



THE ART OF NURTURING

Heads-up for the 21st Century Parent

By Philip C. Omenukwa & Paschal I. Okpaleke



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A Breaking The Coconut Publication



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**Chika Philip Omenukwa
&
Ikenna Paschal Okpaleke**

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Dedication

To our parents, who first nurtured us.

Acknowledgments

The initial excitement that greeted the decision to publish this book almost faded after the first draft was done. Publishing it was therefore the result of a renewed interest inspired by some friends who found the content interesting and who insisted that it must go to the press despite some perceived inadequacies. First, we acknowledge God, the Father of all, in whose image we are formed. God's responsibility over all creatures and creation becomes thus a principle of operation for any parent, who as a matter of fact, is a co-creator with God. In this sense, our parents (late and alive), as co-creators with God exercised the responsibility that have continued to shape our individual self-understanding and that of the world around us. Parents and children function within the family in this handbook, except in special cases, and so we sincerely acknowledge our 'families' – nuclear and extended, pastoral and spiritual, social as well as academic – whose influence and contact have contributed in this work.

Special thanks to Ugoeze (Prof.) Rose Ndimele who generously made significant inputs from her experience as a mother, a teacher and a community leader. We are also grateful to Fr. Dr. Vernatius C. Oforka for proofreading the manuscript and offering valuable insights. Quite unquantifiable is the assistance of Ifeanyi Charles Umeh, who vehemently opposed the loss of excitement that befell the manuscript in our quest for a more academic work, and practically worked out the entire details of the publication. We also thank other friends who read the manuscript and either offered some valuable suggestions or wrote reviews: Fr. Ernest, Chisom, Chiamaka, Chizoba, Jos, and Udeona, who is expecting her third child. Finally, we acknowledge all parents around the world nurturing their children. This handbook was birthed out of his never-give-up spirit, for which we are very indebted to. Finally, we acknowledge all parents out there who are struggling with the responsibility of nurturing children in today's complex world and changing cultures. We salute your courage and urge you to keep up the struggle.

Chukwu gozie unu!

Preface

Nurturing a child is an art! Becoming a parent hardly happens by chance. It requires a method. It follows a scheme. This does not cancel out the application of wisdom and parental instincts in the raising of children. Our claim, however, is that in having some guidelines derived from the experiences of parents and families, health experts, psychologists and thinkers, adapted to the cultural norms and contemporary circumstances, one could become a better and responsible parent.

As priests, with experiences of serving in both the rural and urban areas of apostolate, our friendly but passionate interaction concerning our pastoral ministry revealed the radical changes in our society with regard to the youth and children. These experiences were mined from our close contact with many young people who would always confide in us when they found it difficult to freely share some of these issues with their parents. The idea for this book came about in 2013 out of these encounters and after we had analyzed the attitudes and behavioral patterns of our young friends, we came up with the resolve to do something about our findings. We particularly do not claim any expertise in behavioral psychology, yet the results of our encounters were borne out of trust and friendship. It then dawned on us that to begin to fix these problems, there is need to re-emphasize the responsibility of parents which has continually weakened over the years and is contributing to the attitudinal problems in children.

Surely, others in our position, whether priests, pastors, teachers or counsellors can easily relate to this problem, and this raises the questions: What is the fate of the many young people who find it difficult to open up to any person outside their family? What are parents doing to exercise effective responsibility over their children, one that is filled with trust, openness, love and understanding? For one thing, the methods of the past may not be effective in the present and may therefore need to be reviewed. The art of nurturing children must evolve in the light of contemporary circumstances. Meanwhile, the fact that many children in these days of social media and digital technology appear smarter but deficient in wisdom, must be given sufficient consideration. Be that as it may, the idea of this handbook is to put back the primary task of training and nurturing children in the hands of parents in this challenging age. Even the increasing task of teachers and media influencers cannot displace the control of the parents over their children and this is very critical for the type of society we wish to build and the vision

of the future we wish to construct.

We must confess that there is little out of the ordinary in this work since it only repeats, and sometimes even reproduces what one could easily find in similar works. In a way, one could even regard it as a systematic compilation of parental responsibilities. However, what have been done slightly differently are:

- To contextualize most of the guidelines to the Nigerian situation,
- To apply a methodology that makes for easy use by parents or any other person,
- To open up the guidelines for different family settings, despite operating from a Christian background.

The work has an elaborate introduction that gives a picture of the family and what the responsibility of parents entails in our society today. It is basically divided into seven chapters, each of which focuses on key aspects of a person's life, namely the spiritual, social, intellectual, physical, psychological and moral.

As a caveat, we do not claim that these guidelines are exhaustive, neither are they all-encompassing or capable of resolving all issues pertaining to parenting. Peculiar situations might also make some of the guidelines inapplicable or require them to be moderated in some ways. However, we consider the work as a valuable contribution to the duty of parents in nurturing their children towards becoming responsible in their families, communities, churches, and the society at large.

Chika P. Omenukwa & Ikenna P. Okpaleke



Introduction

UNDERSTANDING YOUR CHILD

One of the most famous stories in the Bible is the narrative of the first miracle of Jesus at Cana in Galilee (cf. John 2: 1-11). When Mary, the mother of Jesus, discovered that the wine for the wedding had finished, she did not consult anyone, nor did she wait to be consulted before appealing to her son. Even the response of Jesus, which suggested that the situation was not his major concern, did not deter the mother from giving the necessary instructions that preceded the miracle. Now, our interest in making reference to this story is not in the miracle, neither is it in the historical identity of the key actors involved. Rather, the central interest here is on *a mother's profound knowledge of her child*. This story is a lucid expression of a mother who knows her child, his tendencies, impulses and capabilities. Mary's instruction, "Do whatever he tells you," speaks volume of the special, exclusive and superior knowledge she has about her son. Beyond Jesus' response, she indeed understands her son.

Understanding your child is one of the most important things that one could learn as a parent. It is the first lesson in the art of nurturing a child. The job of parenting involves first and foremost, the ability to study and understand your child, his or her likes and dislikes, abilities and inabilities, inclinations, tendencies, capabilities, dispositions, etc. It is very helpful in becoming effective in guiding and nurturing your child as he or she grows and matures. You need to bear in mind that your child has a unique personality trait that remains consistent throughout life. This uniqueness is what a parent focuses on and seeks to harness fruitfully for the benefit of the child.

To know one's child is an all-involving exercise. It demands, as it were, one's entire energy, concentration, strength, experience, and indeed the whole person. One of the ways one can do this, especially at the early stages, is to consciously observe children

as they sleep, eat, or play. Here, one must have to patiently consider the consistent traits, the behavioral pattern. Which activities do they like best? What type of food do they dislike? Is adjusting to changes easy for them or do they need time to become familiar with these changes? In other words, what is their degree of adaptation to new environments and circumstances? These things present themselves as the normal characteristics of a child; and your child may not be an exception.

As much as possible, parents should make out time to talk to, and with, their children. Although they are the progenies of their parents, a step further is quite importantly needed, namely to consider children as friends. Children are by nature, closer to their parents than any other person. Since this is the case, effort ought to be made to maximize the benefits of this natural ordering because to do so is to enter into the world of the child and to gain access to invaluable information about the child and the energies that propel his or her actions. Most parents are grossly lacking in this aspect. They often ask themselves: What am I going to discuss with this kid, being so young? With this, one shuts off every possibility of establishing a meaningful dialogue with the child. This, no doubt, widens the gap between the child and the parent and equally forecloses the easiest avenue for the inculcation of values in the child. It is therefore necessary for one to make out time to talk with one's children, especially as they pass through the various life-phases. In the case of young children, they require less verbal language and more of body language in order to communicate effectively. Asking them questions will allow them to freely share their feelings with you. For example, rather than asking your kids what they did in school, ask them what they built with their blocks today. Instead of asking them if they played with their playmates, focus on the game they played. Rather than asking them what they would love to be in future, ask them what problem they would love to solve. This approach changes the conversation from *who do I want to work for*, to *what do I need to learn to be able to do that*. In the end, we increase their curiosity level which pays off in the long run.

Another way of understanding our children is by taking a look at their environment in order to learn about a certain behavioral pattern that we may have observed. The relationship between the environment and the child is a very clear one. The child is a product of not only nature but also nurture. Nurture here involves the influences the environment impresses upon the child. Relatives, childcare providers, friends, teachers, the community, the home setting, and other aspects of the environment can play a crucial role in the behavior of the child. This fact must never be neglected by parents since they are the primary agents in shaping the child's behavior. For example, if one's child is showing aggressiveness towards other children at school, one may want to find out all the possible sources of the aggressive behavior. Often, one hears parents ask their children: "From where did you copy this sort of behavior?" Or complain: "He was not

like this before”. Some possible angles could be their association with another child who exhibits aggressive tendencies. The environment at home is another possible source for such behavior. Thus, we do not have to rule out the possibility of internally generated modifiers of child behavior. Often times, this is the major source of negative influence on the development of the child. Most parents take for granted the type of acts they display before their kids. So, one may have to ask oneself: Have there been conflicts and arguments at home lately that were witnessed by my child? Could my child’s attitude be as a result of a negative influence somewhere from the community? These and other similar situations ought to be given due consideration in searching for the reason(s) behind a child’s aggressive behavior.

In addition, a diligent observation of children of the same age group could be needful in understanding the behavioral traits of one’s child. Many books with lots of tips and in-depth knowledge on child development have been written in this regard and would be invaluablely helpful if one avails himself or herself of the treasures these books offer. The stages children undergo are not exclusive to them; so, more or less, the behavior of children in that same stage would be similar. However, the speed of development through each stage is personal. It means that one’s experiences have a lot to contribute in the art of nurturing the behavior of one’s child. Those things that influenced you negatively could be mindfully avoided or prevented from influencing your child. Those things that impacted your life for the better should be encouraged for your kids. Do not allow them to suffer just because you suffered. Do not allow them to make terrible mistakes in life just because you did make such. The opportunity you have as a parent gives you the power to re-write your history in your children. It gives you the chance to redress your mistakes and to improve your quality of life through your children. An African wisdom saying has it that “the dream of every father is to have his child become greater than him.” The same applies to a mother. Meanwhile, every parent must be mindful of the characteristics of the age and time we find ourselves in today’s world. Speed in technological smartness has become part of the new order and parents must integrate these elements in this art of reconstructing their past in present generation.

By understanding your child’s development, you will be able to provide them with opportunities as well as toys that can boost their development and prepare them for the next phase of their growth. This does not have much to do with how buoyant a family is in purchasing these instruments of growth known as toys, but mainly with commitment and interest. Toys must not necessarily be bought in the market, they could be produced locally. Toys could simply point to anything or any device or tool designed to add worth and value to the growth of the child. When toys do not perform such functions, their relevance in the entire welfare of the child and family must be seriously re-examined. At the same time, every parent ought to be able to set expectations and limits that

are acceptable to his or her child. You cannot set these expectations and limits if you have not offered the child anything beyond what you have received. *To whom much is given, much is surely expected, but until much is surely given, then the expectation of a corresponding much should be put on hold.* So, do not complain a lot when you have not done a lot to set your child's behavior right. What you give is what you get. And, sometimes how you give what you give, plays a pivotal role in determining what you get. Any correction to the child, for instance, given out of bitterness may not produce the same fruit as one that is given with an attitude of love and care.

Being a responsible parent is hard, especially in this age when parents spend more time working rather than being with their kids. Quality time is difficult to achieve when you are trying to juggle your time between corporate life and parenthood. Not many people achieve success in parenthood and this could be frustrating on your part. Understanding your child is one effective way of becoming successful in the art of parenting which is the major objective of this book. This book is all about understanding your child from a broader perspective. It is all about addressing the different dimensions of a child's life and the appropriate parental role in these areas. It is all about fashioning the best out of the child from parents who are the primary caregivers. It is all about being alive and attentive to one's responsibility as a parent. In becoming a good parent, you contribute in a moral reconstruction of our society, for without well-nurtured individuals, the society remains in crisis.

Changing the Face of Nigeria through the Family

The introduction of the Nigerian context at the beginning of this work is aimed at narrowing down the principles that are contained herein to the context of parenting we have in mind. Of course, one could easily write tons and tons of papers on the problem with the Nigerian society, and most of these often center on the question of leadership. It is an undeniable fact that every proffered solution to our pitiable situation has always looked the other way when it comes to the importance of the family. The reason perhaps is that many Nigerians do not see the connection between the family and the decadent leadership structure we have in our nation. The critical questions bother on the following: How can we highlight the fact that the family is implicated in the inability of Nigerian leaders to provide the basic social amenities and security for the Nigerian citizens? In other words, is there any possible relationship between the failure in families and the failure of the state? How could one blame the family for the general moral decadence in a nation where the value and protection of human life and dignity of the human person are not given due attention? In a situation where the family is declared innocent of all of these, how then would the family help in healing what it did not help to inflict? The present discussion is therefore an attempt to rebuild

the society from below, namely from the family, which remains the basic unit of every society, the first point of socialization. At the center of all this, is the art of parenting.

Any form of reasoning that exonerates the family from the present Nigerian predicament obscures the fact that every socio-political and moral ill in any society is a reflection of the gross dysfunction in the family units. It is for this reason that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) emphasizes the irreplaceable role of the family in the general structure of the society. The Catechism states: “The family is the original cell of social life. It is the natural society in which husband and wife are called to give themselves in love and in the gift of life. Authority, stability, and a life of relationships within the family constitute the foundations for freedom, security, and fraternity within society. The family is the community in which, from childhood, one can learn moral values, begin to honor God, and make use of freedom. Family life is an initiation into life in society.”¹ Given this therefore, one could argue that the rot in the society is often hatched first in the family, most times inadvertently. Most moral evils sprout from the family and often turn back to torment the family, and unfortunately, the society at large.

The role of the family in positively changing the face of the Nigerian society remains undisputed. In his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, Pope John Paul II made the point that the family is the foundation upon which the social edifice is erected.² He equally observes that, not only the future of the church, but also the future of the world passes through the family.³ The wider society cannot develop if the family does not live up to its bidding. If it is from the family that the conscience of every society is formed and nurtured, then it becomes necessary to look at the condition of the family in Nigeria, (and by extension, Africa and the world at large) in order to discover if the situation of the Nigerian socio-politics and socio-economics is a spill-over from or a reflection of the dysfunction in the family.

¹Holy See, *The Catechism of the Church* (Nairobi: Paulines, 1994), no. 2207.

²John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesiae in Africa, On the Church in Africa and Its Evangelizing Mission Towards the Year 2000* (14 September 1995), http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_14091995_ecclesia-in-africa.html (accessed 07 September, 2018), no. 80.

³John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio, On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World* (22 November, 1981), http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio.html (accessed 05 September, 2018), no. 75.

In the traditional African society, the family is a sacred institution primarily because it is that institution that is concerned with the generation and nurture of human life. Being open to this concept of the family, Africans love and appreciate the gift of children, who are joyfully welcomed as gifts from God. In his homily at the opening liturgy of the Special Assembly for Africa on the Synod of Bishops, John Paul II agreed that “the peoples of Africa respect the life which is conceived and born. They rejoice in this life. They reject the idea that it can be destroyed, even when the so-called progressive civilizations would like to lead them in this direction.” Nigeria is not an exception in this African traditional ideology. Given their fundamental respect for human life, Africans leave the training of the children to parents in such a way that education in Africa does not have meaning without the agency of parents and elders. In fact, parents are the guardians and the directors of their children’s morality and social conscience. According to Pope John Paul II, nothing can compensate for the failure of parents in this role. Through this informal socialization avenue, the African child, very early in life, appropriates the pertinent values of African life that have always been the pride of the continent; namely the sense of sacredness of life, respect for elders, life of community, love and solidarity, mutual generosity, hospitality, warmth in human relationship, dialogue and trust. Given the fact that the typical African family extends beyond the nuclear family to include all other members of the extended family who share a corporate responsibility in the family union, it is the best context for the practice of these social values and virtues, which shape the socio-political life and activity in the African society at large.

Pitifully, things are no longer as they used to be due to the modern commercialization of life and relationships in Africa. Human life has become a commodity to be sold, bought and controlled depending on one’s economic power. The virtues of love, care, solidarity, compassion and communality have been lost to regular shifts within the family: Responsibility for family formation has been shifted from the hands of the parents to the school teachers, media, peer groups and non-governmental organizations. Even where parents live with their children, they no longer pay adequate attention to the training of these children on the cherished values of the society. Evidently, contemporary African (Nigerian) family is in crisis for this reason. The instability of many marriages attests to this. Consequent to situations like this, how then do we expect not to breed young men and women with such deviant conducts as gross insubordination to authorities, incorrigibility, looting of public funds, armed robbery, kidnapping, sexual molestation, drug abuses, sexual promiscuity and indifference to ethical and spiritual standards? How do we expect our political office holders to be accountable and responsible to their mandate of pursuing the common good when they have traded human compassion for sadism, and human development for personal gains? This is the status-quo of the Nigerian society and for this anomaly to be addressed properly, there is the need to

retrace our steps back to our system of family formation, which is important for a morally decent society. The recapturing of the lost family values will definitely impact positively on our society, and it is our conviction that this project begins with parents living up to their responsibility towards their children and wards.

One should be mindful, however, that the notion of responsibility is used in many ways. Discussions about responsibility therefore often suffer from a lack of conceptual clarity. For the purpose of this book, we think that two common distinctions between meanings of responsibility are relevant. First, there is the distinction between *moral responsibility* and *non-moral responsibility*. Moral responsibilities are responsibilities we have on moral grounds, whereas non-moral responsibilities are based on non-moral grounds, for example organizational rules or the law. An example of non-moral responsibility is task responsibility. Task responsibility can, for example, be based on tasks in an organization. Task responsibilities are not necessarily immoral, but they may sometimes be. Under Nazi rule, Eichmann had a task responsibility to transport Jews and other minorities to concentration camps, but it seems obvious that he did not have a moral responsibility to do so. Quite the contrary.

Second, a distinction should be made between *forward-looking* and *backward-looking* responsibility. Backward-looking responsibility is related to blame and liability for things that have happened in the past. We will refer to this variety of responsibility as moral liability. Forward-looking responsibility refers to the taking of responsibility for things that are still in the future. Forward-looking moral responsibility can be linked to the notion of responsibility as a virtue. Parental responsibility towards their children and wards is not only a moral responsibility but also a forward-looking responsibility. This is so because we are talking about a duty that is imposed by conscience and marital vows, as well as the shaping of the child's destiny and future towards building a stable individual and society.

The intention of this book might appear like proffering a magic wand that would automatically turn things around. Much as this is the wish behind it, one however acknowledges the difficulties involved. The past cannot be glorified in an exaggerated style, neither are we to be severely pessimistic about the situation of today. Thus, the key issue remains that the contribution towards a better society is a duty that we owe both God and humankind. We therefore consider the contributions here, notwithstanding their deficiencies, as part of our contribution to make our society a better one, a society where the family becomes the nursery for forming responsible men and women who could transform our society for the better. The transformative potency of this project therefore lies in the fact that it looks beyond the family despite focusing on it. A better society remains the overall target. But this cannot happen without better families made

possible by good parenting. This is key, unless we take the option of enhancing behavior through technological regulations, an option which only builds on moral compulsion rather than conviction.

Chapter 1



PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY TOWARDS THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF CHILDREN

Being a parent is not just a natural or sociological function, it is equally a spiritual one. Parents are vested with spiritual responsibility towards their children, for if procreation is ordained by God, then its divine origin impresses it with a spiritual character. Just as early Christian families were exemplary to others around them, Christian families today can build up their domestic churches and strive to be what the *Catechism* termed “islands of Christian life in an unbelieving world.”⁴ Hence, the fear of God begins at home. The home is the first spiritual empire, the domestic church where parents are the spiritual prime-ministers and Christ remains the Lord of the home. Within the home, the child encounters God first, and experiences the taste of spiritual life. Within the homestead, the child first learns the definition of faith and begins to live it.

The Family as a Domestic Church

Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that “Every home is called to become a ‘domestic church’ in which family life is completely centered on the lordship of Christ and the love of husband and wife mirrors the mystery of Christ’s love for the Church, his bride.”⁵ A domestic church begins with the Sacrament of Matrimony – man and woman become

⁴CCC, no. 1655.

⁵Benedict XVI, General audience, Feb., 7, 2007.

husband and wife – “which unites the spouses and binds them to their eventual souls, with whom they make up a sole family – a domestic church.” (John Paul II). The family as a domestic church is summoned to proclaim, celebrate, and serve the Gospel of life.⁶ Thus, “married couples (are) called to be givers of life, on the basis of an ever greater awareness of the meaning of procreation as a unique event which clearly reveals that human life is a gift received in order then to be given as a gift. In giving origin to a new life, parents recognize that the child, ‘as the fruit of their mutual gift of love, is, in turn, a gift for both of them, a gift that flows from them’”.⁷

While understanding their family as domestic church where the Gospel of life is enthroned, parents equally come to terms with their responsibility of erecting their family upon the pillars of spiritual values.

