Program helps blacks hone parenting skills

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Richard Bash

Richard Bash was a desperate man. The single parent, black father of three – one girl and two boys – was worried about his family's well-being. He didn't know where to turn.

Neither did Rachael Clark, a black single mother who wondered if she'd fail as a parent when she was told her son might be black in school.

The concerns of Bash, Clark and 76 other parents of black children prompted them to seek better parental skills. They turned to the Central Youth and Family Services Effective Black Parenting Program.

The 15-week parenting class, offered by the Seattle-based, non-profit agency, was specifically designed to provide parenting tools for parents of black children.

"We wanted this program to assist parents... in the cultural and social nurturing of black children," said Pat Mouton, who is black and is the program's coordinator. "The program was meant to help parents feel more confident."

Bash concedes he'd lost virtually all of his parental confidence before entering the program.

"I was not parenting effectively," Bash said. "I must admit that I was overwhelmed with the responsibilities and the workload. But I'm not overwhelmed anymore."

The program, Bash said, taught him "to appeal to my child's mind and not his behind."

He added that the program also showed him how to identify his child's specific behavioral problems, isolate that behavior from his own feelings, and redirect his children's behavior into something positive and instructive.

Bash also learned to understand some historical problems associated with black parents.

"There are cultural and social differences that I was not even aware of until I joined the program," he said.

During slavery, for example, there was "a need to instill fear" into black children, Bash said.

"They (parents) thought it was better to put fear in them at home, so they wouldn't go out and get killed by the white pow structure – the slaveholders," Bash said. "The children had to be fearful because social conditions demanded that they be fearful. I was a tool parents used as protection for the children."

Blacks learn how to become more effective parents

Often whipping or even beating – a child was the way some parents achieved their aim.

But the program, Bash said, taught him that was no longer necessary. Positive instruction, he learned, was a healthy way of raising children.

Mouton said the Effective Black Parenting Program – one of several in King County – resulted from a statewide task force mandated in 1989 to examine parental education as a way to curb family disintegration.

The task force initiated a "needs assessment" for each county across the state and determined that targeting specific cultural and social groups might help strengthen family units.

"The task force found that because there weren't any specific parenting classes that talked about the history of blacks, racism and slavery, and how it affected the black family unit, it might be smart to start some around the state," Mouton said.

Two weeks ago, the 78 parents of black children in King County were among the largest group to graduate from the Effective Black Parenting Program.

"I learned things from the class that I really needed to know," Clark said. "A lot of us didn't always get the structure from our parents, so we're trying to break out of that parenting cycle into one that will allow us to help our children meet their goals."

Abbie Jackson, a foster mother, said the program "was very enriching" for her. "A lot of the children I'm dealing with are coming out of hell," she said.

They need very specific teaching and parenting tools to enhance their lives. I believe in my ability, but I needed reaffirmation of my skills and reassurance that the things I was doing were correct. I learned a lot."

Bash said he came to realize that "instilling fear is not necessary. It is counter to effective parenting. It may have worked – and probably did work during slavery and Jim Crow – but that's not effective parenting."

"We can control children with fear – with spankings and whippings – but that's not teaching them the skills that will take them to their life goals," he said.