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Adapting A Parenting Skill Program For Blacks In Southern Louisiana: A Sociological Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the Effective Black Parenting Program developed by the Center for the Improvement of Child Caring. The present inquiry was an attempt to present the adaptation of this program to Black families in a non-urban setting. The author is certified as a facilitator of the program. The study focuses on the use of role analysis and group dynamics as teaching tools. Effective parenting programs are very important in the survival and socialization of Black children.

Introduction

Although parenthood involves some of the most important challenges an individual will ever experience, many people assume they will acquire the necessary parenting skills after they become parents. A quick glance at any newspaper, however, provides ample evidence that for many, this is not, in fact, the case. In recent years a number of efforts have been made to remedy the apparent lack of parenting skills by providing parenting programs. One approach that has received widespread acceptance is Parent Effectiveness Training (P.E.T.) (Gordon, 1975).

The focus of P.E.T. is on improving the communication between parent and child, reducing family conflict, and increasing family cohe-

sion. There are, however, basic cultural differences in child rearing practices, and these differences impact on the successful outcome of such a program. Stinnett (1991), for example, argues that Black families place a higher value on achievement in both sports and school than do white families; Black children spend more time watching television than white children do; and, Black families are more likely to use physical punishment than white families.

The Effective Black Parenting Program (Alvy and Marigna, 1985) was developed by the Center for the Improvement of Child Caring, Studio City, California, to provide a program more relevant and sensitive to the Black experience in the United States than existing programs. Despite the merits of this program, the focus is on urban families. This report presents the adaptation of this program to Black families in a non-urban setting and focuses on the use of role analysis and group dynamics as teaching tools.

The Effective Black Parenting Program

Parent training is based on the assumption that parents have a major and predictable impact on the lives of their children and that there are certain conditions that tend to foster healthy psycho/social development in most children. Such conditions include providing love and acceptance, supplying structure and discipline, encouraging competence and self-confidence, presenting appropriate role models, and creating a stimulating and responsive environment (Coleman, 1988). The Black community, however, faces a number of unique social problems that complicate the ability to provide these necessary conditions. These include:

1. Black parents must cope with racism;
2. Black parents have often had to rear their children in conditions of poverty;
3. Black parents have historically had to deal with an unusual generation gap; and,
4. Black parents have to deal with the problem of self-identity and cultural identity.

The Effective Black Parenting Program, developed by the Center for the Improvement of Child Caring is unique in that it emphasizes the role of Black culture in parenting. The central theme of the program is to stay on the "Path to the Pyramid." The base of the pyramid consists of those behaviors parents should model for and teach to their children,

such as good health habits, love and understanding, pride in Blackness, self-discipline, and good school skills. The second level of the pyramid includes the necessary characteristics children should have in order to reach the life goals at the top of the pyramid, e.g., high self-esteem, self-discipline, pride in Blackness, etc. At the top of the pyramid are education, good jobs, and loving relationships. The program includes approved disciplinary techniques, such as time out, ignoring, mild social disapproval, and effective praise. In addition, unique sessions in the program include *Pride in Blackness*, *Traditional Black Discipline vs Modern Black Discipline*, *Single Parenting*, and *Drugs*.

There are fifteen training sessions, each of which includes a curriculum outline, the curriculum, instructional summary, technical aids, charts, and handouts. Each session lasts for three hours. The basic structure for each session is similar. The session begins with an icebreaker followed by a presentation of a specific topic and discussion on a set of skills. Teaching methods include lecture, skill demonstrations, role playing, use of transparencies, structured group elicitation, and pyramid pep talks. A fifteen minute refreshment break is included in each session, followed by additional ideas and skills. The session ends with each parent receiving a homework assignment, usually charting a child's behavior and implementing the specific skill taught during the previous session.

Throughout the program parents are encouraged to stay on the path to the pyramid. They are encouraged to model and teach love and understanding, pride in Blackness and good health and study habits, and to always praise their children in order to help them achieve their life goals.

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Lafayette (Louisiana) recognized the need for such a program for Black parents in southern Louisiana. In the summer of 1991, twenty persons representing a variety of occupations, were invited to participate in the first training session to be held in Louisiana. The intensive week-long training, sponsored by the Office of Justice and Peace, Diocese of Lafayette, included learning the theories and concepts of the program as well as role playing the actual skill and techniques taught in the workshops. Approximately fourteen workshops have been conducted with approximately 193 Black parents. I have served as facilitator for five of these workshops.