The Spiritual “Directors”

Parents are the spiritual directors in the family. Together, parents are the catechists of their home with every love, respect, sincerity and honesty that can be imagined. Indeed, they are supposed to be the priests, pastors, catechists, and instructors in the home. They are the first coordinators of spiritual activities, the primary pilots of the spiritual airbus, the directors of the spiritual rudders of the family. When parents are grossly lacking in spiritual matters, when the father and mother of the home are spiritually retarded, the general spirituality of the family is seriously affected. Such spiritual disinterestedness could spill over to other aspects of the family life, since most social virtues and values are founded upon the spiritual fabric of life. If on the other hand parents are spiritually active and alert, the effect is evident in the life of the family, notwithstanding some isolated instances where other factors truncate the resultant harmony. In our families today, it is evident that spiritual laxity is more prevalent among the fathers. Pastoral experience shows that mothers are in most cases, often more spiritually active than fathers. Some fathers find it difficult to pray, some find it hard to get involved actively in the Church, some see prayer as a ‘women-thing’, some feel that the prayers of their wives are enough to cover their spiritual sloth, and some shy away from becoming spiritual

⁶John Paul II, Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, *On the Value and Inviolability of Human Life* (25 March, 1995), https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html (accessed 07 September, 2018), no. 92.

⁷*Evangelium Vitae*, no. 92. The text cited within the quote is taken from John Paul II, Address to Participants in the Seventh Symposium of European Bishops, on the theme of “Contemporary Attitudes towards Life and Death: A Challenge for Evangelization” (17 October 1989), No. 5: *Insegnamenti* Vol. XII, no. 2 (1989), 945. Children are presented in the Biblical tradition precisely as God’s gift (cf. Ps 127:3) and as a sign of his blessing on those who walk in his ways (cf. Ps 128:3-4).

role models to their kids. Such men easily forget that to effectively and creditably discharge their duty as fathers in the family, they must style their duties along the lines of God whose fatherhood they enjoy. They must not forget that they are enjoying a delegated function and as a matter of fact are expected to keep in touch with him who has entrusted them with such great responsibility. This attitude of spiritual negligence has become quite disturbing and is partly responsible for the decadence and spiritual laxity in most families today. So, if one expects his or her family to be spiritually and morally stable, one must get on one's knees and teach the children by example.

Meanwhile, for us to get our children onto the proper spiritual frequency we have to take note of the godly principles that are meant to shape the spiritual life of our family. If our children are to be spiritually minded, if they are to shape their lives in line with divine precepts, if they are to enjoy the glimpse of heaven here on earth, then we have to take the following into serious consideration:

(a) Praying together

It is said that “a family that prays together, stays together.” It is absolutely essential that parents pray with their kids daily, starting at a very young age. Examples of the most common times in which parents can pray with their kids are mornings, evenings, and before and after meals. Rudimentary prayers such as the *Sign of the Cross*, *Our Father* and *Hail Mary*, including prayer postures such as kneeling and standing are first learnt in the family. In many Catholic families, it is traditional to pray the rosary either every morning or every evening before bed. The rosary brings everyone together. More still, attending the celebration of the Holy Mass (or Sunday Service for non-Catholics) together as a family is a very powerful way of training children in spiritual matters. When done together, these spiritual exercises prove critical in a child's spiritual upbringing and in constructing the foundation of their spiritual life, for in the words of Jesus, “where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20). Jesus is “in our midst” when we pray with our children. This Jesus-in-the-midst-of-your-family is the source of joy, peace, happiness, love and unity. The absence of Jesus in the family is the presence of disharmony and disorientation in the home and society.

Another spiritual exercise that should have a *family* time is scripture reading. Reading the Bible as a family is the best way to introduce the child to the world of God's Word. This is the duty of parents. The impact of an early introduction of the Word of God in the life of the child cannot be overestimated. The vitality of the Word of God reflects in an amazing manner in a child who is introduced to it right from time. Parenting is thus made easy since the life of the child is fashioned already by the principles of the

Scripture. St. Paul instructs: “All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, refuting error, for correcting and training in Christian life. Through Scripture, the man of God is made expert and thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17). One could amplify Pauline idea of ‘the man of God’ to include ‘the child of God’. Every child that daily gets in contact with the Word of God is daily shaped, equipped and motivated to do every kind of good work. This should be the desire of every parent: that your child becomes a veritable instrument in the hand of God. To see to the fulfillment of such an achievable desire in your child, you must nurture your child with the juice of God’s Word. Sometimes, it is good to adopt a method whereby:

- The Scripture is read before the main prayer; maybe, a little prayer or devotional song at the start would do;
- The reading of the Word of God is assigned to individuals and rotated on a daily basis;
- One person gets the function of explaining the scripture passage that was read together;
- Either of the parents gives a summary at the end of the explanation, pointing out the lessons therein;
- Some passages, preferably the Psalms, could be committed to memory. For example, the most common psalms like Psalm 23, 51, 63, 91, 121, etc.

(b) Watch Christian videotapes

When the child is young, it is important that they visualize the things that they pray for and read about in the Scripture. Therefore, it is important to supplement spiritual reading with movies or documentaries about saints, and stories from the Bible. In addition, listening to and reciting spiritual songs with your children is an excellent spiritual activity. When the child is very young (5 - 10 years of age), animated (cartoons) Bible stories are a wonderful source of religious training. Many Christian stores have excellent and comprehensive set of animated Bible stories including stories about Adam and Eve, Moses, Noah, Samuel, Daniel, Joseph, David and Goliath, the Nativity, and so many more. This and other stories also have many other spiritual tools, including Children’s Bibles, coloring books, spiritual songs, Christian puzzles, etc. This is where the advantage of modern digital devices must be maximally put to good use.

Parents can indeed limit the amount of television that their children and wards watch. Some cartoons and TV shows can be quite violent, sexual in nature, and in general, problematic in their taken-for-granted influences on young children. Some video games are also not quite appropriate for children. Parents should replace excessive watching of television and playing of video games with watching movies that enhance spirituality

as discussed above, although we must note that watching television and playing games serve their own useful values in the life of children especially with regards to cognitive development. To strike a balance between these is indeed a difficult task, but when accomplished will definitely yield some fruitful results. It was thrilling to watch a priest display an excellent didactic ingenuity in biblical instruction with kids, by creatively getting the attention of kids through integration of appropriate animated Bible stories with his homilies at Children's Mass in his parish. At home, this may be easier since there is no crowd of kids and no risk of breaking any liturgical regulations. Though this would turn out to be one of the toughest tasks parents in this generation may face, however, this is the best time to feed the minds of children with healthy ideas that would last a long time when they finally leave home. When a home is not decorated with such modern media like television, especially in the rural areas, it is often the case that children easily leave their homes to visit their peers who are privileged to have such gadgets at home. Such visits may not be bad in themselves, but parents must know that such unmonitored visits may expose the children to direct contact with the unique culture of other families.

A very senior citizen shared his experience on how his last child does not watch television during weekdays until weekends, and how this standing rule in the house has kept his children sane. However, in a bid to ensure they don't miss out completely, he introduced musical instruments to their schedule. Interesting as it may sound, all his children have won laurels for playing one musical instrument or another, and research say that children who play instruments are more intuitive and most times, turn out smarter. It is therefore of utmost importance for parents to painstakingly find out from their children what they do when they are at their neighbor's house and the good things they learnt there as well. Every family has a language and culture and parents must be aware of this. This simply expresses the uniqueness of every family and it is nothing to be afraid of but an invitation to alertness and carefulness.

(c) Curriculum of Love

The family is the sanctuary of love. Blessed Mother Teresa observes that, "the best and surest way to learn the love of Jesus is through the family." The *Catechism* offers us direction regarding the responsibilities of parents to impart the faith to their children. It teaches us that the "Christian home is the place where children learn the first proclamation of the faith. For this reason, the family home is rightly called 'the domestic church,' a community of grace and prayer, a school of human virtues and of Christian charity."⁸ It is within this family that Christian parents lay a curriculum of

⁸CCC, no. 1666.

fraternal love and forgiveness while helping the family to work out their salvation in the give-and-take of life that the family epitomizes. To this effect,

- Parents should love their children by showing it and saying it. It is not out of place for parents to look straight in the face of their children and say such simple but profound words of positive affirmation like, “I love you”, “I cherish you”, “I am proud of you.” It may be necessary for one to ask oneself when last he or she did this. Surprisingly, this may be completely unthinkable for some, while some others may do that without the required consciousness and strong commitment.
- Parents must be careful not to constantly criticize and yell at their children. This gives them a very low sense of themselves and may, if care is not taken, lead to complete loss of self-confidence, which is can be very damaging.
- Parents must find ways of inculcating in their children the reciprocal love which they give. They should teach them how to love one another.
- Parents should always forgive wrongdoings, even when they punish. Children must be made to understand that they have been forgiven and be taught to forgive always in accordance with the Word of God.

Parents should deal with problems in a loving way, limit their criticisms, criticize only in a loving and constructive fashion, and tell their children that they love them on a regular basis. Children, especially at a young age, deeply need this kind of affection, affirmation, reassurance and encouragement. It gives them a healthy self-esteem when they are told that they are smart, well-behaved, capable of doing good, and when they are appreciated, cared for and loved.

(d) Spending quality time with your child

Parents have to spend quality time every day with their children, including reading with them and doing various activities with them. Reading with your children stimulates their minds and builds them up intellectually as well as spiritually. In addition to spiritual books, parents can read other types of books too and with their children, including children’s developmental books, simple stories from children’s books, science, history, math, and so on, to intellectually stimulate them and to engage their curiosity. Parents should also spend quality time with their children by doing various activities at home, such as solving puzzles, playing games, doing house chores together, etc. Parents should take an interest in their children’s life and be interested in what they are doing from day to day. It is equally necessary that parents take adequate interest in their kids’ school, know what they are studying and learning, help them with their homework, learn who their friends are and get to know them, have interest in their activities and participate in them as much as possible. The aim is not to be overbearing but to earn your position

as your best friend.

(e) Taking interest in your child's spiritual life

This campaign for parental availability is modelled after the example of God who is always there for us. Christ is called the Emmanuel, meaning *God-with-us*. Since God is ever with us in His Son, parents, as the visible 'God' for kids, should always be available to their children. This is required not only by the demands of emotional companionship, but more so by the norms of spiritual mentorship. The spiritual life of the child must be given close attention all the time. The father or mother of the home should not be absent every time the family gathers to pray in the morning or in the evening. Here, there is every need to maintain a prayerful rule of life. This involves in essence, when, how, what and where to pray. Importantly, a lovely observance of those basic hours of prayer ought to be held sacrosanct, whenever possible. Parents who structure their families along these lines, endear themselves admirably to their children as friends of God and would earn themselves much more respect from their children. More still, parents will be doing a great service to their children by inculcating in them the love of prayer and communion with God.

A responsible parent should take great interest in the child's spiritual life. To be true to this vocation, one should be able to detect the spiritual impulse of one's child; knowing when it is either progressing or retrogressing. Other practical steps include:

- Finding out if your child really attends Sunday school or Block Rosary crusade, or if he or she uses such spiritual activities as a perfect excuse for hanging out with peers. Knowing that children copy a lot, parents themselves must endeavor to lead by example in this regard.
- Finding out whether your child learns and grows spiritually by attending such spiritual gatherings. How do the spiritual lessons reflect in his or her daily living? Ask your child questions each day he or she comes back from such fellowship. To do this creditably, parents must endeavor to be informed, so as to know what to ask and what to expect, how to ask the questions, and why the questions must be asked in the first place.
- Being interested in the sacramental life of your child. Effort must be made to register them for catechism classes and make sure that they receive the sacraments of the Holy Eucharist and Confirmation as and when due. This is also applicable in cases of non-Catholics. Parents should take the initiative to enroll their children in Sunday Schools and other departments of their church ministry.
- Finding out the reason for the child's relapse in the reception of Holy Communion. Here, care and patience ought to be diligently applied in finding out the reason for the child's action without in any way offending his or her sensibilities or inflicting

emotional injuries which could create negative impacts on the child. And when the reasons for relapsing in the reception of communion are materials for sacramental reconciliation, they should be encouraged to make peace with God. Here, parents ought to lead by example also.

- And in what may be termed “a do-you-care question”, few questions like these may be raised to summarize our points here:
- *Do you encourage your child to frequent the Sacrament of Reconciliation (penance or confession)?*
- *Do you ever care if your child has a personal Bible or not?*
- *Do you ever care if your child has a rosary?*
- *Do you care if your child belongs to a particular pious society or group in the church?*
- *Do you care to find out what truly happens in the pious/religious groups your child belongs to?*

(f) Being a good Christian role model

Children imitate their parents whom they observe very carefully. So, parents have to be mindful of this and be good role models by leading exemplary and God fearing Christian lives. Together couples can work on having a strong Christian marriage and be good to one another. Parents must be honest, use good language at all times, and relate with others in the home in a respectful, loving, and Christian way. Consequently, children should not be given the impression, for example that house helps and servants are second class human beings, who should be treated shabbily and without respect. Where this is not the case, a negative influence is presented to the child. In any case, the continuous presence of house helps or servants in our contemporary society is pitiable, condemnable and unacceptable. Neither does it help the individual who is pulled out of his or her immediate family nor the children of the very home that are supposed to be the beneficiaries of the apparent helps they render. In most cases, these are merely young children, who must be confronted with some difficult tasks in their new homes and psychologically deprived of the security and warmth their personal families could have provided them. Oftentimes, financial constraints force families to give away their kids as house helps or servants with the hope of a better future for their children. This has worked in some cases, but in some other cases it has not. Whatever, the outcome might be, this must be honestly discouraged for the future of our kids ought not to be placed on the balance of guess work and luck. Even with the best of intentions, families must be encouraged to resist the urge of introducing house helps and servants in the family structure. Families have a lot to gain without them than with them.

Outside the home, parents also bear a great responsibility in the Christian upbringing of their children. Here are some of the parents’ responsibilities outside the home:

Integration and Active Participation in the Church Community - It is the parents' responsibility to take their children to church, have them attend Eucharistic celebrations, catechism classes, Sunday-Services or School, and receive Communion (if applicable), especially when they are still very young. These three things are very important. It is not good to be "too busy" to go to church, or "be too tired" or "too lazy" to go to church on any given Sunday. Parents should teach their children the need to be active in the church community; to be part of those who render service in the house of God either as lectors, choristers, ushers and so on. The church community should be understood as another family to which the child belongs; a spiritual eschatological family where everybody is a child of God and Jesus is the Lord. It is equally worrisome when parents spend all their time in church or in various pious engagements imprudently. Often some parents spend almost 24 hours in the church doing devotion and moving from one pious group to the other, attending every crusade and convention. They literally neglect their legitimate parental responsibilities in the home and carelessly expose their children to danger. Parents of course ought to be the spiritual bulldozers of their families, but there has to be a balance, and this function must be carried out with wisdom and prudence and in complete awareness of their parental demands and responsibilities.

Spend time with your kids outside the home - On weekends and other special occasions, parents should make special effort to take up activities with their kids outside the home, such as a visit to a park or zoo, play sports, go shopping, etc. Every child feels happy when asked by their parents to join them on an outing. Sometimes, children derive joy in simple things such as holding their parents' shopping bag while they buy groceries. Going out with your children is a practical way of teaching them how to behave in the public and of instructing them on the value of leisure. It can also be a source of parent-child bonding.

Be a good Christian role model outside the home - Parents should be good Christians outside the home just as they appear to be inside the home. They have to be honest in their work, have good relations with others at church and in their workplace, have good relations with their relatives and the clergy. This is necessary because often people are glad to meet the children of honest and friendly individuals. Often, you could hear such enthusiastic questions as: Are you the child of Mr. and Mrs. so or so? Madam/Sir, is that your child? And the comments could go like: Your mom is such a good person, I hope you are as intelligent as your parents. Such accolades inspire children to live up to the virtuous life of their parents.

Chapter 2



PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY TOWARDS THE SOCIAL LIFE OF CHILDREN

Teenagers generally object to the monitoring of their social life by their parents. They dislike it when parents give such bursts as: *"You are not going to that party or to that event, if you like, hit your head on the walls!"* *"I don't want to see you outside this house once it is 6:00pm."* Some feel so bad when they are severely punished or grounded by their parents. They question whether their parents have any right to meddle into their social lives and relationships. They frown when their parents determine who should be their friends and who should not. They get mad when their parents dictate what they should wear and what they should not. They often construct their world in accordance to what is in vogue, to popular trends, and so, they always want to appear trendy. They hate to appear out-jaded and old-fashioned in style and concepts.

The question remains whether something is to be judged good, proper and necessary by the mere fact of being popular. That something is in vogue does not translate into the same thing being needful. The experience of parents does matter seriously here because even during their own time, certain things went trending, and the gains and pains of such lifestyles were manifested either in their very lives or in that of people they know. So, a good parent feels they owe themselves and their children the duty to prevent any negative consequence of youthful exuberance. Such history can be prevented from repeating. Thus, parental responsibility towards the social life of their children remains relevant. However, care must be taken to strike 'a balance' between instilling discipline in children and the amount of independence and freedom that could also be allowed

these children. This independence is very important in their overall development and assumption of personal responsibility as active members of society. We now highlight the social responsibility of parents within the context of the nexus between the family and the society.

The Family and the Society

The family is the microform of the society. It is the society in bud. In a simplified term, a family refers to a group of people affiliated by consanguinity, affinity, or co-residence. It is the principal institution for the socialization of children. Extended from the human 'family unit' by biological-cultural affinity, marriage, economy, culture, tradition, honor and friendship are concepts of family that are physical and metaphorical, or that grow increasingly inclusive, extending to community, kindred, village, city, region, nation and the world. This shows that the concept of family today has experienced an extrapolation beyond the simple nuclear and extended forms to include the global, implying that the foundational family unit suffers an immensity of influence and pressure from the extensive society within which it exists and thrives.

In the area of social life or activities, family cannot be indifferent to the trends of the time. Often there appears to be a conflict between the attitude of parents to contemporary social trends and that of their children since there might be a generational gap between the two groups in most instances. This gap needs not be filled but could be handled maturely by a basic understanding of the social and emotional development of every child. This is the first step to be taken by parents in judging the responses of children to emerging (and already existing) global social trends. Next is the evaluation of the necessity of such social behavior and thereupon, devising the best form of discipline to be applied in guiding the child as he or she responds to such social trends. To help us in this direction is a review of the study by the renowned psychologist, Erik Erikson.

Examining the Structure of Erikson's Social-Emotional Development

An overview of the developmental tasks involved in the social and emotional development of children and teenagers, which continue into adulthood is a sure guide in responsible parenting. Erik Erikson's *Eight Stages of Development*, which he developed in 1956, is very necessary for parents' understanding of their children, and to be better informed in carrying out their responsibility towards them.

According to Erikson, the socialization process consists of eight phases, referred to as the 'eight stages of man.' His eight stages of man (understood generically) were formulated, not through experimental work, but through wide-ranging experience

in psychotherapy, including extensive experience with children and adolescents from low as well as upper and middle social classes. Each stage is regarded by Erikson as a 'psychosocial crisis,' which arises and demands resolution before the next stage can be satisfactorily negotiated. These stages assume a peculiar structure and are modelled almost in an architectural manner. Each stage demands a deep and careful study and analysis for the satisfactory resolution of the crisis that it posits. Here, nothing is to be neglected. Each stage must be given the attention it deserves similar to the erection of a building, otherwise regrets will definitely set in, and especially at a time the situation in place will no longer tolerate any amendment. The fact is simple, the foundation of a house is essential to the first floor, which in turn must be structurally sound to support the second floor, and so on.

In the following sub-sections, we take a concise look at the eight stages of development as propounded by Erikson. With each stage of development there is a corresponding psychosocial crisis that equally needs to be resolved.

1. The stage of hope: Learning Basic Trust Vs Basic Mistrust

Basically, this covers the first two years of infancy. The child, though young, is already sensitive to its immediate environment, the sentiments of love, hate, the principles of nurture and good mannerisms. These affect directly the child's developmental process and future orientation. The child, when handled well, nurtured, and loved, develops trust and security and a basic optimism. However, when the child is badly handled, he or she becomes insecure and mistrustful.

