That's a phrase and a rationale that has been used in the black community in parents to avoid their children's treatment and avoidance.

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

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

At the other end of the spectrum is Augustine 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 is no reason to change that," he said.

Alvy is aware of the criticism — and 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.

"They're two programs, two approaches, but it's the same way we work with children," he said.

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 spanked 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 whip them," she said.

Sybil Henderson, one of four Bucks County social service workers trained as program instructors, said she had hit her son for cleaning his room. "The key to evoking a response is to be consistent," she said. "Whether it's consistent with praise or consistent with whippings." White people, the women said, too quick to criticize approaches child-rearing that differ from their own. "They would say that we're too strict and cruel," Nancette Moore said. "They're too quick to say we child abuse.

But in the view of some women the room, white children don't respect their elders as they shouln't. "We're all children, isn't that good for you?"

"The notion that spanking can be helpful is anathema to Poussett, who said he believes hitting makes children angry and violent. On you give parents permission to do things you lose complete control. If you give them permission, it's 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 pediat- ician 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 Dr. Wilson, who teaches the course. "There was an awareness of, "Hey, don't have to beat our kids to be good."

In some cases, parents were receptive to other ways of parenting.

So, too, is Queenie Newkirk. I still 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 being consistent, the children will 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."