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Music to My Ears

By William Raspberry

Have I become a Johnny One-Note on parenting education? A computer check of several years' worth of columns suggests maybe so. On columns dealing with everything from youthful crime and school failure to drug abuse, intergenerational poverty and welfare, I have sung my one-note song.

If only parents could be taught what the lucky ones learn by familiar osmosis—the importance of making children feel loved and valued, the power of modeling values we want our children to embrace, the use of children's natural curiosity as a base for academic success—almost all the social problems that occupy us would be a lot easier to deal with.

The responses to those columns, however, lead me to believe that there are a lot of one-noters out there: people who either are involved in parenting education, or who know someone who is or who wish someone in their hometown would get such a program going.

What brings all this up now is that I've just been talking to Kerby Alvy, a California psychologist who tells me he's making serious headway in turning his effective parenting movement into a virtual one-note choir.

Alvy, speaking at a conference here called Strengthening America's Families, ticked off dozens of parenting education programs gathering steam across the country— in churches, in schools and recreation centers, in Head Start programs— many led by people who have been trained at Alvy's Center for the Improvement of Child Caring, either at its Studio City headquarters or at one of its regional satellites.

“The goal,” he says, “is to increase the numbers of children who are effectively and humanely raised.”

It's a deceptively powerful goal. Just imagine an America in which most children were effectively and humanely raised. It's hard to think of an area of our lives that wouldn't be vastly improved. Effective parents get their children ready for school learning, for civic engagement, for personal and social responsibility, for hopeful futures. And children who are both competent and hopeful are overwhelmingly likely to avoid such things as adolescent pregnancy, drug abuse, violent crime, suicidal behavior— and even sexism and racism, to the extent that these two maladies spring from feelings of inadequacy.

Speaking of racism, Alvy's center has a special program for black parents (and a special handbook, “Effective Black Parenting”). The rationale says Alvy, who is white, is that minorities face parenting issues that are special. For Example:

“How do you teach your children to respond to racial slights or racist treatment? What do you tell them about when to stand and fight and when to try to resolve conflicts by talking? How do you help them to avoid the trap of thinking that academic success or careful speech is ‘white’? We even have a section on institutional racism and another on how to help kids avoid the kind of racial put-down black kids often do to one another.”

Most of the training, though, fits parents of all colors and sizes.

I am frank to say I have no basis for judging (nor any reason to doubt) the quality of Alvy's training. But he has enough confidence in what he (and others in the field) are accomplishing with their here-and-there efforts that he wants the White House to take it national.

The point, he explained over coffee, is that, as with all great movements, there needs to be a catalyst. Long before civil rights or women's rights became full-fledged movements, individuals and small groups were out there doing the work. Then something happened to galvanize these individual activities into movements. He hopes that a Clinton decision to launch a presidential commission on parenting, or to call a parenting summit led by effective parenting advocates, might be the catalyst that transforms this fledgling effort into a nation-transforming movement.

Maybe it can make it happen. Maybe a push from the White House would help to avoid the notion

that parenting education is only for “bad” parents or poor parents. Maybe Alvy really is close to transforming a series of local programs into a national initiative.

I don't know. I only know he's singing my note.

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