2. The stage of the will: Learning Autonomy Vs Shame

Erikson believes that the second psychosocial crisis occurs during early childhood, probably between about 18 months or 2 years and 3½ to 4 years of age. Just like in every stage, and depending on how parents manage the child at this stage, it has both a positive and a negative package. A child with an advantage of good parenting will emerge from this stage confident and surer of self. Strengthened therefore, with this new-found confidence, it will enjoy some level of self-control, confidence and self-assertion rather than become shy or ashamed at the least provocation. Self-assertion and self-confidence, however, ought not to be confused with child autonomy, which is found in every child. Autonomy in a child should not be viewed as a synonym for self-assertion or as an expression of assured self-possession, initiative, and independence, because other factors could be responsible for such a trait. With reference therefore to psychosocial crisis seen in some children, at least in their early stages, some other traits like stormy self-will, tantrums, stubbornness, and negativism could be discovered.

For example, one sees many 2-year-olds resolutely folding their arms to prevent their mothers from holding their hands as they cross the street. Proper understanding of what is going on at this level is therefore very crucial for good parenting.

3. The stage of purpose: Learning Initiative Vs Guilt

Erikson explains that this third psychosocial crisis occurs during what he calls the 'play age' or the later preschool years (from about 3½ to entry into formal school). During this period, a child that has a healthy development learns the following:

- **Imagination:** the child's imaginative skills and ability are sharpened, and the child could meaningfully engage in active skillful imaginative games of all sorts, including fantasy.
- **Cooperation:** the child begins to develop a certain sense of communality and cooperative spirit. The existence of the other becomes more concrete for the child, not as a reality to be avoided but one to cooperate with.
- **Leadership:** the child begins to assume leadership qualities and functions. Even when the child plays with other children, one observes astonishingly a departmentalization of functions in display. The need to lead and to follow becomes very expressive.

However, parents must understand that at this stage, when the child's development is hampered by some unhealthy and negative factors, a feeling of guilt might set in whereby the child might become (1) fearful, (2) hangs on the fringes of groups, (3) continues to depend unduly on adults, and (4) is restricted both in the development of play skills and in imagination. This should not be the case, rather the imaginative, cooperative and leadership potentials of a child should be aided to blossom by parents and other caregivers.

4. The stage of competence: Industry Vs Inferiority

Erikson describes the fourth psychosocial crisis as a phase of great importance and its management could either produce positive or negative results. This happens during what he described as the "school age; presumably occurring up to the stage of what we know as junior secondary school. Here, the child learns to master the more formal skills of life: (1) relating with peers according to rules, (2) progressing from free play to that which may be elaborately structured by rules and may demand formal teamwork, such as baseball, and (3) mastering social studies, reading, and arithmetic. The necessity of homework ought to be emphasized here and should be given its required attention; parents can help so much in ensuring that this happens. Because with each passing year, the child is expected to increase in self-discipline, the child who, because of his

or her successive and successful resolutions of earlier psychosocial crisis, is trusting, autonomous, and full of initiative will learn easily enough to be industrious. However, the mistrusting child will doubt the future, while the shy and guilt-filled child will experience defeat and inferiority.

5. The stage of fidelity: Learning Identity Vs Identity Diffusion

This is a stage of identity consciousness. Erikson maintains that during the fifth psychosocial crisis, the child, now an adolescent (from about 13 or 14 to about 20 years) learns how to satisfactorily and happily answer the question of “Who am I?” However, parents must be conscious of the fact that at this stage even the best-adjusted of adolescents experience some role identity diffusion: most boys and probably most girls experiment with minor delinquency; rebellion flourishes; self-doubts flood the youngsters, etc.

According to Erikson, during successful early adolescence, mature time perspective is developed: the young person acquires self-certainty as opposed to self-consciousness and self-doubt. He or she comes to experiment with different – usually constructive – roles rather than adopting a ‘negative identity’ (such as delinquency). The adolescent anticipates achievement, and goes ahead to achieve, rather than being ‘paralyzed’ by feelings of inferiority or by an inadequate time perspective. In later adolescence, clear sexual identity – manhood or womanhood – is established. The adolescent seeks leadership, namely someone to inspire him or her. More still, there is a gradual development of a set of ideals, often socially congruent and desirable, in the case of the successful adolescent. Erikson opines that within human culture, adolescence affords a ‘psychosocial moratorium’ particularly for middle and upper-class children, whereby they do not yet have to ‘play for keeps’ but can experiment, trying various roles, and thus hopefully find the one most suitable for them. Rather than being estranged from them, it is the parents’ responsibility to look out for and help adolescents attain this maturity in the right directions.

6. The stage of love: Learning Intimacy Vs Isolation

The successful young adult, for the first time, can experience true intimacy, the sort of intimacy that makes good marriage or a genuine and enduring friendship possible. Some parents do not understand that this is a stage in life and that they may hamper development at this stage by being over-protective. Such parents praise the child who isolates himself or herself from the opposite sex as good and exemplary, and paradoxically may begin to push the child into mixing up with others at later stages in life. It helps to be attentive to your children at this stage and establish a good relationship with them so

as to be in a position to direct them along the right path.

7. The stage of care: Learning Generativity Vs Self-Absorption

In adulthood, the psychosocial crisis demands generativity, both in the sense of marriage and parenthood, and in the sense of working productively and creatively. Generativity here implies the struggle against stagnation. It is about the concern for guiding and establishing the upcoming generation. It has at its background, optimism for humanity. The mistake some parents make is to think that marriage is the ultimate requirement at this stage and as a result, put unimaginable pressure on their sons and daughters. The key focus here is 'generativity' which might be realized in productivity and/or creativity.

8. The stage of wisdom: Integrity Vs Despair

In a case where the above mentioned seven psychosocial crises have been successfully resolved, the mature adult develops the peak of adjustment, namely integrity. He or she trusts, is independent and dares the new. He or she works hard, has found a well-defined role in life, and has developed a self-concept with which happiness is built. Here intimacy can be established without strain, guilt, regret, or lack of realism. The individual is also proud of what he or she 'creates', namely children, work, or hobbies. If one or more of the earlier psychosocial crises have not been resolved, he or she may view self and life with disgust and despair. It is not immediately clear whether parents still have any role to play at this stage, but the fact remains that the impact of parents, whether positive or negative, is evident in this stage.

These eight developmental stages of an individual with corollary psychosocial crises are plausible and insightful descriptions of how a personality evolves. Nevertheless, they are merely permutations and hypothetical projections and cannot form as it were, a conclusive testament of human development. Our assertion of clarity in fact are at best rudimentary and tentative. The impact the environment has on the individual, the future it promises, and the package it holds for every individual, especially in traits of trust versus distrust, or clear personal identity versus diffusion, cannot be easily determined and conclusively summarized with the considerations made so far. Nevertheless, a moderate knowledge of a child's developmental stages remains heavily rewarding for parents. Knowledge of course is power, and this is true in this circumstance. Any worried parent or teacher knows the complexity and difficulty associated with the training and formation of children, especially in guiding them through the various stages of growth and in making sure that they learn positively. In view of accomplishing this task creditably, many works have been written, and profitable research conducted in the field of child development, all attempting to respond to this all-important and

sensitive matter. One thing is clear, a child must undergo the processes of socialization. It becomes necessary therefore, to devise means of supporting and being available for the child in this challenging journey.

In what follows, parental responsibility in relation to the social life of children is examined in the light of the powerful influence and presence of the mass media. The question to be answered is: In the light of a pervasive presence of conventional media and social media, how can parents cope in their responsibility?

Child Development and the Influence of the Media

Today, the media (specifically electronic and social media) have become part and parcel of life in our age. Hardly can one think of a family without these modern inventions. Television, movies, videos, music, video games, smartphones and computers have become basic necessities in almost every home. How basic and necessary these can be to life is a completely different question. The true situation is that many families appear to be inconceivable nowadays without these objects. Although these media outlets can provide education and entertainment to children, the negative impacts these often make on the child are not given proper attention and emphasis they deserve. Various research have been made in this regard, and the results are astonishingly revealing.⁹

Children before school age may be the most vulnerable to certain effects of media use. It is not unlikely that their addiction or even attraction to electronic media and digital technology may lead to obesity, aggression, fear, sleep disturbances, and a whole lot of negative behaviors often too difficult to be completely understood. The danger this portends cuts across boundaries and neighborhoods. It is not limited to kids in bad neighborhoods or kids with bad friends who could be victims of negative influences arising from their immediate environment. A “virtual” bad street is easily available to most youth nowadays in their very homes. Media is used as a third parent or servant to keep children engaged or distracted while their parents spend more time outside of the home or engaged with something else. Teenagers spend their lives immersed in electronic media or social media. While doing homework on the Internet, they do

⁹Some research in this area would include: Susan Villani, “Impact of Media on Children and Adolescents: A 10-Year Review of the Research,” *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, Vol. 40, no. 4 (2001): 392-401; David Buckingham and Rebekah Willett, eds., *Digital Generations: Children, Young People, and the New Media* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Ruth N. Bolton, A. Parasuraman, Ankie Hoefnagels, Nanne Migchels, Sertan Kabadayi, Thorsten Gruber, Yuliya Komarova Loureiro, and David Solnet, “Understanding Generation Y and Their Use of Social Media: A Review and Research Agenda,” *Journal of Service Management*, Vol. 24, no. 3 (2013): 245-267.

instant messaging with their friends. They have television in background and listen to music on iPod at the same time. They also take pictures and post secretly on social media. At every occasion, including trivial ones like having a new hair style, they are snapping and posting on WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat, and so on. Furthermore, time spent with media decreases the amount of time available for pursuing other healthier activities such as sports, physical activity, community service, cultural events, reading and family time. Most parents today live in pain, completely surprised that their children hardly greet them when they come back home, simply because they are too occupied with their computer games to look up a bit. The days when children run to welcome their parents back home are almost vanishing. Nevertheless, parents are implicated in this cultural shift.

And are parents not also implicated in this situation? Most parents are also preoccupied with the social media that parental work is left undone. Take for example, simple things like keeping the TV loud when kids are playing, as if one does not realize that the background TV interferes with the toddlers' ability to focus on play? Kids raised in such a media-saturated environment may not discriminate between TV and real life events until pre-school years. Sadly, still, even in their preschool years, it appears that there is presently a growing sense of helplessness among children in relation to their inability to strike a balance between appearance and reality owing to some of the impacts of electronic media and the distraction associated with the internet world. In most cases, children who get involved in real childhood activities like sports, community service and reading books have a very strong possibility of coming out more balanced, with critical mindedness, competitive and less likely to be depressed in comparison to children who stayed mostly indoors and played more of video games and spent their time watching more screen and obsessive television programmes. Such children develop what may be called 'focus mechanism' without the distractions that are found in most homes these days as a result of the wrong use of the electronic and social media. We shall further examine in clearer themes the effects of the media and why parental care is most needed in this area.

a) Brain development and learning

Much has been written on the impact of exposure to electronic media and how this affects children especially in relation to attention, memory, executive functions, language and communications, visual spatial processing, reasoning and social emotional functioning. The impact here depends on the age of the child as well as the content in question, they were exposed to. Children develop easy flay and attraction to what is trending – material and immaterial. Media technology, no doubt, can be veritable means of communication and effective teaching tool, but its effectiveness depends, to

a large extent, on the efficiency of the teachers in manipulating it to their advantage and the expected outcome they wish to accomplish. Children are often well attracted by television programmes that appeal to their fantasy. This indeed can be exploited by parents to the advantage of the formation of the child only when they have some positive impact to make on the child's well-being. A clear example is already provided above in our discussion on the spiritual training of children. Content, if designed properly can enhance learning, especially when it contains materials that the child understands, remembers and perceives in relation to his or her immediate world and the challenges associated with it.

b) Addiction to television

Addiction has to do with an immoderate sense of reliance on something, say on a substance, activity or relationship. It is an exaggerated form of co-dependency, manifested in a way that consumes the thoughts and behavior of the addict. Our attention here is mainly on the unique cause of addiction with an excessive preoccupation with the television. Symptoms of television addiction could be identified as follows: using TV as sedative, indiscriminate viewing, loss of control while viewing, feeling of anger with oneself for watching too much, inability to stop watching, and feeling miserable when kept away from watching or when there is no electricity to do so. These and lots more hold not only children hostage, but even adults. There are several issues related to media consumption by children. Such addiction in Nigerian setting is directed to some program, such as *Champions League*, *Big Brother Naija*, *Telemundo*, *Zee World* and so on. In situations where parents suffer the same addiction to the media, exercising control and discipline over the children becomes very difficult.

c) The value of time

Time is often described in the business world as being equated to the value of money. For many others, time is precious and ought to be managed with utmost care since each lost time is not recoverable. When children are not well guided, especially in our media infested world, their future can be jeopardized. In societies like the USA, it has been estimated that children watch about 4 hours of TV every day. In Nigeria, the situation is no different, except that there are inhibiting factors like poverty and epileptic power supply. In addition, the time spent listening to music, playing video games and surfing the internet and social media consumes a large portion of the child's day as against engaging in healthier activities like interacting with others or reading¹⁰

¹⁰Divya Dave and Avnish Dave, "Electronic Media and Child Behaviour," *National Journal of Medical Research*, Vol. 1, no. 2 (2011):87-89; 88.

or even engaging in sports. For a child to only sit down and be immersed in the internet and media activities enumerated above can be quite injurious to the child's health.

Little wonder research evidence suggests that many children have become victims of diabetes, overweight and other related cases. It is probably the case that before the age of 18, children especially in the developed world and in cities of the developing nations spend more time on the media than on their studies, or carry on their studies with the media to the point that the two share a strong bond of inseparable dependency. They spend more time using media than engaging in any single activity other than sleeping. As children spend more total time watching TV, they spend a significantly shorter amount of time with friends and families as compared to those who do not.

d) Nutritional side-effects of the media

As we have already pointed out, children who spend a lot of time on the computer, watching TV, or playing video games are more susceptible to diseases and disorders that could arise from inactivity, because of their lack of exercise.¹¹ Unfortunately, these "media children", who because of their age are still unable to strike a reasonable balance between reality and appearance become mere consumers and prisoners of the media goods. Furthermore, because they view thousands of commercials for unhealthy foods (snacks, sugary cereals and candy) their eating habits will be sadly corrupted. Studies have shown that there is nearly two-fold increased risk of obesity for every hour spent playing electronic games or watching television.

e) Media and academic achievements

There is significant negative link between grades and media exposure. An academic achievement of children peaks at 1-2 hours of educational programming and declines with heavier use (more than 4 hours). Playing video games can have positive effects in developing visual spatial skills such as visual tracking, mental rotation and target localization. Games (board, video, computer) may also involve problem solving skills. But on the other hand, these affect the academic output of children if not kept within a balanced usage.

f) Insufficient sleep

Children ordinarily need more hours of sleep than adults for effective academic

¹¹See, Victor C. Strasburger, Amy B. Jordan and Ed Donnerstein, "Health Effects of Media on Children and Adolescents," *Pediatrics*, Vol. 125, no. 4 (2010): 756-767.

production and alertness. It could be fashionable to install TV sets in children's rooms for the singular purpose of making children happy, or even to create for them their own world and be saved from their distraction. Something may indeed be trendy without being proper. Said differently, an idea may be fashionable but very disastrous, dangerous, harmful and unethical. And so is this unfortunate act of installing TV sets in the children's rooms. One may think that the installation of TV sets in the children's rooms is a sign of love and care, but far from such reasoning, it is in actual fact quite detrimental to the children. It impedes the growth of children's psychosocial and cognitive development and exposes them to an unlimited and unregulated watching of the TV beyond what could be considered strictly okay for them in the average.¹² It leads to poor outcomes in academic, social and physical engagements. Teenagers' use of smartphones after bedtime contributes to poor sleep. Today in Nigeria midnight free calls and chatting apps have rendered most teenagers 'talking sentinels', busy all-night discussing unimportant issues over the phone or apparently important only to themselves and their world. This habit must be vehemently discouraged by parents. Children ought to be taught the importance of sleep for a healthy living. It may not be out of place to note that there is a direct relationship between a child's alertness in school and the quality of rest that had been gained during sleep.

g) Media and its impact on behavior

The media holds a powerful influence specifically on the health and behavior of humans. People are often victims of what they watch. It is often the case that children after watching horror movies tend to be restless during sleep and even while awake are thrown into disturbing imaginations. Their exposure to movies characterized by murder, violence, and torture, do them much damage and increases the likelihood that they tend towards violent behavior. Children who watch violent films or programs on TV or play violent video games tend to be more aggressive and are more prone to confrontation with their teachers.¹³ There is actually the pull in them to translate into action the results of their learning. Their inability to exercise mature analysis and judgment compounds the issue and makes them highly susceptible to negative influences. Extreme manifestations may also include the children engaging in fights with peers and a drastic decline in academic performance. Experience suggests that girls experience more fear from media than boys. A study in India shows that vivid display of violence through the media caused stress and depression in adolescents.¹⁴ A means to optimize children's social development and long term mental health is for parents to discourage viewing of violent television programs.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

This may prove to be an even more herculean task especially for Nigerian parents since movies and music videos characterized by smoking and drinking have increased in Nigeria. Underage drinking and smoking are now associated with such media-induced 'approval' of alcohol consumption. All these make parental responsibility even more daunting.

h) On risky behaviors and sexual problems

Music, movies, television and the Internet are in themselves useful tools for self-development, cognitive development and enrichment, but when not well managed can become objects of self-destruction; very damaging to health, lifestyle and personality. Exposure to sexual content in music, movies, television, magazines and the Internet can cause unimaginable dysfunctional behaviors in children and a disturbing and accelerated adolescent sexual activity. They increase in children the risk of engaging in early sexual experimentation. In a more liberal environment, this may not be considered unhealthy even when its adverse effects constantly surprise us daily. The problem borders, to a large extent, on self-deceit, bearing in mind that the lifestyle we unfortunately parade as normal, fun and exciting, while consciously shying away from admitting the risks it embodies, with particular reference to early pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases, leaves one more confused than is desired at the end. There are cases of 'sexting' – messages of a sexual nature exchanged through mobiles among school-going adolescents. These days adolescents have gotten smarter and now use sexual codes to communicate. Unfortunately, most parents might never understand these codes on their face value. The influence of secularization has made it easy for some people to quickly reduce everything to a common decimal of "it does not matter". Nothing matters anymore, everything has been relativized and subjected to personal feelings and emotions, and nothing again is regarded as an objective norm. Parents should beware of this pitfall.

Tips for Managing Children's Media Consumption

In the article (already cited above) on "Electronic Media and Child Behaviour," Indian pediatrician, Divya Dave and behavioral therapist, Avnish Dave, provide some ideas on how to manage the media consumption patterns of children. Their suggestions are subsumed in the following recommendations:

- Be alert of the shows or TV programs your child sees. Monitor all your child's media consumption, from video games, television, movies and the Internet. Just as it is important that parents know the nutrients in the food they may offer their children, it is equally important that they be fully informed and aware of the media content

their children are exposed to.

- Avoid using TV, videos or video games as babysitter. Replace the TV with some other fun activity with the family. However, in situations where the TV would be helpful, ensure you use visual materials that are strictly designed for such purposes.
- Limit the time for media: It may be reasonable to limit the use of TV to no more than 1-2 hours per day. Discuss and make decisions on how much the child can play video games, surf the Internet if necessary, listen to music, and watch television. You can also set situation limits too, by prohibiting television before school, during meals, or before homework. Consistency needs to be applied in enforcing these regulations.¹⁵
- For proper monitoring, it is important to keep television and video player machines out of your child's bedroom.
- Turn the television off during meals, and no one should be allowed to use the phone at the dining table.
- Instead of tuning in to see if something is happening on TV, turn it on only when there is something specific you have decided is worth watching, say hourly news broadcast or an educational children's program.
- TV should never be made the focal or rallying point of the home. The physical interaction between family members should be the center of family life.
- Be active by engaging your children in important discussions while a program is on. TV viewing could be an active process and a learning opportunity when parents become co-viewers. As a parent, take the time to discuss with your children about their engagement with the electronic and social media. Ask them about the lessons they learn and how they feel about what they observe in the video games, TV shows or movies. This is an opportunity to share your feelings and grow closer with your child.
- Be especially careful about viewing just before the bedtime to avoid the possibility of nightmares arising from unhealthy emotions that were carried into sleep.
- It is important to be very clear with children about your guidelines for appropriate movie viewing and insist on reviewing proposed movie choices in advance.
- Become media literate. Catch up with the operations of the latest apps on smartphones and know about how the various social media platforms work.
- As a parent, you have to set a good example by limiting the time you spend on viewing the TV or using your mobile phone. Never deny your children the love, warmth and attention they deserve because of your addiction to either your cell phone or media programs. Be careful also with the content of your private viewing since children can easily copy such.

¹⁵Ibid., 89

- Join in discussions concerning the content of TV programs and insist on better shows for kids.