Adapting The Program To A Non-Urban Setting

The Effective Black Parenting Program was developed through extensive interviews with inner city Black parents about their child rear-

ing values, practices, and aspirations. None of the parents in our groups lived in an inner city. As a result, the program required some adaptation in order to be relevant. For example, the facilitator needed to help the parents become aware of how their lives were intertwined with larger social patterns that impacted inner city parents. Although the issues of crime, poverty, and overcrowding were not as critical for our participants as for those in urban settings, our parents could relate to how drugs were becoming a part of their neighborhoods. One parent commented about her fear for her fourteen year old son to simply ride his bike on the next street. Thus, the parents from rural areas and small towns were able to identify with the problems of urban parents. Two sessions on drugs, however, proved to be excessive.

Although there continues to be neighborhood closeness and close family ties in the non-urban setting, the parents noted that this was also changing to some degree. The fact that neighbors and grandparents seem to play a lesser role in the discipline of children was cited as an example. Despite this, however, most of the parents had extended kin who lived close by and tended to offer assistance (financial, babysitting, etc.) to the parent(s). Discussion, therefore, included not only the amount of involvement by others, but whether this involvement was helpful or harmful.

A few single fathers participated in our program and in some cases both parents. Thus, recognition and inclusion of these participants was important. Regardless, the session on Single Parenting was popular as well as the session on Pride in Blackness. Both provoked a lot of discussion. It was the area of discipline, however, that required the greatest adaptation. Role theory provided a useful format for doing this.

In recent years, a body of knowledge known as role theory has come to be widely used by social scientists. Essentially, a role is a task that some person is supposed to perform (Biddle, 1966). Roles have to be defined, assigned, perceived, performed and integrated with other role tasks. Every role carries with it a position in the interaction system that relates to status and prestige. In a well-organized family, the major roles have been identified, assigned and performed with some degree of competence (Biddle, 1966). Lemasters & DeFrain (1989), however, suggest that the role of parent is often poorly defined, ambiguous and not adequately delimited. Interviews with parents who participated in the Black Parenting Program indicate that a large number of them are confused, frustrated and discouraged. They expressed feelings of concern and fear for their children in reference to drug use and peer pressure. They felt in some ways that the "streets" were taking over their children. They wanted

to protect them but not be overly protective. Sociological factors such as the rate of social change, the decelerating rate of socialization of the parent in contrast to that of the child, adult realism vs youth idealism, conflicting norms, competing authorities and sexual tensions had robbed parents of the traditional ways of rearing children without having an adequate substitute (LeMasters & DeFrain, 1989).

Although child-rearing philosophies change from one generation to the next and parents often have to sort out conflicting advice (Dail & Way, 1985), a parent may feel that the way he or she was reared is the "right way" and that other methods will not achieve as good a result. Parents may sometimes repudiate the methods by which they themselves were reared and resolve to do differently with their own children (Reis, Stein, Bennett, 1986). The parents in the Effective Black Parenting Program are asked to unlearn and rethink their philosophies. This was particularly problematic for our parents with respect to discipline.

The program did not include spanking/whipping as a disciplining technique. The majority of the parents in our program, however, had experienced spanking/whipping while growing up. Parents shared stories of how their parents used belts, hands, switches (tree branches) to give spankings/whippings. One comment was that parents would send the child to get the switch for the whipping. All of this was understood and accepted as punishment for disrespectful behavior. Stories were also told of how eye contact (getting the eyes) from parents got results. You knew what the "eyes" meant. A child immediately discontinued the disrespectful behavior.

It was very important to help the participants in our groups to analyze their definitions of discipline. We used the word association technique and came up with various viewpoints. Based on their socialization and the child rearing practices of their parents, various themes came forth, e.g., punishment, love, spanking, taking away privileges, etc. The aim of this exercise was to get them to discuss the traditional method of Black Discipline (Spanking/Whipping) in particular and then to contrast it with Modern Black Discipline (The Thinking Parents' Approach). This means of value clarification proved to be especially sensitive to our groups. The issue of slavery came up and how spanking/whipping by parents during that time was a way of protecting their children from white harm. Parents had to analyze their thoughts and deal with their feelings about spanking which they had all experienced in their childhood. Religious views and Biblical teachings also came into play. The facilitator tried to help parents verbalize their values, beliefs, ideas, tra-

ditions, and customs regarding these traditional methods. Although the aim of the program was to get parents to try new methods/approaches, we stressed that no one method can be considered “best” for all children. What works for one may not work for another. What is important is the quality of the parent-child relationship.