Next, we shall take a look at another social factor that influences children either positively or negatively - dressing. Sometimes the question is not about the right or wrong dress code as it is that of appropriate and inappropriate dressing.

Parents and Dress Code for Kids

Fine clothes are a passport into good society, if with them one possesses a knowledge of *savoir faire*.¹⁶ While it cannot be said that an elegant suit would make a lady or gentleman appear responsible and acceptable, there is something to be significant about an appropriate sense of dressing since a shabbily dressed person may fail to make the same impression as one who is well-dressed. Although 'the hood does not make the monk', however, the hood actually gives him an identity, and most probably preserves him. It is clear also that the knowledge of being well-dressed, not necessarily in a very expensive way, is a standard of behavior in various contexts. But to be well informed on the basic principles of dressing becomingly and suitably, gives one an ease of manner, and an unconsciousness of self, which can never be obtained, when one is conscious of looking badly, i.e., dressed in clothing which is out of date, or fits very badly, or does not blend harmoniously with one's complexion, height, or figure. In summary therefore, in the art of parenting, it is important to teach children the basics of what to wear, how to wear it and when to wear it.

There is no doubt that appearance counts in today's world. Behavioral scientists tell us that your evaluation by a stranger takes 30 seconds or less and can be so strong that it could take as much as five years to erase.¹⁷ Since up to 90 percent of you is covered by an apparel, the clothing you choose makes a significant impact. Remember, first impression matters and the strength of this impression should not be underestimated.

As the speed of the business world accelerates, the *instant communication* of your appearance increases in importance. With more pressure on time, people are more likely to make quick judgments. The appearance factor extends beyond first impressions.

¹⁶This (*savoir faire*) means the instinctive ability to know how to deal with any situation that arises. The literal translation from the French is 'know how'. It is first seen in English in the writing of the incorrigible coiner of phrase - Sir Walter Scott, *Guy Mannering*, 1815: "He had great confidence in his own *savoir faire*."

¹⁷Cf. Janine Willis and Alexander Todorov, "First Impressions: Making Up Your Mind After a 100-Ms Exposure to a Face," *Psychological Science*, Vol. 17, no. 7 (2006): 592-598.

Public speaking experts report that over half of communication is non-verbal. It is not only what you say, but how you look when you are saying it. Therefore, the way you look really matters today. The discussion so far, or even the recommendations already made, are not and should not to be a dance to the gallery or unnecessary yearning for acceptance. They are in simple words, basic principles of self-discipline, self-presentation, self-packaging and composure.

In the case of responsible parenting, the issue of proper dressing culture within the family remains very necessary. Parents should in time inculcate an acceptable dress sense into their children's consciousness so that when they grow up it may be easier to navigate the sometimes challenging notion of dress sense in society. This must be done with clear explanation because the society changes every day and gone are the days when parents simply declared rules and regulations without taking the time to explain the reasons why the rules are important or why the changes are needed. We are no longer in a world where orders are given without the concomitant reasoning behind the order. If a parent fails to make the child see the reason why he or she should adhere, the child would grow up to adopt the reason why his or her peers dress improperly, and then would quickly copy them. So, it is not just enough for a parent to tell the child "Don't wear those!" You must furnish the child with the reason behind your command. Commands are not simply to be given for the sake of it, neither is it proper to be unnecessarily strict or uncompromising without any justifiable reason. This can have very serious negative influences on the growth and formation of the child. Often, children who are raised this way live their lives in fear and without attempting to raise questions or even to resist unjust structures in society.

Often times, within our African context, there has always been rifts between mothers and their girls on proper dressing. Some parents demonize some dresses as counter-scriptural. Hence, the question of proper mode of dressing for women remains of great interest to many. Actually, God's guidelines regarding clothing and dress are very general. God expects Christian women to dress in "modest apparel, with propriety and moderation (*discretion, margin*)" (I Timothy 2:9), that is, in clothes that are neither flamboyant nor garish. A Christian man or woman should not be an 'exhibitionist' who attracts undue attention to himself or herself (by wearing an attire that is provocative, suggestive, or outrageous).

By the same token, this does not mean that Christians should be drab, colorless, or tasteless dressers. A Christian is to be a light to the world (Matthew 5:14-16), an example of right judgment, modesty and good taste. It is advised that Christians should not be so out of step with the fashions of society such that we stand out like the proverbial "sore thumb."¹⁸ Clothes can be fashionable without being immodest or impious. A Christian

woman, for instance, should especially strive to look nice for her husband and family by dressing appropriately. Same with the Christian man.

In the Old Testament, God gives this law: “A woman shall not wear anything that pertains to a man, nor shall a man put on a woman’s garment, for all who do so are an abomination to the LORD your God” (Deuteronomy 22:5). We have to understand that this instruction refers to transvestitism or cross-dressing, not to a woman’s wearing of trousers that are designed for women as some people often conclude. The simple principle is that men should look and dress like men—masculine—and women should look and dress like women—feminine. By doing so, both will glorify God. The “meek and quiet spirit” of a Christian woman will be reflected in the kind of clothing she selects (I Peter 3:1-4). She will wear what is appropriate and stylish for any given occasion, but with proper modesty and decorum. And God will look on the heart of such a woman with approval. Parents

should set the dress code in their homes with this understanding of the Biblical principle in mind.

One of the things that was glaring in the observations done for this book was that when parents set rules, which the children do not think are legitimate, the children tend to disobey them. Often, they just lie or become secretive. A girl may refrain from wearing trousers or mini-skirts at home, but at school, she makes them her best wears. So one thing that parents can do is to explain *exactly* why they think the issue is legitimately something that one can set rules about. The child may not agree. But they are more likely to understand. Surprisingly enough, experience shows that older teens are more likely than younger ones to understand that parents often have good reasons for setting the rules they do.

Second, parents should be careful about issues for which they set rules. Parents who are both strict and warm tend to allow their children considerable freedom as long as they stay within reasonable boundaries. Hence, they do not set rules about what children must wear. But they do have rules about what they cannot wear. They allow children to choose their activities. But they do not let them watch too many videos and children must have their homework done first. Setting limits like that - fairly restricted and often explained - has striking results. With such a method, children and adolescents are more likely to obey and less likely to lie. They are more likely to respect and love their parents and they are more likely to understand that parents set rules because they have their good interest at heart. They are more likely to say they share their parents’ values and

¹⁸The proverbial “to stick out like a sore thumb” means to be very conspicuous, obvious or noticeable.

agree with them.¹⁹

Still, most parents, and even most adults, do not see dressing appropriately for a given situation as something a teenager needs to learn through experience. Why not just save your daughter from the uncomfortable lures of motor-park touts, or your son from being followed around a store by security men? We know clothing communicates, we are the adults to whom, in part, it speaks. Why not translate that language for our children not just through words, but through well-thought out rules, communicated in love and empathy?²⁰

Parents can establish dress codes for their children bearing in mind the following:

1. The fashion sense of proper color combination must be taken into consideration while dressing up your child. You do not clothe the child in apparels that reflect 'color-rioting'.
2. There are different outfits designed for different occasions. You should not dress or allow your child to be dressed in clothes designed for birthday parties when actually the destination is the church. There are specific outfits for sports, school, parties, church, gardening, sleep, etc.
3. The neatness of the clothes matters a lot. Cleanliness is next to godliness. Poverty is not an excuse for dirtiness. Granted that detergents cost money, but their costs are generally not too expensive. They are not actually so much that one cannot afford to wash the child's clothes. It is more or less a matter of priority, which must be given the attention it legitimately deserves. And if he or she is of age, then the demand for cleanliness must be made of him or her. This hygienic culture is also necessary for their health.
4. The body shape and size of the child should also be considered here. Parents should not allow their children to put on clothes that are disproportionate to their body frame. Fashion is about clothes fitting the body.
5. The Christian principle of decency must be respected in drawing up dress code for our kids. That something is in vogue does not make it fashionable or decent. That young boys today 'sag' their trousers is not enough reason to make it a norm of action. Indecency must be frowned at by responsible parents and guardians.

¹⁹Darling, "Should Parents Impose a Dress Code?" *New York Times*, September 10, 2012.

²⁰KJ Dell'Antonia, "Teenage Dress Codes: Easier Said Than Done," *The New York Times* (September 13, 2012), <https://parenting.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/09/13/teenag-dress-codes-easier-said-than-done/> (accessed 07 June 2018). Also published same date on page D2 of the New York City edition with the headline, "You're Not Wearing That to School."

Other principles could also be brought into play here, with regard to other wears like shoes, caps, jewelries, bags, make-up or cosmetics, and so on. However, we shall now turn attention from bodily concerns to intellectual concerns. Beyond, dressing and fashion, we ask: What roles should parent play in the intellectual development of their children?

Chapter 3



PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY TOWARDS THE INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN

Parents and the Education of Children

In an end-of-the-year graduation ceremony in a primary school, an inscription was posted on the wall among others. The inscription read: *“Every other thing can wait but not the education of the child.”* It was a blunt piece of advice to parents and guardians; a statement of fact. The advice is not only blunt but considerably forceful. It drew the attention of its readers so much so that it became a strong point of discussion for many who came for the graduation ceremony. The message simply stressed the importance of education especially for children and young people. With such an inscription, even the little children, immediately realized that it is a primary obligation of parents to see that their child is educated. This fundamental duty of parents forms part of the gift of nurture which they owe the child. It calls for a radical application of sparing the rod and spoiling the child, which the book of Proverbs describes thus: “those who spare the rod hate their children, but those who love them are diligent to discipline them” (Prov. 13:24). We can in this circumstance talk of the rod of discipline for indolence, carelessness, irresponsibility, and incivility. When the rod of discipline is not spared, it will produce the desired values of dexterity, carefulness, hard work, industry and the fear of God. Often, parents erroneously think that the more they shout on their kids, train them with fear and sometimes, physically abuse them by creating wounds on their body and inflicting pains on their souls, the more they will get their children to act in alignment or be responsible. This assumption is purely misguided and untrue. It smacks

of a negative and uninformed understanding and application of this beautiful biblical passage. To train or educate simply means to lead out and endow. It is a journey that mostly demands dialogue, love, understanding, faith and trust.

The whole campaign about child planning is mostly based on this reason, apart from medical reasons. The education of the child requires finance, especially in a country like Nigeria and most third world countries where the government seems to be paying lip-service to the provision of free basic education. But then, even if basic education remains free, there is still the need to provide financially for the secondary and tertiary education of the child. Again, given the poor quality of education and formation in some public schools, the private institutions have sadly become another alternative to standard education even to the tertiary level. These private institutions, since they are not run with any grant from the government, are usually expensive. So, that explains why couples are advised to first and foremost evaluate their financial capacity before deciding on the number of children to have. It is a common practice to see folks who go on bearing many children, only to give them all away to neighbors, relatives and strangers once it dawns on them that their carrying capacity is at breaking point. Often, they'd be quick to dismiss any blame with "*Ọbụ Chukwu na-enye nwa (It is God who gives children)*". The natural family planning methods, which the Church proposes are there for every couple to access bountifully. We do not intend to set limit to the number of children to be raised, but to simply insist that Christian couples determine the appropriate number of children to have, plan accordingly and for the future of the children as well. Every child legitimately deserves the best of attention and training.

The project of educating the child takes place both at home and at designated institutions of learning, namely schools. Naturally, parents are the first teachers or instructors of the child. They teach the child how to behave and how to say certain words even before the child gets into the school environment. They are the ones to first teach the child the art of differentiation of persons and objects. They teach the child who should be called 'papa' and who should be called 'mama'. They teach the child the nature of things within the environment: the hotness of a burning candle; the coldness of water from the refrigerator; the fragility of a glass cup; the danger of an electric system and of the moving blades of an electric fan; the dirtiness of the garbage bin; etc. A lot of these information is passed on to the child at such an early stage by parents in preparation for the formal education the child will receive. Without this necessary background, which the child absorbs and gulps with ease, the learning process in the formal system might be difficult. Parents and guardians therefore should invest a lot of effort at this stage to educating their children. Meanwhile, even when the formal education is introduced in the life of the child, the role of parents does not cease at such point of transition. In fact, while parents become co-teachers, teachers in schools also assume the duty of co-

parenting towards the children under their care. So, both parents and teachers mutually contribute to the education of the child both in a formal and in an informal sense. This explains the emergence of the Parents-Teachers Association (PTA) in schools. In subsequent sections, these issues would be elaborated on, beginning with insights from the Jean Piaget's popular research findings on the stages of human intellectual development.

What Could Be Learnt from Piaget Stages of Intellectual Development?

The Piaget stages of development²¹ form a blueprint that describes the stages of normal intellectual development, from infancy through adulthood. This includes thought, judgment, and knowledge. The stages were named after the psychologist and developmental biologist Jean Piaget, who recorded the intellectual development and abilities of infants, children, and teens. A fair knowledge of these stages is very important for the parental guidance that is needed for proper intellectual development of children, beginning from birth.

Piaget's four stages of intellectual (or cognitive) development are:

- Sensorimotor: Birth through ages 18-24 months.
- Preoperational: Toddlerhood (18-24 months) through early childhood (age 7).
- Concrete operational: From ages 7 to 12.
- Formal operational: Adolescence through adulthood.

In Piaget's understanding, the description above is not in itself absolute. There are possibilities of exceptional cases whereby some children may experience these stages at different ages than the average ages noted above and some of them may show characteristics of more than one stage at a given time. However, even with the above observation, Piaget insisted that cognitive development always follows this sequence, that these stages cannot be skipped, and that there is a blend between each stage and the cognitive intellectual abilities of the child. Here, the child experiences a more appreciable reality of the concrete world around him or her because of newly acquired intellectual abilities.

Sensorimotor Stage

At its early stage of development, infants are drawn to what their eyes could perceive.

¹⁹Piaget's ideas on the intellectual development of children are contained in his classics which include: *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (London: Kegan Paul, 1932), *The Origins of Intelligence in the Child* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), *The Construction of Reality in the Child* (New York: Basic Books, 1954), etc.

They are in this sense merely aware of objects that are visually and immediately in front of them. They simply focus on what they see, on what they are doing, and on physical interactions with their immediate environment so much so that if at any stage their attention is directed outside the particular environment or the concrete object, a new world emerges and the old one is immediately forgotten.

Basically informed by ignorance, they constantly engage themselves in unending experiments; experimenting with every activity, each new impulse, every feeling, every noise, and every object such as shaking or throwing things, putting things in their mouths and learning about the world through trial and error and being consumed in their own world. The later stages include goal-oriented behavior, which brings about a desired result.

With the passage of time, one observes that infants progress to an awareness of objects even if they are no longer immediately perceptible. This occurs basically about the age of 7 to 9 months. This is in itself a clear indication that the memory is developing.

Gradually, infants will begin to crawl, stand and then walk, not without difficulty. They become successful after many persistent attempts. These natural, but physical, developmental stages correspond simultaneously with different levels of cognitive development. This could be a direct consequence of the physical mobility of human beings which directly takes them from one point to the other as they grow. Indeed, in infants, physical development is interwoven with cognitive development. Near the end of the sensorimotor stage, infants reach another important milestone, namely the early language development, a sign that they are developing some symbolic abilities.

Preoperational Stage

Symbolic thinking emerges in the developmental process of a child at this age. During this stage, young children are able to think about things symbolically. Some level of maturity appears to be experienced in their language usage. Together with the maturity of language use is the development of memory and imagination, which allows them to understand the difference between past and future, and to engage in make-believe. This, however, has its own limitations since their thinking is still heavily influenced by intuition and not completely logical. They are yet to grasp more complex concepts such as cause and effect, time, and comparison.

Concrete Operational Stage

At this stage, we have the elementary-age and preadolescent children. Children within

this stage demonstrate logical, concrete reasoning. To this effect, they become less and less egocentric in their thinking and at the same time become increasingly conscious of external events. These are conspicuous developmental strides with the consequence of recognition of one's uniqueness in thoughts and feelings, completely peculiar to the individual, and which forms as it is, a part and parcel of this reality and world. Added to is the development of operational thinking, namely, the ability to perform reversible mental actions such as being able to tie and untie a shoe.

Nevertheless, even though the child can perform all the actions enumerated above within this stage, most children still cannot tackle a problem with several variables in a systematic way.

Formal Operational Stage

Adolescents who reach this fourth stage of intellectual development are able to logically use symbols related to abstract concepts, such as algebra and science. They can think about multiple variables in systematic ways, formulate hypotheses, and consider possibilities. They also can ponder abstract relationships and concepts such as justice.

Although Piaget believed in lifelong intellectual development, he insisted that the formal operational stage is the final stage of cognitive development, and that continued intellectual development in adults depends on the accumulation of knowledge.

Bearing the above stages of intellectual development in mind, it is therefore important that learning, whether at home or in school, should be person-centered, and this is to be accomplished through an active process of learning. In this setting, the role of parents or teachers is to facilitate learning, rather than direct teaching. Therefore, in facilitating the intellectual development of children, parents should endeavor to do the following:

- Focus on the process of learning, rather than the end-product of it.
- Use active methods that require rediscovering or reconstructing of "truths".
- Apply collaborative as well as individual activities (so children can learn from each other).
- Identify situations that present useful problems and create disequilibrium in the child.
- Evaluate the level of the child's development, so that suitable tasks can be set.
-

Given the special and primary role of parents in the intellectual development of the child, they should be at the fore-front of facilitating the above processes even prior to the intervention of teachers.

Parental Responsibility in Re-assessing the Child's Intellectual Performance

Parents are better informed when they engage in the task of re-assessing their child's educational progress once they are aware of the developmental stages stated above. Of course, as have been noted earlier, the educational role of parents is ongoing. It does not come to an end when the child starts school but continues until the child is old enough to provide for his or her education. While the teacher basically evaluates the child, parents have the duty to continuously re-evaluate the child too. Where it is the function of the teacher to assess the child's performance, it equally behooves the parents to re-assess the performance of their child. Where the school may have some fundamental parameters for measuring the success or failure of the child, parents should also have their own standard for determining the degree of the performance of their child. From every perspective, no one should know the child better than his or her parents. The effort of the child must be accompanied by this constant and loving attention and assessment by parents. The learning response of the child should not be left to his or her whims and caprices. Parents should offer the right motivation, which should be inspired by love for excellence.

To do this effectively, parents must have the following aims in view:

- To maximize the potentials of their child.
- To expose the child to the very possibilities of his or her being.
- To assess the *Intelligence Quotient* (IQ) of the child.
- To let the child, know that God created us to bring out our best.
- To make the child understand that the world awaits his or her gift.
- To help the child understand that the time to bear fruit begins now, not in the future.
- To help the child develop self-confidence in his or her abilities.
- To help the child focus on life's bigger picture.
- To aid the child improve constantly in the spirit of genuine self-competition.
- To help the child manage time very well and to set priorities right.

At school, teachers have many children to take care of, therefore parents may be in a better position to drive home the basics that are given at school. To do this effectively, parents are to take care of the following:

- They should ensure that the homework is properly done and on time.
- They should make out time to ask questions on the subjects/topics learnt each day.
- They should evaluate the performance on the assignments given to the child at school.
- They should always check the Continuous Assessment (CA) and exam scores of the child at the end of the term.
- Praise or caution should be given to the child based on his or her end-term performance.
- Special emphasis should be placed on the key subjects like English language and Mathematics.
- There could be gift-rewards for excellent and improved performances as this could serve as effective motivational tool.
- If the child performs badly due to some distraction, care should be taken to point out and handle the source of the distraction.
- The recommendations or observations of the teachers must be taken seriously.
- If the child is required to repeat a class, parents must not insist on pushing the child forward.
- If the school offers a sub-standard education, parents should withdraw the child and send him or her to a better school (that is, if you feel strongly about and can afford this).
- If the child complains about the inefficiency of any teacher, parents should report so appropriately.

The education of the child should be taken very seriously. In most cases, parents pay for this education and thus should ensure that the best is offered to their children, for *he who pays the piper should not only dictate the tune, but should also evaluate if the quality of the tune is commensurate to what he paid for*. This awareness thus necessitates the formation of the parent-teacher association especially at all levels of pre-tertiary education.

The Necessity of Parent-Teacher Association

Most schools have the tradition of organizing regular parents and teacher's meetings, otherwise called the *Parent-Teacher Association* (PTA) meetings. The event is organized by the school authorities generally after a test or an examination to issue the progress report of the child and to discuss ways of enhancing the child's academic performance and the school's progress in general. Parents can endeavor to be both physically present in this important meeting as well as be actively involved in the deliberations. In some cases, one may find a one-sided approach where teachers take over the conversations, leaving little room for suggestions from parents. However, the concept of parent-teacher

associations may be unique. The association is often a two-way approach allowing equal participation from both parties with the objective of realizing the goal of overall child development in an effective way. It is important for every school to have a PTA for the following reasons:

- *Tracking the child's academic record:* Although the more private parent-teacher meetings also do this, PTA gives a chance for parents to suggest ways in which teachers can help students to perform better in their academics.
- *Getting teacher feedback:* The problems teachers might have with present teaching methodologies or ignorance by parents about children's development can be addressed.
- *Inculcating discipline in the child:* When children know that there is a platform for parents and teachers to connect and discuss about their progress, this may enhance personal discipline and make them more aware of the need to be in the good books.
- *Organizing events:* Teachers and parents can decide upon organizing those events that nurture a child's overall development such as sports competitions, debates, spelling competitions, and so on.
- *Nurturing child's interests:* Every child has some interests which he or she might want to develop and excel in. Various events organized by the PTA can help the children discover their hidden talents and interests.

The importance of PTA meetings cannot be overstressed. A parent should not wait to get 'second-hand' information about the proceedings of such meetings where the fate of his or her child is discussed. More so, a child's self-esteem may be hampered when parents fail to represent their children at such meetings. It is a very important aspect of parental responsibility to *be there* for their children. The resourcefulness of the parent-teacher associations is unquantifiable. They have remained the secret of the success of some high-performing schools. Meanwhile, every parent can ensure that the discussions and decisions arrived at are communicated personally to their children so as to further achieve the overall aim of the meeting and the mission of the school.

Taking Children Beyond the School Corridors

In today's competitive, dynamic and multifaceted world, extracurricular activities and classes for children are getting increasingly popular. With the growing importance of confident all-rounders as against the mono-dimensional academic crammers, there is need for Nigerian parents to make provision for extracurricular classes for their children. This can replace the often counter-productive extramural lessons which most parents use as a soft strategy to keep their children away from home during holidays. As

a substitute, parents need to start thinking the other way whereby children are trained to acquire skills which are not readily available within the academic environment, but which could prove very beneficial to their overall development. It should even take the place of the so-called 'extra lesson' to which the children are subjected at the end of the daily regular and marathon study period. However, since most schools may not have the capacity to provide such extracurricular programs, it is recommended that parents register their children in outlets that provide these socio-psychological services beyond the confines of a formal classroom. Unfortunately, in Nigeria, these institutions are not many, and the available ones often demand high fees for these specialized classes. However, for those who can afford them, the benefits greatly outweigh the cost.

Helpful extracurricular classes

In times past, families and homes were major points of learning. Children learn a lot from their parents and other siblings in every aspect of family life, but most especially, through folk tales shared among family members. This is a culture that is presently scarce, if not completely strange to many parents in most modern families. To make up for this lack and to keep abreast of changing times, there are a plethora of extracurricular classes that could be explored, these days. But then, one may be inclined to ask: Why take extracurricular classes? How do we select appropriate classes? How many classes are optimal? How do we strike a balance between having a bored petulant child and an overscheduled child? In the face of this new challenge, these questions could pose quite a dilemma for the modern Nigerian parents. The good news is that there are myriads of options available these days. Below, some guidelines and tips concerning extracurricular activities for children are provided. The focus is on the after-school classes or structured activities that children could participate in, in addition to formal school activities. These are not academic or school related. Some examples include:

- Sports: Tennis, swimming, cricket, football, golf, table tennis, badminton, skating, etc.
- Dance: Ranging from classical (examples: Ballet, Salsa), contemporary Nigerian dance (examples: Alanta, Shaku Shaku, Azonto, etc.) to the traditional dancing (examples: Afrobeat, Atilogwu, Etigi, etc).
- Music: Voice training and lessons on how to play musical instruments like flute, piano, guitar, drums, saxophone, xylophone, etc. Also, there are classes for musical staff and composition.
- Arts and crafts classes, painting, sculpture.
- Board games like chess, gymnastics, scrabble, etc.
- Language classes: Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, French, German, Spanish, Italian, etc.
- Technology-ICT classes: Programming, designing, blogging, etc.

In general: How to view and tackle extracurricular activities

- The role of parents is not to thrust their ambitions on their children, but rather to help them unearth their own passions and calling in life and actualize their potential. Exposure to the right activities and recreations is an important step in this direction.
- It is important not to view extracurricular activities mechanically just because it is the 'in-thing' these days, or merely in a bid to keep up with other families or just for your child's upward mobility. It is rather essential to look at the bigger picture than these short-term motivations.
- Essentially, ask yourself: Is this going to make my child happier in life? If your child is passionate about something good and creative, encourage the child and facilitate it.
- At the same time, it is important that children have adequate unstructured free time. This could be time to relax at home, hang-out with friends, do things spontaneously, or even get bored. Ensure that your child is not over-scheduled or over-stimulated.
- Strike a balance between extracurricular classes and unstructured playtime for your child's optimal development.

Why are extracurricular activities good for children?

Within reasonable limits, extracurricular classes can be fun and beneficial for the child's overall development. Here are some benefits:

- They can be a creative outlet and a refreshing change from routine and academic pressures.
- Depending on the activity, these classes can play a big role in the overall physical and intellectual development of children.
- They can be opportunities for the child to interact socially with peers. It does not actually matter if one lives in an environment densely populated by children or not. Every situation has its own peculiar gains; it borders mostly on planning.
- An activity where you and your child can participate together like swimming classes or knocking around a tennis ball is also a great way for parents and children to spend time together and bond effectively.
- Of course, who knows? Your little one might be a budding Michelangelo or Ben Enweonwu, a Mozart, an emerging Onyeka Onwenu, a Walt Disney, an Oprah Winfrey, a Tee Mac or a Steve Jobs. They just need that opportunity and gentle encouragement and validation.
- Give your child confidence and expose him or her to different healthy situations

and spaces.

- Physical activities also get your child started on the path to good health early enough.
- Help in exposing your children to different activities at an early age and equip them with tools to select some fun hobbies and passions that can be their lifelong companions. These can enhance their lives as adults and could become a sure way to keep them away from becoming unproductive or exploring unhealthy habits.

When should these activities start?

There is no right or wrong answer as to the proper time these extracurricular activities can begin. This depends on the child's needs, the family situation and the specific activity concerned. Here are some guidelines:

- If you happen to live in an area where there are not too many kids, extracurricular activities can be a welcome way to have your child experience some fun with his or her peers while learning something useful. So, there is nothing wrong if parents decide to start their children early on classes.
- And in a situation where the child starts early, make sure that the class is not too strict and unduly structured. It ought to be fun for the little ones. Otherwise, they can get cranky and over-stimulated.
- Some parents enroll their children to start some activities as early as 1 or 2 years and others start some activities around 5 or 7 years. In general, most parents and childhood experts agree that 4 and 5 years are appropriate for starting to participate in extracurricular classes. By this age, children can be reasonably independent and can take classes without their parents, have good attention span and be well ready for formal classes.
- The right time to start also depends on the activity and the teachers. For example, for piano classes, most teachers want children to start when they are old enough to have the right attention span and the fine motor skills for musical instruments and young enough to have the flexibility - typically around 6 or 7 years. Of course it could also depend on the child. Some child prodigies exhibit significant skills as early as 3.

How many activities and for what duration?

- It is very important that children have sufficient unstructured playtime. As has already been stated, children should not be over-scheduled or over-stimulated.
- The number of classes could also depend on when the children get back home. But if they are back home at a decent time, many children and their families can handle

1 or 2 activities or classes. If there are 2 classes, then one can be physical or sports related and the other could be more cultural like art or music. You can rotate classes as well and for some months give them a break from a particular class.

- You need to strike your own special balance in making sure that your child is well engaged in fun and useful activities and has time for spontaneous play.
- In general, most of these classes and activities are from 45 minutes to an hour. This is appropriate for their attention span and just in time for toilet time.

It is also important to keep the following in mind when organizing extracurricular activities for your children:

- Do not force them. It is okay if your child is reluctant. Try in another few months. Follow their interests. Of course, you might need to gently encourage your child. But first follow their interest and give them variety. You can learn a lot about your child in this process.
- Do not label them rigidly. Give different activities a try. For example, if your child is shy, do not think that drama is off the limits. You will be surprised to know that many top actors today were once shy as kids. It might get them to express themselves creatively in different roles. Give your child a chance to explore different activities.
- One tip to make classes fun and sustain their interest in an activity is to have some of their friends go for the classes as well. Wait and see how they listen to you and look forward to their class!
- In general, encourage them to be regular for the class and on time.
- At the same time, do not be too strict. It is an extracurricular class after all and it is supposed to be fun and get the creative juices flowing. Alongside homework and exams, the added stress of extracurricular classes can really bog children down.²²

“Play is the work of the child” – Maria Montessori

Play is essential to healthy development of children and adolescents. Research shows that 75% of brain development occurs after birth.²³ The activities engaged in by children both stimulate and influence the pattern of the connections made between the nerve cells. This process influences the development of fine and gross motor skills, language,

²²We adapted some of these tips from, Parentree-editors, “Extracurricular activities – why, which, when & how,” <http://www.parentree.in/Parentree-editors/journal-658/Extracurricular-activities--why--which--when---how.html> (accessed 22 March, 2018).

²³Jona K. Anderson-McNamee and Sandra J. Bailey, *The Importance of Play in Early Childhood Development*, (2010) Montana State University, <http://msuextension.org/publications/HomeHealthandFamily/MT201003HR.pdf> (accessed 21 March, 2018).

socialization, personal awareness, emotional well-being, creativity, problem solving and learning ability.²⁴

The most important role that play can have is to help children to be active, make choices and practice actions to mastery. They should have experience with a wide variety of content (art, music, language, science, math, social relations) because each is important for the development of a complex and integrated brain. Play that links sensory-motor, cognitive, and social-emotional experiences provide an ideal setting for brain development.

According to Montessori, the essential dimensions of play are:

- Voluntary, enjoyable, purposeful and spontaneous
- Creativity expanded using problem solving skills, social skills, language skills and physical skills
- Helpful to expand on new ideas
- Helpful to the child to adapt socially
- Helpful to thwart emotional problems

If play is the work of the child like Maria Montessori shares, toys are the tools. Through toys, children learn about their world, themselves, and others. Toys teach children to:

- Figure out how things work
- Pick up new ideas
- Build muscle control and strength
- Use their imagination
- Solve problems
- Learn to cooperate with others

The content of play should come from the child's own imagination and experiences. Unfortunately, the play experience for today's child is often quite different from that of their parents. With the ever-expanding influence of electronic media including TV, videos, video games and the Internet, children spend much of their time being passively entertained by minimally interacting (by way of a keyboard or control pad) with an electronic device. Even today's toys are more often structured by onboard computers that dictate the play experience. This robs children of unstructured play with other kids

²⁴Cf. Barbara A. Wasik and Jill L. Jacobi-Vessels, "Word Play: Scaffolding Language Development Through Child-Directed Play," *Early Childhood Education Journal*, Vol. 45 (2017): 796-776.

as well as individual playtime spent in creative play. In the face of these changes, parents need to understand the *play needs* of their children and provide an environment to meet those needs to the best of their ability. This may include ensuring that they attend schools that have enough open space for play, or periodically taking them to parks and to their hometowns where they would be less confined to the limited space of the urban areas. In relation to the importance of play in the upbringing of kids, our next interest will be to examine the parental care that is needed in ensuring that children enjoy good physical health.

Chapter 4



PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY TOWARDS THE HEALTH OF CHILDREN

The fragility of human life shows how necessary the culture of nurture is to mankind. As already pointed out, the task of nurturing is fundamentally the primary assignment of parents. Apart from other aspects of child rearing, it involves quite importantly, taking care of the health of children. Children must stay healthy if they must survive and be strong enough to pursue their life goals and interests. Responsible parents have the task of safeguarding their children's health and keeping them in shape mentally, physically and psychologically. Being healthy, as we know, simply implies enjoying the state of good health.

The most famous modern definition of health was articulated during the *Preamble to the Constitution of the World Health Organization* (WHO) as adopted by the *International Health Conference* held in New York from 19 to 22 June 1946. It was eventually signed on 22 July 1946 by the representatives of 61 States and entered into force on 7 April 1948. It states that health is “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being” and so cannot be negatively defined or narrowed down to “the absence of disease or infirmity”.²⁵ The *Definition* has not been amended since 1948. During the *Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion* in 1986, the WHO remarks that health is: “a resource for

²⁵ World Health Organization, *Official Records of the World Health Organization*, No. 2: *Summary Report on Proceedings Minutes and Final Acts of the International Health Conference Held in New York from 19 June to 22 July 1946* (New York, Geneva: WHO Interim Commission, 1948), 16.

everyday life, not the objective of living. Health is a positive concept emphasizing social and personal resources, as well as physical capacities.”²⁶ In other words, beyond the duties of health-care providers, parents have a duty to assist their children with having and preserving this resource for daily living.

Determinants of Health

The health of individuals and their communities are affected by a wide range of factors. People’s good or bad health could be determined by their environment and situations - what is happening and what has happened to them. According to WHO, the following factors probably have a bigger impact on our health than access and use of health care services:

- Where we live
- The state of our environment
- Genetics
- Our income
- Our educational level
- Our relationship with friends and family

Meanwhile, in talking about health, especially of children, two major areas are of paramount importance: the physical and the mental or psychological.

Physical Health

For humans, physical health means a good body health. Generally, a body is kept healthy because of regular physical activity (exercise), good nutrition, and adequate rest. As people experience improved nutrition, health care, standards of living and quality of life, their health condition continues to improve. In fact, most people, when asked for a definition of health refer only to physical health. Physical health relates to anything concerning our bodies as physical entities. Physical health has been the basis for active living campaigns and the many nutrition-drives that have swept the industrialized world. People are exposed to so much ‘physical health’ data these days that it is hard to decide what is relevant and what is not.

Another word for physical health is *physical wellbeing*. Physical wellbeing is defined as something a person can achieve by developing all health-related components of his or

²⁶ WHO Ottawa, “Report of an International Conference on Health Promotion, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, 17-21 November 1986,” *Health Promotion: An International Journal*, Vol. 1, no. 4 (1986): i-v, 405-460. For a recent assessment of the Ottawa conference see, John Catford, “Ottawa 1986: Back to the Future,” *Health Promotion International*, Vol. 26, no. 2 (2011): 163-167.

her lifestyle. Fitness reflects a person's cardiorespiratory endurance, muscular strength, flexibility, and body composition. Other contributors to physical wellbeing may include proper nutrition, bodyweight management, abstaining from drug abuse, avoiding alcohol abuse, responsible sex life (sexual health), hygiene, and getting the right amount of sleep. We find this growing awareness today in Nigeria with the thriving business of fitness centers in most of the cities across the country.

In recognizing the limitations of excessive focus on physical well-being, especially in narrowing it down to fitness centers which are not available to the poor rural dwellers, we could also talk about "reasonable care" of physical health. The basics include a balanced diet, regular exercise and adequate sleep. Reasonable care of physical health is important if we are to save our society from suffering an epidemic of obesity and its related problems of diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease. Fresh fruits and vegetables, lean meats, appropriate portion sizes, limited sugar and salt are the requirements for a healthy diet. Even one who necessarily frequents restaurants or fast-food eateries has the chance of choosing healthier options.

In terms of physical exercise, two-and-a-half hours per week of aerobic exercise is recommended. This does not necessitate membership in a gym; brisk, sustained walking outdoors is excellent for promoting cardiac, pulmonary and musculoskeletal health.

As for sleep, an average of eight hours is still recommended. Understanding the limitations of the human body is important in the practice of the virtues of humility and prudence.

What is mental health or emotional health?

Mental or emotional health refers to one's overall psychological well-being. It includes the way one feels about oneself, the quality of one's relationships, and one's ability to manage one's feelings and to deal with life's difficulties.

Good mental health is not just the absence of mental health problems. Being mentally or emotionally healthy is much more than being free of depression, anxiety, or other psychological issues. More than the absence of mental illness, mental and emotional health refers to the presence of positive characteristics. Similarly, not feeling bad is not the same as feeling good. While some people may not have negative feelings, they still need to do things that make them feel positive in order to achieve mental and emotional health.

People who are mentally and emotionally healthy have:

- A sense of contentment.
- A zest for living and the ability to laugh and enjoy themselves.
- The ability to deal with stress and bounce back from adversity.
- A sense of meaning and purpose, in both their activities and their relationships.
- The flexibility to learn new things and adapt to change.
- A balance between work and play, rest and activity, etc.
- The ability to build and maintain fulfilling relationships.
- Self-confidence and high self-esteem.

These positive characteristics of mental and emotional health allow people to fully participate in life through productive, meaningful activities and strong relationships. These positive characteristics also help one cope properly when faced with life's challenges and stresses.

The role of resilience in mental and emotional health

Being emotionally and mentally healthy does not mean never going through bad times or experiencing emotional problems. We all go through disappointment, loss, and change. And while these are normal ingredients of life, they can still cause sadness, anxiety, and stress. The difference is that people with good emotional health have an ability to bounce back from adversity, trauma, and stress. This ability is called resilience. People who are emotionally and mentally healthy have the tools for coping with difficult situations and maintaining a positive outlook. They remain focused, flexible, and creative in bad times as well as good.

One of the key factors of resilience is the ability to balance stress and emotions. The capacity to recognize one's emotions and express them appropriately helps one to avoid getting stuck in depression, anxiety, or other negative mood states. Another key factor is having a strong support network. Having trusted people to turn to for encouragement and support boosts one's resilience in tough times. This is remarkably needed since people die daily of loneliness and depression nowadays. Loneliness, which is a complicated emotional consequence of isolation, involves anxiety over lack or loss of relationship with others. Thus, loneliness does not simply disappear when one is surrounded by other people. Resolving loneliness requires the necessary connection and communication. Loneliness in this sense ought to be distinguished from a deliberate act of being alone. But loneliness as described here could lead to depression, which is a monster that must be fought with every strength and vigor. As mentioned already, there is a difference between being alone and loneliness. One can choose to be alone for particular reasons; for meditation, recollection, sober reflection and for inner strength

and energy. There are and could be countless reasons for the option of aloneness that is discoverable in silence and the positive withdrawal from the noisy and busy traffic of our daily life routine.

It is frustrating, disastrous, depressive and emotionally destabilizing. We consider these clarifications to be very important before we go into specific ways of handling issues of physical and mental health of children.

Physical health is connected to mental and emotional health

Taking care of one's body is a powerful first step towards mental and emotional wellbeing. The mind and the body are interlinked. When physical health is improved, this will automatically lead to an experience of greater mental and emotional wellbeing. For example, physical exercise not only keeps the heart and lungs healthy, it also releases endorphins, powerful chemicals that energize and improve a person's mood. This is same for children. Children deserve stability in both physical and emotional health as much as you do. To get your child to enjoy same, bear in mind the following:

- *Your child should get enough rest.* To have good mental and emotional health, it is important to take care of your child's body; that includes getting enough sleep. Your child needs at least 10-12 hours of sleep each night in order to function optimally. This may decrease a bit as the child goes into adulthood.
- *Learn about good nutrition and practice it.* The subject of nutrition is complicated and not always easy to put into practice. But the more you learn about what you eat and how it affects your child's energy and mood, the better you can make him or her feel.
- *Exercise to relieve stress and lift your child's mood.* Exercise is a powerful antidote to stress, anxiety, and depression. Look for small ways to add physical activity to your child's day, like taking the stairs or going for a walk. To get the most mental health benefits, engage the child for 30 minutes or more of exercise per day.
- *A dose of sunlight every day.* Sunlight lifts your mood, so try to get your child to enjoy at least 10 to 15 minutes of sunshine per day. This can be done while exercising, gardening, or socializing.
- *Restrict children from alcohol and cigarettes and other drugs.* These are stimulants that may make someone feel good in the short term, but have long-term negative consequences for mood and emotional health. So, children must be kept as far away as possible from indulging in these. Many of our youths who became addicts, even to medications like Codeine and Tramadol, whose lives have been pretty messed up, started getting acquainted with these substances while still very young.

More specifics on how to take care of children's health

The duty of making a child realize the importance of a healthy body and mind lies with the parents. A healthy mind is cultivated by a healthy body (*Mens sana in corpore sano*). It is important therefore to learn how the adoption of exercise and a good diet in daily routine can ensure a healthy body and mind. One of the foremost duties of parents is to teach and encourage their children to lead a healthy life. Parents can have a positive impact on the health of their children simply by setting good examples for their wards.

As is common knowledge, children and teens who are overweight and in poor physical shape are likely to suffer from a host of health-related problems. Hence, it is imperative for parents to participate in sports and physical activities together with their children. Parents should encourage their children to take part in games and physical activities on a regular basis and try to persuade them into making such a part of their lives.