Parents were reminded throughout the program of their role as a parent and how important it is to model and teach their children what they want them to do. The parental role sounds simple; it is to meet the needs of children so they can grow (Amato & Ochiltree, 1986; Ballenski & Cook, 1982). The parental role is to discover the physical needs of their child and to fulfill those needs. A very important session in the Effective Black Parenting Program for our participants was on developmental stages of children. Parents were taught the appropriate abilities and stages of development of children at various ages. Similarly, the parental role is to fulfill emotional needs so that children can grow to become emotionally secure and stable persons. If children’s needs for love, affection, security, understanding and approval are met, they are more likely to develop positive feelings (Cooper, Holman & Braithwaite, 1983). This was an important point to make to Black parents who have to deal with how to discuss prejudice and discrimination with their children. They were encouraged to use Chit-Chat Time to have a discussion of racial awareness/identity.

Using praise at all times whenever their child displayed a respectful behavior was a major part of the training. Role playing was used for the various corrective consequences such as Time Out, Ignoring, and Mild Social Disapproval. Each parent was encouraged to participate. By putting themselves in the role of the child, they were able to see how the child felt and whether they had actually gotten the desired effect. In order to improve their parenting skills, a lot of social interaction was involved. It was important to encourage parents to touch and hug their children. Role playing helped especially with the Effective Praise Method, where touching is a basic component. Parents found this hard to do, but reported how well their children responded whenever it was used. The basic theme throughout the sessions was to model and teach. If parents wanted their children to achieve the life goals of good jobs, good education, etc., they had to be good role models and to do exactly what they wanted their children to do. A major objective of parents should be to provide as many diversified experiences as possible to find their child’s talents. Parents cannot determine for certain how a child will grow, but they can enhance their growth.

Not only is family background important in the way parents relate to their children, but life circumstances affect parent-child relationships as well. Parents who experienced a great deal of stress in their lives have more difficulty being patient and relaxed with their children. One study of Black and Hispanic mothers who were on welfare found that these mothers were less emotionally and verbally responsive to their children, spanked them more and were generally less likely to avoid restriction and punishment than were those not on welfare (Philliber & Graham, 1981). However, welfare was not the cause per se, rather it was the combined frustration of their lives that affected the quality of parenting.

Black physicians, educators, mental health specialists and child psychologists all had input into the program. Review of books/articles by Black parenting authorities helped to identify existing programs and modify and recommend what should be included in the program. The basic component of the program was a cognitive-behavioral parenting skill building program; however, a sociological perspective was incorporated. The facilitator constantly reinforced the fact that parents had probably already used the techniques being discussed and this was not an attempt to change them, but offer alternatives and new ways of viewing parenting. Discussions of self-esteem and feeling good about self were very important in encouraging parents to consider the techniques. An understanding of the socialization process and how it relates to child rearing practices was very helpful in the workshops. Parents shared their stories of their childhood and how their parents disciplined them.

In open discussions, viewpoints were given on parenting competencies, frustrations, and confusions of being a parent. These discussions took on the appearance of a support group. Parents listened to each other's problems and offered suggestions and advice for dealing with them. We found a tremendous need for this type of dialogue in our groups. The group dynamics that operated were volatile, probably because there is no outlet for expression in this area or for obtaining knowledge in reference to Black parenting. It was easy to show the participants that what was occurring in the groups, lack of consensus, was a reflection of what was occurring in their families. It was stressed that families operate in terms of roles, and communication patterns are very important, especially in terms of making family rules. When family members feel a part of making rules and giving input into decisions, it is easier for rules to be followed. Even though parents are the powerful figures or authority in the family, things run smoother in families when children feel a part of the group.

Emphasis was also placed on the strengths of Black families. Many of the problems that beset the Black family are due to racial discrimination and the economic conditions under which many live. There are, however, a number of positive characteristics that enable Black families to function and to survive in a hostile social environment. These strengths include: strong kinship bonds, favorable attitude toward the elderly, adaptable roles, strong achievement orientations, strong religious orientations and a love of children (Hill, 1972). Our participants were able to identify with these strengths.

Bonding developed between participants over the weeks as well as with the facilitator. Separation anxiety was evidenced as participants shared what they had learned from the program and how much they anticipated missing the weekly meetings. Thus, as a final adaptation, the participants were encouraged to continue to meet as a support group after completion of the fifteen week program.

Summary

The Black family is an important institution in the Black Community, and effective parenting is very important in the survival and socialization of Black children. Changes in attitudes and behaviors of Black men and women and social problems in the Black community are important considerations in parenting programs for Black parents. It is also important, however, to remember that Black parents in non-urban areas may have different needs than those in urban areas. Sociology provides a framework within which existing programs can be adapted to meet the needs of these often overlooked parents.

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