On Exercise and Diet

- To keep a child in good health, parents should accompany their children on daily walks since walking is an exercise that is considered extremely useful.
- Parents should try to give swimming lessons to their children since swimming is an extremely useful exercise which ensures good physical health.
- Tennis and bicycling are regarded as excellent physical activities and parents should ensure that their children are appropriately engaged in such activities.

Physical exercise together with a proper diet can ensure the proper health of children.

- Calcium is a necessity in the growth of young children. Calcium assists in developing strong bones and teeth. Milk in addition to milk products are excellent sources of calcium. Hence, parents ought to see that a child gets sufficient amount of milk and milk products for the overall development of their body.
- Children should be served with vegetables rich in calcium such as broccoli, mustard greens, collard greens, and pumpkin leaf.
- High-calcium beans such as black turtle beans, great northern beans, baked beans and navy beans either prepared differently or in salads are also extremely beneficial for the health of growing children.
- Soy drinks, such as *Kunu* or drinks prepared with soybeans, is also ideally suited for the proper growth and development of children.
- It is not a bad idea to provide one's child with a snack or two apart from his or her three daily meals. However, we should be mindful of making junk part of their meal.

- To ensure the proper health of a child, he or she should be introduced to a diverse range of foods, for example grains, vegetables and fruits, low-fat dairy products, and lean meat or beans.
- Food cooked with less fat are considered beneficial for children. Parents should see to it that baked, roasted, or poached foods are served instead of food that are fried.
- Parents should endeavor to restrict the quantity of additional sugar in a child's diet since sugar consumed in unchecked quantities can lead to several health complications. Cereals with low or no added sugar should be preferred. Water or low-fat milk is considered beneficial in comparison to sugar-sweetened sodas and fruit-flavored drinks.
- Children generally have always the penchant of eating what is tasty and not what is healthy and this ought to be properly monitored. It is therefore important to consult a physician whenever a problem related to the health of a child arises. Even if the problem seems minor, it is advisable to seek a physician's help since children are delicate and require special attention.

The Inculcation of Classical Hygiene

Hygiene is very critical to good health. Parents, caregivers and peers can influence the way children approach personal hygiene, which will stay with them for life. Educating children on good hygiene is the best way to avoid the spread of infection and disorders. This is not just for childhood complaints. Teaching the principles of correct hygiene at an early age can help keep one healthy in later life, and could become a resource for teaching future generations. Principles of hygiene should be made part of everyday life and the best way for parents to teach their children about good hygiene is to lead by example.

The incidence of illness relating to personal hygiene is more apparent in children as they are learning to take care of themselves and are exposed to many germs while in the school environment or in a play area. Below are some important considerations.

Oral hygiene

It goes without saying that the teaching of good oral hygiene is essential for kids, especially in the pre-adolescent age. Their milk teeth are bound to fall out and they must know how to prevent this happening to their adult teeth. Along with brushing technique, the importance of dietary influences should be explained and alternatives to sweets, biscuits and fizzy drinks should be made available.

Hand washing

Hand-washing is the single most important factor relating to the spread of infection,

not just for children but for adults of all ages.

Children should be taught early to wash their hands before eating, after using the toilet, after handling animals, when they come home from school or other outing, if they are ill, or if they are spending time with a newborn.

Hand washing is essential to avoid developing threadworms, which cause itching around the anus and genitals, and are contracted from poor toilet hygiene or from animals. When a child is ready to go to school, at least at the nursery stage, they are expected to be able to use the toilet themselves and wash their own hands. Parents and caregivers must make sure this is happening, otherwise infections and diseases can spread.

Fungal infections

Athlete's foot and ringworms are also less likely to spread if correct hand washing is achieved. Children should be taught how to effectively wash their hands, including between the fingers and under the nails; employ the use of a nail brush if needed. Drying properly is also important to prevent fungal infections from becoming worse. Children should understand the importance of these actions also, as well as using an individual towel always and unflinching if they have an infectious complaint.

Nails

Nail biting should be discouraged, particularly if the nails are being swallowed. The nails offer easy transmission for germs to live and breed. Nail biting permits the transfer of these bugs to the mouth, which can then lead to the digestive tract causing many problems. An incidence of diarrhea can badly affect a child and they can become quite ill from electrolyte imbalance and dehydration. This can happen very quickly in the young. Even if correct hand washing takes place, there will continue to be some germs under and around the nail, if left they will not normally cause any harm, but transfer to the mouth can induce problems. Keeping nails short will help to reduce the amount of germs under the nail.

Hair care

A suitable hair length and style is a very easy way of minimizing the risk of nits and dandruff. These types of bacteria are spread by contact, and so there is need to decrease the chance of transmission. This may generally be the case for boys but keeping the hair tidy is the most important thing in all cases.

Food hygiene

Children should be encouraged to wash their hands before meals and snacks and should be discouraged from eating off the floor. This is especially important if there are pets in

the house.

The use of cutlery at table allows the child to learn table manners. This helps to reduce the chances of transfer of germs from the hands to the mouth. However, when there is need to use hands, for instance in eating fufu or a big chunk of chicken, then it is necessary to wash the hands thoroughly.

Teaching the correct principles of hygiene should begin at an early age. It will help to prevent the spread of infections and diseases that can damage the digestive tract, respiratory tract, and the external features of the body.

Children will follow the example set for them by their parents, so adults should lead by example always. Less incidence of illness means fewer absences from school and less time needed to be taken off work.

Infant and Newborn Hygiene

Caring for a baby can be hard, especially when looking after their hygiene needs, and often these skills are needed a lot more frequently. It can be very daunting to be responsible for the needs of a newborn, but with a little practice, some basic instructions, common sense and a routine, this can be properly managed. These tasks become easier and can provide valuable one-to-one contact for you and your child.

Washing and bathing

United Kingdom National Health Service (NHS) suggests that there is no need to bathe a child every day.²⁷ This is also a recommendation that is generally found in many Western countries which some people in other nations of the world do not seem to share. Some medical experts in the tropics, like Nigeria, insist that the recommendation of the National Health Service of the United Kingdom cannot be generally applied to every country and nation of the world, because of many variables like difference in climatic conditions. Nevertheless, a reasonable number of health workers still maintain that the sensitivity of the baby's skin must be given the attention it deserves, such that in our tropical weather, care must be taken in cleaning the baby's body. Given therefore that a baby's skin can be quite dry and sensitive, these medical experts maintain that plain water and either a plain soft wash cloth or cotton wool or pads should be used.

²⁷ National Health Service, "Washing and Bathing your Baby," <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/washing-your-baby/> (accessed 03 May, 2018). This website has a lot of recommendations on how to take care of newborns, and most of the instructions in this section of the work are adapted from the website.

Often in the first few months, soaps, shampoos, talc and moisturizers are not needed unless one feels confident that the child's skin can cope with it.

Strict attention, according to medical experts, should be given to drying the skin, especially in and around the skin creases such as the underarms, under the neck and between the fingers and toes. This routine should be carried out at least once a day or more often, if necessary.

Care of the umbilicus

Medical caregivers advise that during the first week, until the umbilical cord remnants have been shed, the area should be cleansed at least once a day, often twice to prevent it from becoming sore and infected and to come off without problems. In order to achieve an optimal result, they strongly recommend the use of clean warm water and some pieces of cotton wool or gauze. This according to them has to be done in a careful manner by gently wiping the area once and discarding the cotton at once. This must be repeated until any hard, scabbed areas are softened, or have been removed and the area is dry. Any areas of bleeding, excessive redness and pus must be reported to the nurse or midwife as it may have become infected.

Nappy changing

A baby will require its nappy to be changed frequently, after urinating, defecating or both. To prevent sore skin and foul aromas around the nappy area, soiled nappies should be removed and replaced when necessary.

Before changing a nappy, ensure all the required materials are at hand. Often during the first few weeks, a newborn's skin may be too sensitive to require the use of baby wipes, so a bowl of warm water and some cotton wool may be more useful (this is also better for the environment). Medical experts are of the opinion that when cleaning girls, it is especially important that a 'front to back' motion is used to prevent contamination of the urethra and bladder from bacteria in the faeces. Special attention should be given to drying the creases and often the use of a lubricant such as Vaseline can help prevent these areas from becoming sore.

Looking after a baby can be a very hard work, but if care and attention are given to maintaining a good standard of hygiene, many sores and infections can be prevented for a happier, healthier baby and in turn, a happier parent.

Combating Poor Hygiene in Teens

During puberty, the body goes through some very important changes increasing the

need for a regular regime for maintaining personal hygiene. Many teenagers and indeed parents find these changes embarrassing and difficult to discuss and many teenagers could be left in the dark about what they need to do and the products available to them.

Body odor

Puberty causes the body to produce greater quantities of oils and sweat that can clog up the pores leading to spots acne or sores. This, coupled with increased activity, can lead to foul smelling and offensive body odor. Parents should be able to discuss this subject with their children in an informal and gentle manner so as not to make a big issue of it. Teenagers should be able to have free and private access to the bath or shower. They should also be allowed to choose their own cleansing products, and to be encouraged to bathe regularly.

Boys should be taught about the occurrence of nocturnal ejaculation and the need for a morning shower, while girls should be educated on their menstrual cycle and how this can add to odors.

Parents should discuss the variety of anti-perspirants or deodorants available and explain why they are needed. Many teenagers falsely and ignorantly believe they can simply apply deodorant as an alternative to bathing. Parents or caregivers must explain that temporarily masking odors does not stop the problem.

Hair removal

Many teenagers crave for hair removal as they become adults. Again, they should be educated on why it is done and the products available. They should be taught the correct technique as many of the products can cause very serious injuries if they are not used correctly.

Oral hygiene

Being busy with school, establishing a social life and a general increase in the consumption of junk food can all have a detrimental effect on the teeth. Good oral hygiene practices should be part of every life from the moment the child grows their first tooth. It should be a twice daily activity and should become second nature. If parents feel your teenager is neglecting their teeth, they should bring the subject up for discussion. They should talk about the consequences of bad breath and how rotten teeth can jeopardize their career options, not forgetting how painful dental problems can be. Continue to make their dental appointments for them and encourage attendance.

Menstrual issues

Many girls rely on the advice given by their friends, but the mother is the best person to

give accurate information and support in this regard. Parents are advised to always set out a good, private time to interact with their female children on this topic and allow plenty room for questions. Parents must reassure their daughters that there is nothing to be embarrassed about and that it is a fact of life. They can provide information of the various products available and explain the advantages and disadvantages of each one clearly. She must be educated on the correct usage and disposal of the items. Care must also be taken to always be sure to include the importance of hand-washing with this subject.

If open discussion is not a comfortable option, there are many leaflets and books that specialize in this field. By leaving one or two next to your child's bed, she can learn in privacy, and the parent can offer a point for questions at an appropriate time.

Many modern teenagers are leaps and bounds ahead of their parents and may even be practicing some of these tasks already. They are usually very unaware of the necessity for extra care with hygiene needs as they discover their sexuality and attractiveness to the opposite sex. A young girl narrated an unpleasant experience when she discovered that she was menstruating for the first time. She had to be informed rudely by her mother when she complained. Concerned, she made the decision to not allow her younger ones experience the same embarrassment she had in the hands of their mother by taking it upon herself to enlighten her younger ones before they get to experience what she experienced. Parents must not shy away from this responsibility, especially the mothers.

Caring for a sick child

Maintenance of health does not only involve the intake of things to keep the body functioning well, it equally includes the elimination of diseases and antibodies or impaired tissues which have become harmful from the body. Hence, with all the wonderful diet and physical exercises, one could still fall victim to bad health. When a child becomes the victim, what should parents do? A child could fall victim to ailments like appendicitis, liver or kidney failure or prevalent tropical malaria and typhoid. Whenever a child falls sick, parents should respond to the emergency by observing the following:

- When a child falls sick, the parents should take the child immediately to a pediatrician for proper diagnosis and treatment. If the child is suffering from a specific problem that affects the eye, ear or skin, the proper specialist should be consulted.
- Parents should provide the child with foods or fruits that could stimulate his or her appetite, to facilitate the effectiveness of drugs taken.

- Parents should avoid indiscriminate self-medication to the child. *To think you can cure your child means that you can as well kill your child.* Life is too precious to be toyed with;
- Parents should have First Aid boxes at home in case of domestic accidents or insect bites, so as to sustain the child before getting to the nearest health center or hospital.
- Above all, the child needs *tender loving care* (TLC) from the parents. Any attitude of love and care built around the child when sick could hasten his or her recovery back to good health.

When a child gets sick, parents should not allow themselves to be thrown into a state of acute anxiety and despair. With an attitude of faith and readiness, they should respond to such situations. They should always be mindful that such a situation might always occur and so, must be ready at all times. Efforts could be made to forestall the occurrence of avoidable ones, because “*prevention is better than cure.*” Parents should also be very observant so that their child does not hide a disease until it gets out of hand. The life of your child is very precious and is worth every amount of attention you can afford.

Chapter 5



PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY TOWARDS THE PSYCHOLOGICAL STABILITY OF THEIR CHILDREN

Everything Begins in the Mind

Once when he was preaching, Jesus said to those around him “Hear and understand: not what goes into the mouth defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man.” (Matt 15:10-11) This is to affirm the power of what lies within each person’s heart or mind as the case may be. Often, this inner content of the mind can either be positive or negative, but in the case of this Gospel narrative it is about the negative things that defile human beings. Upon Peter’s insistence, Jesus would further explain that “out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.” (v.19) In order that our minds be purified and so be able to bring forth good things, St. Paul admonishes that we preoccupy our minds with things that are true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, gracious, excellent, and praiseworthy (cf. Phil 4:8). Our actions, behavior, attitude and dispositions are thus first processed internally before they are manifested externally.

The mind could therefore be described as the seat of human actions. Human actions are influenced by the activities of the mind. A healthy mind breeds healthy activities and an unhealthy mind breeds unhealthy activities. In simple terms, the mind plays immense role in achieving every kind of success and goal. This could either be minor or major, but visibly tangible in everyday life. To be optimally productive, the mind must be properly cultivated and trained. The training of the mind is not an easy task, but it is

a necessary engagement. Every parent should be aware of this if the success of the child is to be taken seriously. It is the responsibility of parents therefore to help their children in this way, to expose them to the immensity of the power of the mind and train them in the rightful use of same.

In every human endeavor, the need for clarity of thought and the strength that it offers is immense. It ignites the passion to succeed and sharpens the path to its attainment. Clarity of thought enables people to place priorities right and to pursue their accomplishment according to their level of importance, and with the approach that fits best. With minor or day-to-day goals, one usually knows what he or she wants to do or achieve, but when it comes to major goals, most people don't know what they really desire. They desire to do something big, but they don't know what. They might have a vague idea, but this is not enough. And in matters of this kind, the excellence of clear thinking and reasoning makes its optimal expression.

The fundamental question that demands serious attention here is the basic search for that which the individual wants as a person. This can be framed in very simple interrogative form: "What do I want?" To be able to raise this question and to provide answers to it form the basis of human excellence and success. It is in the conscious aspiration to respond meaningfully to the demands of what one wants that the path of true vision and the means to its accomplishment are not only properly cultivated, but fundamentally given concrete expression. To accomplish anything, and to use the mind power, one has to know exactly what it is they want to do. To focus the mind power on a goal, one needs to have a clear and well-defined goal. How can this be done?

There is need for a well thought-out plan in every human engagement. For any reasonable venture, one must first think or reflect, to find out what it is that needs to be accomplished. This, of course is a hard job, but one that is worth the effort. Consequently, to do this creditably requires deep but uncomplicated thinking, investigation and timing. While the need for a clear thinking cannot be underestimated, the courage to translate thought to action is inevitable. When the courage to translate thought to action is lacking, a person can easily become a perpetual daydreamer. In simple terms, the joy of a clear thinking is its tangible realization. After the discovery of the actual goal to be accomplished, there is need to come up with a plan for action. All of this requires planning, which means using the power of the mind.

Motivation and Responsible Parenting

Motivation has become a popular, and in fact, an overused word today. There are numerous motivational coaches and speakers, motivational books and articles on

display nowadays. What is motivation, and why do we need it? Has it any import in the training of the child? Is it an effective tool in the hands of parents?

Motivation is a driving force. In order to accomplish anything, one needs a driving force, otherwise nothing will happen. It is an energy that ignites a person to great and laudable actions. When motivation is fortified by plan, doors of greatness are opened. An unplanned life is without doubt the pathway to self-destruction and regrets - unfortunately, sometimes irredeemable regrets. A wish is not strong enough to make one take action. A wish is a weak desire or a mere desire and could remain untapped if not fanned into flame by the fire of motivation. Only a strong desire can drive a person forward, to act and accomplish aims and goals.

Motivation has much to do with the emotions and the imagination, which means that if one really wants to increase it, one has to work on one's feelings and imagination. Motivation is not just limited to the benefit of mature individuals who can propel themselves towards achieving their desire, but could be used to raise the self-confidence of the child in seeing the possibility of achieving a particular goal. When a child is properly motivated, he or she attains the unexpected in the area of sports, examination, acting on stage, singing, etc. The book, *Gifted Hands* by Ben Carson and the movie *Akeelah and the Bee* are lucid examples of what motivation can do in unfolding the precious treasure in children. To achieve this, parents must first of all, believe in their child.

Tips for increasing the motivation of a child:

- Help the child to think, meditate and find out whether he or she really wants to achieve a particular desire, and whether it is worth the effort and time.
- Help the child to make the goal very clear. Writing it down will help.
- Lead the child to think often about this goal or desire.
- Help him or her to visualize this goal as already accomplished, and to close his or her mind to contrary thoughts.
- Procure books or articles about the subject of the goal and encourage the child to read them.
- Teach the child to read about people who have achieved success. This is where biographies come in handy.
- Make the child to think often about the benefits he or she will gain by achieving the goal.
- Help him or her to visualize and think about how he or she would feel after achieving the goal.
- Urge the child to repeat positive affirmations such as: "I have the desire and inner

strength to achieve my goal.” This affirmation should be repeated often, with faith and conviction.

- Now engage the child with doing something small concerning the goal. Success in little things leads to greater success.

Motivation is the powerful engine that moves one towards success and accomplishments in every area. Parents as well as kids need it. It has always worked, not just in the sense of leading to instant success, but more importantly in coping with life’s challenges.

On the Power of Positive Thinking

Positive thinking is a mental attitude that admits into the mind thoughts, words and images that are conducive for growth, expansion, success, resilience and perseverance. It is a mental attitude that expects good and favorable results. In other words, a positive mind anticipates happiness, joy, health and a successful result while *living through* difficulties.

It may be too much to claim that ‘*whatever the mind expects, it finds*,’ as the positive thinking creed maintains. For sure, not everyone accepts or believes in positive thinking. Some consider the subject as complete nonsense, and others scoff at people who believe and accept it. Among the people who accept it, not many know how to use it effectively to achieve results. Yet, it seems that many are becoming attracted to the subject, as evidenced by the many books, lectures and courses on it. It is a subject that is gaining popularity. The Book, *The Power of Positive Thinking* by Vincent Norman Pearle, has proved to be quite a huge resource for effective living in this regard.²⁸

Perhaps, it is fair to say that *whatever we think affects us*. What your child thinks affects him or her. Have you taken time to find out what your baby girl thinks about you, about herself, about life in general? The influence from social media, often barely sieved, saturate the child’s mind with lots of thoughts. And when these are not properly channeled and synthesized, they affect the child negatively. Despite the skepticism concerning the principle of positive thinking, one must understand that this subject is built on the foundation of practical faith, on the principles of “*onye kwe, chi ya ekwe*” (If a person says yes, his or her *chi* (personal spirit) says yes also).

Illustration: Maduka’s story

²⁸Peale popularized the idea of ‘positive thinking’ and the book, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, first published in 1952 is so far his most read book. Other popular titles written by him include *The Art of Living*

Maduka applied for a new job, but as his self-esteem was low, and he considered himself a failure and unworthy of success, he was sure that he was not going to get the job. He had a negative attitude towards himself and believed that the other applicants were better and more qualified than he was. Maduka manifested this attitude due to his negative past experiences with job interviews.

His mind was filled with negative thoughts and fears concerning the job for the whole week before the job interview. He was sure he would be rejected. On the day of the interview, he got up late, and to his horror he discovered that the shirt he had planned to wear was dirty, and the other one needed ironing. As it was already too late, he went out wearing a wrinkled shirt.

During the interview he was tense, displayed a negative attitude, worried about his shirt, and felt hungry because he did not have enough time to eat breakfast. All this distracted his mind and made it difficult for him to focus on the interview. His overall behavior made a bad impression, and consequently he materialized his fear and did not get the job.

Femi applied for the same job too but approached the matter in a different way. Most presumably because of his parental upbringing and mental stamina. He was sure that he was going to get the job. During the week preceding the interview, he often visualized himself making a good impression and getting the job.

In the evening before the interview he prepared the clothes he was going to wear and went to sleep a little earlier. On the day of the interview he woke up earlier than usual, and had ample time to eat breakfast, and then to arrive at the interview before the scheduled time. He got the job because he made a good impression. He had also, of course, the proper qualifications for the job, but so had Maduka.

What do we learn from these two stories? Is there any magic used? No, it was all natural. When the attitude is positive, we enjoy pleasant feelings and visualize what we really want to happen. This brings brightness to the eyes, a spring to our steps, more vitality and happiness. We walk tall, our voice is more powerful, and our body language shows

(1986), *A Guide to Confident Living* (1996), *The Tough-Minded Optimist* (1961), and *Positive Thinking Every Day*

(1993). While we do not intend to wholly endorse Peale's ideas due to some perceived egocentric principles that he entertains, however, we are of the opinion that there is need to highlight the power of the mind. Perhaps a more intellectual work on the power of the mind could be found in the ideas of the Jewish-American political theorist, Hannah Arendt. Cf. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harvest Books, 1981).

the way we feel. However, having all the right attitudes and winning disposition, does not automatically translate to success. Failure, disappointments and setbacks are all part of life's experiences. Parents should endeavor to teach their children that failure is part of life, and that a winning disposition is manifested by not giving in to any instance of failure, but to a constant resolve to rise and keep pushing on and on.

Positive and negative thinking are contagious

All of us affect the people we meet, in one way or another. This happens instinctively and on a subconscious level, through our thoughts and feelings, and through body language. People sense our aura, and are affected by our thoughts, and vice versa. Is it any wonder that we want to be around positive people, and prefer to avoid negative ones? People are more disposed to help us if we are positive, and they dislike and avoid anyone broadcasting negativity.

Negative thoughts, words and attitudes lead to negative and unhappy moods and actions. When the mind is negative, toxins are released into the blood, which cause more unhappiness and negativity. This is the way to failure, frustration and disappointment. Certainly, we do not wish this for our children.

Some practical instructions on assisting a child to think positively

In order to turn the mind of the child toward the positive, some inner work is required, since attitude and thoughts do not change overnight.

- Read about this subject, think about its benefits, and persuade yourself to try it both on yourself and on your child. The power of thoughts is a profound influence that is always shaping our life. It initiates a process of transformation that takes place subconsciously, but it is possible to make the process a conscious one. Even if the idea seems strange, to give it a trial may not be a bad idea. One has nothing to lose, but a lot to gain.
- It is proper to help a child ignore what other people might say or think about him or her by helping the child to discover that there is a change in the way he or she thinks.
- Help the child to use the gift of imagination to visualize only favorable and beneficial situations.
- Encourage the child to use positive words in his or her thoughts or when talking with others.
- Teach the child to smile a little more, as this helps one to think positively.
- Instruct the child to be aware of the emergence of negative thoughts. It is important to teach them that the moment a negative thought enters his or her mind, the best

response is to endeavor to replace it with a constructive one. Reality tells us that this is not just a one-way traffic, it is a battle between the good and the bad and can only be won by persistence. It is as if there are two pictures in front of the child, and he or she has to choose to look at one of them and disregard the other. Persistence will eventually teach the young mind to think positively, and to ignore negative thoughts.

- In case the child feels inner resistance and difficulties when replacing negative thoughts with positive ones, he or she should not give up, but keep looking only at the beneficial, good and happy thoughts already in the mind.
- It does not really matter what the circumstances of the child are at the present time. The child should be helped to think positively, even in the midst of challenges, difficulties and failures. Perseverance in this sense means that learns how to survive both favorable and unfavorable times. This attitude is more realistic than the all-too-fanciful and romantic idea of success as all there is to life and living.
- Another useful technique is the repetition of affirmations. This technique is similar to creative visualization, and both can be practiced together.

Encourage your Child to have a Healthy Self-Esteem

It is imperative for a child's healthy development to feel important and worthy. Healthy self-esteem is a child's armor against the challenges of the world. Kids who feel good about themselves seem to have an easier time handling conflicts and resisting negative pressures. They tend to smile more readily and enjoy life. These kids are realistic and generally optimistic. It has also been shown that children with self-esteem are well-rounded, respectful, and excel in academics, extracurricular activities and hobbies and develop healthy relationships with their peers.

In contrast, children who do not feel important or cherished have low self-esteem, and challenges can become sources of major anxiety and frustration. Children who think poorly of themselves have a hard time finding solutions to their problems, and may become passive, withdrawn, or depressed.

We are the biggest influence when it comes to our children feeling important, valued and worthy. Remember to praise your child for a job well done, and for putting up a valiant effort. Praise the good traits they naturally possess and help them find ways to learn from their mistakes and failures. Be honest and sincere in your praise. Help them realize that you also suffer from self-doubt and can make mistakes from time to time, but that these cannot define your entire personality, because you are equally aware that you are important, valued and loved. When you nurture your own self-esteem and importance, your child will learn to do the same, so be sure to lead by example and steer

clear of self-depreciating yourself or engaging in activities that lower your self-worth or importance.

Your child may have inaccurate or irrational beliefs about himself or herself, personal abilities or traits. Accentuate the positive about your child and encourage them to set realistic expectations and standards. Help them to identify traits or skills that they would like to improve on and to come up with a plan for accomplishing that goal. Encourage your child to become involved in collaborative activities that foster a sense of teamwork and loyalty.

Through these and other positive, affirming activities, children are sure to develop a strong sense of self-importance, value and worth which they will carry into their adult years.

Psychological Impact of Broken Homes on Parenting Children

Real-life experiences have indicated that the love between parents or lack of it can greatly affect a child's psychological development and emotional health. Children are not merely spectators in the love life of their parents but are active participators in this life. They are the fruit of the love and remain the livewire of this love reality. Thus, when this love goes sour and divorce or separation sets in, children become the first victims of this painful situation.

Let us consider the story of a young University student, Mfon, the eldest child in a family of five, whose parents had to go their separate ways. In her narrative, Mfon was very much tormented by the crisis that was brewing in the family prior to the divorce of her parents. According to her, "sleeping at night was quite a battle as I had to keep processing the possibility that my family, as I once knew it, would cease to exist, not because someone is going to die but because my parents would no longer be together." Part of Mfon's ghosts was the uncertainty of where she and her siblings would belong, to the father or to the mother. The thought of jostling from one place to another just to see their parents in their separate new homes was very unsettling for her. Also, her responsibility over her siblings is seriously threatened by the new situation. Indeed, it was a grave torture for this 16-year-old. Recounting life in the aftermath of the divorce, Mfon had this to say: "It was for us indeed a very difficult time. Thank God the storm is now over, but the scares have remained deep within us, the children. Often, we discuss the incidence among ourselves and simply imagine what other children with similar unresolved experiences will be passing through. The thought of it simply scares me and has affected me till date especially in my relationship with others."

Do not be deceived: Children do not just sail through parental conflict, separation, divorce, and/or remarriage. There are lasting consequences. The option of single parenting has also its deficiencies in the well-being of children. Cases abound where adults travel every length in search of the identity of either the 'hidden' father or mother. This clearly indicates the psychological load they carry and the pains and trauma they struggle to cope with daily. More still, step-parenting has also its deficiencies and has not proved to be a better alternative or substitute for a missing father or mother.

Dramatic changes have occurred and still occur in parenting in the modern times. A reasonable percentage of children in the Western world are born outside marriage. This is a challenge that strongly confronts responsible parenting. The high rate of divorce, especially in the Western world, does not help in any way. Each parent, the father or the mother has a unique role to play in the upbringing of the child, and where any of these is lacking, an unfortunate vacuum will be inevitable. Traditional parenting remains ideal. In Africa, especially in Nigeria, the problem of divorce is equally on the rise though not as pronounced as that of the Western world. This, however calls for urgent attention so that we do not find ourselves in a situation whereby parenting children becomes limited to only our personal convenience and no longer the collective good of both the children and the parents. For both the single parent, the divorced parents and the children suffer some emotional stress and often very noticeable psychological trauma.

Without doubt, some parents are admirably responsible in the rearing and training of their children. These parents presumably act out of their conviction that good parenting forms the strong basis of emotional and financial security. Of course, there is a strong connection between a sound parental upbringing and emotional and financial security. This truth can be trusted. The major shifts in family life associated with social and economic changes have made the attainment of sound parenting much harder. Often, parents find themselves at the crossroads of decision making as it concerns and affects their children. This borders basically on the tension between the gains of the mother and the gains of the child. To resolve these tensions is a very difficult task but an achievable one indeed.

The major pathway to a healthy resolution of this tension is a conscientious commitment to a dispassionate analysis of every issue particularly related to the upbringing of the child. An increased emphasis on the desire for individual fulfillment may result in parents making decisions which they hope will improve their own lives, but which their children do not always view as positive. The emphasis here ought to be the common interest, which goes beyond the immediate apparent gains of the child. Distinction must be strongly made between what is and what appears to be. Often, and very painfully too, many people today are fascinated by appearances, which leaves one more devastated

and confused at the long run.

There have been frequent and simplistic attempts to explain the growing insecurities shown by children in educational and social settings simply by blaming changing family structures. Pediatricians, when faced in practice by children struggling with a range of difficulties, will be aware of the wide range of influences at work in producing 'symptoms' or aggravating an organic disorder.²⁹

In 1993, the *National Research Council* (NRC) report on child abuse and neglect says that almost six out of ten said children needed a home with both their mother and their father to grow up happily.³⁰ Four out of ten said a single mother could not bring up her child as well as a married couple would do. The two-parent family remains a strongly held ideal. In other European nations such as Italy and Spain, with more traditional families, the two-parent ideal is even stronger. Evidence shows that with the UK, many people are still of the opinion that a situation where couples lovingly stay together are best for the children.³¹ But in cases where this is not possible, single mothers can still do a great job in raising children. The reason there is such a drive to recognise the needs of single parents is because bringing up children on your own can be a real struggle and without help children can suffer.

Often, one may easily explain away the concrete perceivable difficulties that characterise single parenting. Granted that the mother plays a great role in the upbringing of the child, but the father helps as well in no small measure in the holistic task of nurturing the child as well as in the child's psychological development. Although some circumstances may arise resulting to single parenting, but these are merely exceptions and cannot be treated as the ideal. Our assertion here does not in any way nullify the possibilities of single parenting, especially when either of the party becomes a nuisance to the health of the family. It is not in doubt that when such an undesirable situation arises, single parenting may represent a desirable option.

It was common in the past for couples to stay together "for the sake of the children". This attitude has changed in recent years to "better a good divorce than a bad marriage". Perhaps the change has come out of an emphasis on personal fulfilment. Perhaps the

²⁹ John H. Tripp and Monica Cockett, "Parents, Parenting, and Family Breakdown," *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, no. 78(1998):104-108, 104.

³⁰ NRC, *Understanding Child Abuse and Neglect* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1993).

³¹ Patrick Dixon, *Rising Price of Love: The True Cost of Sexual Freedom* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 1995), chapter 6.

changing world order of secularisation and detraditionalization could be responsible for this. There could also be influence emanating from some psychiatrist philosophers like Ronald David Laing, who was very negative about the whole concept of family³², or people like psychologist David Graham Cooper who wrote *The Death of the Family*³³ some two decades ago. Notwithstanding, these are mere suppositions and cannot completely account for this noticeable shift in marital paradigm in the world today. Nevertheless, suffice it to say that some broken marriages are often traceable to lack of faith in the family setting.

The *Joseph Rowntree Foundation* funded important research by John Tripp and Monica Cockett at Exeter University. Their preliminary findings were very disturbing and made headlines in February 1994. Tripp and Cockett looked at what happened to a carefully matched sample of 152 children aged 9-10 and 13-14. Half of their families had broken up one or more times. Children whose families undergo a series of disruptions and changes are more likely to experience social, educational and health problems than those whose families remain intact. This study by Cockett and Tripp, based on interviews with children and parents in contrasted family settings, concludes that:

- Children whose families had been 're-ordered' by separation or divorce were more likely to have encountered health problems (especially psychosomatic disorders) than children from intact families, to have needed extra help at school, to have experienced friendship difficulties and to suffer from low self-esteem.
- Where children had experienced three or more different family structures, the 'outcomes' were generally worse than for those living (for the first time) with a lone parent or in a step-family. These children were more likely to describe themselves as 'often unhappy' or 'miserable'.
- Although severe marital conflict and financial hardship were associated with poor outcomes for children, family reorganization(s) appeared to be the main adverse factor in children's lives.
- Only a small minority of children - one in sixteen - had been prepared for an impending separation or divorce by explanations from both parents.
- Fewer than half the children in re-ordered families had regular contact with the non-resident parent (usually their father). Half the children without any reliable contact did not know where their non-resident parent was living.
- A significant minority of children in re-ordered families had made their own

³² See, Ronald D. Laing, *The Politics of Family and Other Essays* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1971); Ronald D. Laing and Aaron Esterson, *Sanity, Madness and the Family: Families of Schizophrenics* (London: Penguin Books, 1964).

³³ David Graham Cooper, *The Death of the Family* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970).

arrangements to keep in contact with their non-resident parent, because the parents themselves had been unable to reach agreement or were not talking to each other.

- Children who had experienced series of family disruptions were not only the least likely to have contact with the non-resident parent, but also received less support from extended family networks.³⁴

Constant fighting between parents had less adverse effects than parental separation. There may not be much distinction between children of a 'happy' family and their counterparts, whose parents quarrel frequently. Tripp is very clear that neither poverty nor conflict causes great damage on the family than the pain of separation resulting from the loss of a parent: "What parents don't realise is that while they may have problems with each other, the children often have good relationships with both parents - and they lose that when the family breaks up. In addition, the separation often did not end the conflict." In some cases, the conflict was made worse because children were drawn into it for the first time. Three out of four non-custodial parents said, after putting their children through all this, they wished they had never divorced.

We need to get this message through to every family where parents are in difficulty. Indeed, challenging situations may arise, but other possible solutions that would still retain the family structure are better sought than the sometimes speedy yield to separation or divorce. Separation is likely to significantly affect the children adversely.

Children are also creatures of habit, as evident in their responses to routine, their disposition to things that are familiar as well as their dislike of change. Part of the consequences of separated parents could be the movement of the children from their original family to another family. This, no doubt has its own effects on the psychological development of the children and has much to contribute to their entire well-being. If couples can avoid separation or divorce, it would go a long way in ensuring that children grow up in a healthy and loving environment, without which they may become psychologically or emotionally damaged for the rest of their lives.

³⁴Cf. A review of Monica Cockett and John H. Tripp, *The Exeter Family Study: Family Breakdown and its Impact on Children* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1994) with the title, *Children living in Re-ordered Families*, by Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *Social Policy Research Findings* no. 45, February 1994. See also, Tripp and Cockett, "Parents, Parenting and Family Breakdown"; Emilia Dowling and Gill Gorell-Barnes, "Children of Divorcing Families: A Clinical Perspective," *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, Vol. 4, no. 1 (1999): 39-50; Jennifer M. Weaver and Thomas J. Schofield, "Mediation and Moderation of Divorce Effects on Children's Behavior Problems," *Journal of Family Psychology*, Vol. 29, no. 1 (2015): 39-48.

Chapter 6



PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY TOWARDS CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Has your child recently been diagnosed with a learning disability? Did you immediately begin to worry about how he or she will cope with school? It is only natural to want the best for your child, but academic success, though important, is not the end goal. What you really want for your child is a happy and fulfilling life. With encouragement and the right support, your child can build a strong sense of self-confidence and a solid foundation for lifelong success. One thing you should understand is that your child is not defined by his or her learning disability. A learning disability represents one area of weakness, but there are many more areas of strengths. Focus on your child's gifts and talents. Your child's life—and schedule—should not revolve around the learning disability. Nurture the activities where he or she excels, and make plenty of time for them. In this chapter, we shall look at some of the things you need to keep in mind as a parent who is faced with such a challenge. It is however very important to note that when it comes to learning disabilities, one should always look at the bigger picture.

Learning Disability and Recognizing a Learning Disorder

In the 2001 UK White Paper for England concerning the health and social support of individuals with learning disability with the title, *Valuing People: A New Strategy for Learning Disability for the 21st Century*, the following are indicators of learning disability: a) a considerably reduced ability to comprehend new and complicated information, b) grave difficulty in learning new set of skills, c) an insufficient ability to

independently cater for oneself, and d) when such inadequacies are noticed at childhood and show a long-term presence. In order to avoid stigmatization, some people prefer to speak of learning difficulty or children with special needs. We however chose to stick with the original designation of this difficulty not with the intent to be derogatory but to highlight the challenge that parents face in such situations and to indicate that such children need special attention beyond the formal ways of doing things.

By understanding the different types of learning disorders and their signs, you can capture the specific challenges your child faces and find a treatment program that works. First, it is necessary to bear in mind that all children need love, encouragement, and support, and for kids with learning disabilities, such positive reinforcement can help ensure that they emerge with a strong sense of self-worth, confidence, industry, hard work and the determination to keep going even when things are tough.

In searching for ways to help children with learning disabilities, we must remember that we are *looking for ways to help them help themselves*. Your job as a parent is not to ‘cure’ the learning disability, but to give the child the social and emotional tools he or she needs to work through challenges. In the end, facing and overcoming a challenge such as a learning disability can help the child grow stronger and more resilient. Hence, you should not forget that the way you behave and respond to challenges has a big impact on the child. A good attitude will not radically solve the problems associated with a learning disability, but it can give the child hope and confidence that things can improve and that he or she will eventually succeed.

Tips for dealing with the child’s learning disability

- *Keep things in perspective. A learning disability is not insurmountable.* Remind yourself that everyone faces obstacles. It is up to you as a parent to teach your child how to deal with those obstacles without becoming discouraged or overwhelmed. Do not let the tests, school bureaucracy, and endless paperwork distract you from what is really important—giving your child plenty of emotional and moral support.
- *Become your own expert.* Do your own research and keep abreast of new developments in learning disability programs, therapies, and educational techniques. You may be ordinarily tempted to look to others (teachers, therapists, doctors) for solutions, especially at first. That is absolutely normal. But you are the foremost expert for your child, therefore you do not need to restrict your action to their advice, but you rather need to take charge when it comes to finding the tools he or she needs in order to learn properly.
- *Be an advocate for your child.* You may have to speak up time and time again to get

special help for your child. Embrace your role as a proactive parent and work on your communication skills. It may be frustrating at times, but by remaining calm and reasonable, yet firm, you can make a huge difference for your child.

- *Remember that your influence outweighs all others.* Your child will follow your lead. If you approach learning challenges with optimism, hard work, and a sense of humor, your child is likely to embrace your perspective or at least see the challenges as a speed bump, rather than a roadblock. Focus your energy on learning what works for your child and implementing it the best you can.

Take charge of your child's education

Unfortunately, in present-day Nigeria which has witnessed endless budget cuts and inadequately funded education, our role in the education of our children is more important than ever. Parents should not just sit back and let someone else be responsible for providing their children with the tools they need to learn. They are expected to take active role in their children's education.

If there is demonstrated educational need, the school is required by law to develop an *Individualized Education Plan* (IEP) that delivers *some* educational benefits, but not necessarily one that maximizes student achievement.³⁵ Parents who want the best for their kids may find this standard frustrating. Understanding special education laws and your school's guidelines for services will help immensely in getting the best support for the child at school. Your child may be eligible for many kinds of accommodations and support services, but in some cases, the school might not provide services unless you ask for them. Unfortunately, some of these special provisions for education are hardly available in Nigeria.

Tips for communicating with your child's school

Being a vocal advocate for your child can be challenging. You will need superior communication and negotiation skills, and the confidence to defend your child's right to a proper education.³⁶

³⁵IEP is an educational plan that is targeted at helping children with special learning needs to attain their academic/life goals through a series of educational intervention in the form of activities, supports and services. Cf. Sofia Cramerotti and Dario Ianes, "An Ontology-based System for Building Individualized Education Plans for Students with Special Educational Needs," *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Vol. 217 (2016): 192-200.

³⁶We do not mean an unnecessary and unwarranted confrontation with the school authorities, but a healthy dialogical engagement with those responsible for the training of our children, with the singular intention of discovering a more productive learning technique.

- *Clarify your goals.* Before meetings, write down what you want to accomplish. Decide what is most important, and what you are willing to negotiate.
- *Be a good listener.* Allow school officials to explain their opinions. If you do not understand what someone is saying, ask for clarification. “What I hear you saying is...” “When you say ... do you mean ...” This can help ensure that both parties understand.
- *Offer new solutions.* You have the advantage of not being a ‘part of the system,’ and may have new ideas. Do your research and find examples of what other schools have done.
- *Keep the focus.* The school system is dealing with a large number of children; you are only concerned about your child. Help the meeting stay focused on your child. Mention your child’s name frequently, do not drift into generalizations, and endeavor to resist the urge to fight larger battles.
- *Stay calm, collected and positive.* Go into the meeting assuming that everyone wants to help. If you say something you regret, simply apologize and try to get back on track.
- *Do not give up easily.* If you are not satisfied with the school’s response, try again.

Recognize the limitations of the school system

Parents sometimes make the mistake of investing all their time and energy into the school as the primary solution for their child’s learning disability. It is better to recognize that the school situation for your child will probably never be perfect. Too many regulations and limited funding may have great impacts on the entire administrative life of the school. The implication is that the services and accommodations your child receives may not be exactly what you envision for them, and this will probably cause you frustration, anger and stress. Try to recognize that the school will be only one part of the solution for your child and leave some of the stress behind. Your attitude (of support, encouragement and optimism) will have the most lasting impact on your child.

Identify how your child learns best

Everyone, whether having learning disability or not, has their own unique learning style. Some people learn best by seeing or reading (visual learners), others by listening (auditory learners), and still others by doing (kinesthetic learners). You can help a child with a learning disability by identifying his or her primary learning style.

Is your child a visual learner, an auditory learner, or a kinesthetic learner? Once you have figured out how he or she learns best, you can take steps to make sure that that type of learning is reinforced in the classroom and during home study. The following lists are

considered helpful in determining what type of learner the child could be.

Is the child a visual learner? If your child is a visual learner, he or she:

- Learns best by seeing or reading
- Does well when material is presented and tested visually, not verbally
- Benefits from written notes, directions, diagrams, charts, maps, and pictures
- May love to draw, read, and write; is probably a good speller

Is the child an auditory learner? If your child is an auditory learner, he or she:

- Learns best by listening
- Does well in lecture-based learning environments and on oral reports and tests
- Benefits from classroom discussions, spoken directions, study groups
- May love music, languages, and being on stage

Is the child a kinesthetic learner? If your child is a kinesthetic learner, he or she:

- Learns best by doing and moving
- Does well when he or she can move, touch, explore, and create in order to learn
- Benefits from hands-on activities, lab classes, props, skits, and field trips
- May love sports, drama, dance, martial arts, and arts and crafts

Identifying the particular learning efficiency method is important in seeking the right way of learning in order to optimize results. In response to each of these types of learners, the following tips are necessary.

For a child who is a *visual learner*, parents should do the following:

- Use books, videos, computers, visual aids and flashcards.
- Make detailed, color-coded or highlighted notes.
- Make outlines, diagrams, and lists.
- Use drawing and color illustrations.
- Use notes or written materials.

For a child who is an *auditory learner*, parents should do the following:

- Make him or her to read notes or study materials out loud.
- Use word associations and verbal repetition to aid memorization.
- Allow him or her to study with other kids. Talk things through.
- Use audio books on tape or other audio recordings.
- Use a tape recorder to listen to lectures again later.

For a child who is a *kinesthetic learner*, parents should do the following:

- Get hands on. Engage him or her with experiments and take field trips.

- Use activity-based study tools, like role-playing or model building.
- Integrate him or her to study in small groups and allow frequent breaks.
- Use memory games and flash cards.
- Study with music on in the background.

Always think about life success, rather than school success

The word success could possess diverse meanings depending on the interpretation by different people. Nevertheless, even in its seemingly variegated understanding, our hopes and dreams for our children ordinarily or probably extend beyond good report cards. Funny but true, education has an aggressive tone of utility attached to it. Probably, one may view this as a mercantile approach to education, but reality shows our assertion to be true. Often, we invest on education in view of the gains it offers. The gains in question may not be immediate but are mainly encapsulated in the bright future that it promises. Maybe you hope that your child's future includes a fulfilling job and satisfying relationships, for example, or a happy family and a sense of contentment. This could become the drivers of every engagement in education.

The point is that *success in life* goes beyond merely school success. Success in life does not depend exclusively on academics but involves other factors like a healthy sense of self, the willingness to ask for and accept help, the determination to keep trying in spite of challenges, the ability to form healthy relationships with others, and other qualities that are not as easy to quantify as grades and SAT³⁵ scores.

A 20-year study headed by renowned child psychologists, Roberta J. Goldberg and colleagues³⁶ that followed children with learning disabilities into adulthood identified the following six 'life success' attributes. By focusing on these broad skills, you can help give your child a huge motivation to succeed in life.

First predictor of success: Self-awareness and Self-confidence

For children with learning disabilities, self-awareness (knowledge about strengths,

³⁵SAT is a standardized test that was introduced in 1926 in the US for admission into colleges. Originally, SAT stands for Scholastic Aptitude Test.

³⁶Roberta J. Goldberg, Eleanor L. Higgins, Marshall H. Raskind and Kenneth L. Herman, "Predictors of Success in Individuals with Learning Disabilities: A Qualitative Analysis of a 20-Year Longitudinal Study," *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, Vol. 18, no. 4 (2003): 222-236. See also, Marshall H. Raskind, et al, "Patterns of Change and Predictors of Success in Individuals with Learning Disabilities: Results from a Twenty-Year Longitudinal Study," *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, Vol. 14, no. 1 (1999): 35-49.

weaknesses, and special talents) and self-confidence are very important. Struggles in the classroom can cause children to doubt their abilities and question their strengths, but parents are expected to prevent such self-doubts from happening. It is important therefore to do the following:

- Ask your child to list his or her strengths and weaknesses and talk about your own strengths and weaknesses with your child.
- Encourage your child to talk to adults with learning disabilities and to ask about their challenges, as well as their strengths.
- Work with your child on activities that are within his or her capabilities. This will help build feelings of success and competency.
- Help your child develop his or her strengths and passions. Feeling passionate and skilled in one area may inspire hard work in other areas too.

Second predictor of success: Proactivity

A proactive person can make decisions and take actions to resolve problems or achieve goals. For children with learning disabilities, being proactive also involves self-advocacy (for example, asking for a seat at the front of the classroom) and the willingness to take responsibility for choices. To assist your child in this regard, you should,

- Talk with your child about problem solving and share how you approach problems in your own life.
- Ask your child how he or she approaches problems. How do problems make him or her feel? How does he or she decide what action to take?
- If your child is hesitant to make choices and to take action, try to provide some 'safe' situations to test the water, like choosing what to make for dinner or thinking of a solution for a scheduling conflict.
- Discuss different problems, possible decisions, and outcomes with your child. Have your child pretend to be part of the situation and encourage him or her to make his or her own decisions.

Third predictor of success: Perseverance

Perseverance is the drive to keep going despite challenges and failures, and the flexibility to change plans if things are not working as planned. Children (or adults) with learning disabilities may need to work harder and longer because of their disability, but you can assist your child by taking note of the following:

- Talk with your child about times when he or she persevered. Find out exactly why

he or she kept going. Share stories about when you have faced challenges and not given up.

- Discuss what it means to keep going even when things appear completely difficult and hopeless. Talk about the rewards of hard work, as well as the opportunities missed by giving up.
- When your child has worked hard, but failed to achieve his or her goal, discuss different possibilities for moving forward.

Fourth predictor of success: Appropriate goal setting

The ability to set realistic and attainable goals is a vital skill for life success. It also involves the flexibility to adapt and adjust goals according to changing circumstances, limitations, or challenges. As a parent, you can assist your child in setting goals. Here are some tips:

- Help your child identify a few short- or long-term goals and write down steps and a timeline to achieve the set goals. Examine the child periodically to discuss the level of progress and to adjust where and when needed.
- Talk about your own short- and long-term goals with your child, as well as what you do when you encounter obstacles.
- Celebrate with your child when he or she achieves a goal. If certain goals are proving too hard to achieve, talk about why and how plans or goals might be adjusted to make them possible.

Fifth predictor of success: Use of social support

Strong support systems are key for people with learning disabilities. Successful people are able to ask for help when they need it and to reach out to others for support. World renowned leaders have been known to face their own challenges as children, thanks to persistence of their parents who paid attention. Albert Einstein was one of such kids while growing up. The greatest support that a child with learning disability needs is you. Yet, you have to teach him or her how to seek support when needed. Here are tips in relation to seeking social support:

- Help your child to nurture and to develop good relationships. Model what it means to be a good family member and a good friend so that your child would learn what it means to help and support others.
- Demonstrate to your child how to ask for help in family situations.
- Share examples of people needing help, how they got it, and why it was good to ask for help. Present your child with role-play scenarios that might require help.

Sixth predictor of success: Emotional stability

If children with learning disabilities learn how to control stressful situations and to maintain serenity, they will be much better equipped to overcome challenges. It is important to be aware of the different ways in which stress can manifest. Your child may behave very differently than you do when he or she is under stress. Some signs of stress are more obvious: agitation, difficulty with sleeping and worries that will not shut off. But some people—children included—shut down, space out, and withdraw when stressed. It is easy to overlook these signs, so be on the lookout for any behavior that is out of the ordinary. To help your child in tackling this challenge therefore, you must endeavor to do the following:

- Use words to identify feelings and to help your child learn to recognize specific feelings.
- Ask your child what words they would use to describe stress. Does your child recognize when he or she is feeling stressed?
- Encourage your child to identify and participate in activities that help reduce stress like sports, games, music, or writing in a personal journal.
- Ask your child to describe activities and situations that make them feel stressed. Break down the scenarios and talk about how overwhelming feelings of stress and frustration might be avoided.

Emphasize healthy lifestyle habits

It may seem like common sense that learning involves the body as well as the brain, but your child's eating, sleep, and exercise habits may be even more important than you think. If children with learning disabilities are eating right and getting enough sleep and exercise, they will be better able to focus, concentrate, and work hard. Also, you should encourage them to develop proper emotional health as part of one's general well-being.

- **Exercise** – Exercise is not just good for the body, it is good for the mind. Regular physical activity makes a huge difference in mood, energy, and mental clarity. Encourage your learning-disabled child to get outside, move, and play. Rather than tiring out your child and taking away from schoolwork, regular exercise will help him or her stay alert and attentive throughout the day. Exercise is also a great antidote to stress and frustration.
- **Diet** – A healthy, nutrient rich diet will aid your child's growth and development. A diet full of whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and lean protein will help boost mental focus. Be sure your child starts the day with a good breakfast and does not go more

than 4 hours between meals or snacks. This will help keep his or her energy levels stable.

- **Sleep** – Learning disability or not, your child is going to have trouble learning if he or she is not well rested. Kids need more sleep than adults. On average, preschoolers need from 11-13 hours per night, middle school children need about 10-11 hours, and teens and preteens need from 8½-10 hours. You can help make sure your child is getting the sleep he or she needs by enforcing a set bedtime. The type of light emitted by electronic screens (computers, televisions, smart phones, iPods and iPads, portable video players, etc.) is activating to the brain. So, you can help by powering off all electronics at least an hour or two before lights-out.
- **Emotional habits** - In addition to healthy physical habits, you can also encourage children to have healthy emotional habits. Like you, they may be frustrated by the challenges presented by their learning disability. Try to give them outlets for expressing their anger, frustration, or feelings of discouragement. Listen when they want to talk and create an environment open to expression. Doing so will help them connect with their feelings and, eventually, learn how to calm themselves and regulate their emotions.

As a parent you need to take care of yourself, too!

Good parenting is all embrative. It involves both the children and the parents. No one is short-changed in the process. An Igbo saying has it that “*Nne muru nwa na-erikwa nri*” which translates loosely to “a nursing mother also eats.” All parties are considered very important in the process. These deserve clear emphasis in the formative process, otherwise one may be pressured by circumstances to be deficient in giving all the parties involved their required attention. Oftentimes, one may be tempted to disregard self in the entire affair of parenting. This enticement must be vehemently resisted because the major drivers of the parenting process are the parents of which any disregard to their welfare could be quite detrimental. It is easy to be trapped exclusively to the pursuit of the child’s needs, while forgetting one’s own needs. When this is allowed to happen, there is the possibility of experiencing a burn-out and the consequences are bound to be disastrous.

Parents must endeavor to pay enough attention to their own emotional and physical needs to be optimally responsive to the family challenges and occupying a healthy space for the wellbeing of the entire family. Parents would be more effective and better equipped to connect with their children when they are calm and focused.

Tips for taking care of yourself

- Learn how to *manage stress* in your own life. Make daily time for yourself to relax and decompress.
- Keep the lines of communication open with your spouse, family, and friends. Ask for help when you need it.
- Take care of yourself by eating well, exercising regularly, and getting enough rest.
- Join a learning disorder support group. The encouragement and advice you will get from other parents can be invaluable.
- Enlist teachers, therapists, and tutors whenever possible to share some of the responsibility for day-to-day academic responsibilities.

Communicate with family and friends

Some parents keep their child's learning disability a secret, which can, even with the best intentions, look like shame or guilt. Without knowing, extended family and friends may not understand the disability or think that your child's behavior is stemming from laziness or hyperactivity. Once they are aware of what is going on, they can support your child's progress. It is however important that you be selective with those you share information with so that you do not attract added stress from people who lack empathy and maturity to handle trust.

Within the family, siblings may feel that their brother or sister with a learning disability is getting more attention, less discipline and preferential treatment. Even if your other children understand that the learning disability creates special challenges, they can easily feel jealous or neglected. Parents can help curb these feelings by reassuring all their children that they are loved, providing help with homework, and by including family members in any special routines for the child with a learning disability.

Chapter 7



PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY TOWARDS THE MORAL UPBRINGING OF THEIR CHILDREN

Dealing with Dishonesty in Children

Honesty forms the foundation of any relationship. Honesty develops trust. Honesty creates, shapes and builds a healthy society. It helps to build reliability, friendly communication, industry and responsibility. On the flip side, dishonesty or deceit destroys trust, creates tension and unwarranted crisis in any given society. Every child normally enjoys trust and love from the immediate environment and beyond. But when a child lies, that trust is broken, and relationships suffer. When this happens, parents and loved ones are ordinarily thrown off balance, and may not know how best to respond to such a development. Often, they are overwhelmed and helpless and may have to depend on common discipline techniques, which are largely deficient in addressing the unfortunate new reality. Consequently, a more comprehensive plan is usually necessary since dishonesty often has several components. Here are some ways to deal with issues of (dis)honesty in a child.

1. Talk about reality and truth and how they are different from fantasy, wishes, possibility, pretense, and make believe. Require that children use cues to identify anything other than reality. Here are some ideas³⁹:

"I think it happened this way," "I think this is the answer," "I'm not sure..." "Maybe..."
(Possibility)

"I wish this were true," "I would like it if..." (Wish)

"I would like to tell you a story..." "I can imagine what it would be like to..." (Fantasy)

2. You can apply the Scripture (for example, Proverbs 26:12; 30:32; Micah 7:16, etc.) to teach your child to stop talking in the middle of a speaking mistake. When you discover that your child is beginning to stray from the truth, stop him or her. "I want you to stop talking for a minute." Sometimes, children just get started and cannot stop. Parents can assist these children as 'midwives' to cultivate the habit of honesty. *"Think for a minute and then start again. I would like to hear the things you know separated from the things you think."* *"Start again and tell me how it really happened. Just the parts you are very sure of."*
3. If a child is impulsive, use a plan for self-discipline. Sometimes children who are impulsive just say things without really reflecting on them. Other times they may start talking and do not know how to stop. It is not just enough to begin to speak, but much more important to know what to say and when to stop. When children are impulsive, a wide range of negative possibilities are opened, especially the tendency for dishonesty caused by lack of self-control. Care should be taken by parents not to perceive every case of dishonesty or false testimony as an act of malice, but it should all the same be excused disability: a) a considerably reduced ability to comprehend new and complicated information, b) grave difficulty in learning new set of skills, c) an insufficient ability to because the situation may become more complicated. The tendency always is to emotionally bundle the two together as necessary correlations, but reality testifies against that. Children may be dishonest and tell lies not because they have bad intention or are out to inflict pain, but simply out of fear or funny expression of novelty or ignorance. Even though children may have weak control over their impulsiveness, it is however important that they always learn to tell the truth. Now, this might require more training in self-discipline than some of the other suggestions.
4. Generally, when courtesy is given in relationships, it is referred to as "the benefit of the doubt." This courteous disposition may easily be lost when lying becomes recurrent and habitual. Trust by its nature must be earned, nourished and sustained by stability of character, and this applies also to children. Automatically, by the very fact of being a child, every child enjoys presumed love and innocence, but time unconsciously either strengthens this presumption or destroys it. Believing someone requires trust and it is a privilege that is earned. Privilege and responsibility go together and when a child is irresponsible then privileges are taken away and suspicion sets in on practically any and everything the child says or does. This may

³⁹Some of the ideas in this section are adapted from the website on *Effective Parenting*, "Helping Children who have a Problem with Lying," <http://www.effectiveparenting.org/tips3.asp> (accessed 06 April, 2018)

degenerate to the point that one may even question something that is found to be true later. Indeed, a child may be hurt by this, but one has to understand such hurt as the natural consequence of mistrust which in turn comes from dishonesty. To be believed is a privilege that is earned when children are responsible in consistently telling the truth. It may seem tough when you come to the stage where you can hardly believe your child, yet your child must be taught that dishonest people cannot be trusted. The child therefore must be made to know that you would like to believe him or her, but that the privilege to be believed and trusted ought to be earned.

5. Some children will deliberately lie to avoid punishment especially when the situation is unclear. As a parent you may find yourself in a predicament in which proof seems impossible, yet your instinct tells you that your child is not telling the truth. This may probably be a suspicion but with a high probability of reality. However, because it is not completely established, you must be careful so as to avoid unnecessary complications that will not do any party any good. The golden principle of 'in doubt do not act' is still relevant. The recommendation here is simple, 'when possible, do not choose that battleground'. Eventually, with time you will have other clearer opportunities later. Children who have a problem with lying, demonstrate it often, and so, it is important that you focus your disciplinary actions on cases with most clarity.
6. Ensure that confrontations result in repentance. At first, this may seem quite unrealistic but keep it in mind as your goal. Often parents shy away from confronting their children because of fear of the unknown. Children sometimes may be erratic and unpredictable, but these are minor occurrences, because children are basically not as complicated as adults. However, children generally are more empirical and pragmatic in nature and this ought to be explored to properly direct their lives. It all means that you should always try to confront children more with concrete perceptible facts than with boring abstract speculations. Children who are confronted with dishonesty should immediately be made to agree and apologize. A child who is defensive, does so with unfounded and unnecessary arguments and justification of the act to avoid taking responsibility. This is unacceptable and should be resisted.
7. In situations where a child responds properly to correction, it may be more reasonable to withhold further discipline so as to motivate repentance. You may use the following line as a guide: *"If you can admit it was a lie and that you were wrong when I confront you, I will not discipline you further for that lie."* It is important to note that this could only be applied as a temporary approach to teach the child the

proper response to correction. Care must be taken that the child does not predict the parent's reaction and thus exploit it for further acts of dishonesty.

8. As a good parent, you should endeavor to be proactive in teaching your child about honesty. Tell stories from your life or read stories like:
 - Ananias and Sapphira from the Bible (Acts 5:1-11)
 - Stories of the saints who excelled in honesty, e.g. St. Thomas More, St. Joan of Arc, St. Charles Lwanga and companions, etc.
 - Child novels that deal with honesty, e.g. *Without a Silver Spoon* by Eddie Iroh, *The Fruit of Honesty* by I.E. Ufondu, etc.

There are several good local novels on this subject, which are written for children and are well illustrated to capture their interest.

9. Memorize some verses of the Scripture that deal with honesty in line with the spiritual training already dealt with above. The Bible constitutes a way to appeal to a child's conscience; also encourage the child to do same. Some of the salient verses would include:

- Neither deal falsely, neither lie one to another (Lev. 19:11)
- All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one. (Matt. 5:37)
- Be not a witness against your neighbor without cause; and deceive not with your lips (Prov. 24:28)
- Therefore, give up lying; let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors for we are members of one another (Eph. 4:25)
- Do not lie to one another. You have been stripped of the old self and its way of thinking... (Col.3:9)
- God hates the lips of liars and loves those who speak the truth (Prov. 12:22)
- Truthful words endure forever but lies, for only a moment (Prov. 12:19)
- These suggestions will go a long way toward helping a child tell the truth. Do not let this problem go. It only gets worse. Continual, persistent work will pay off in the end.⁴⁰

Other Tips to minimize the frequency to lie

- Do not tell lies yourself.
- Be a good role model.

³⁹Other helpful ideas can be found in the book, Scott Turansky and Joanne Miller, *Good and Angry: Exchanging Frustration for Character in You and your Kids* (Colorado: Waterbook Press, 2002).

- Work to foster an open, honest relationship at home early on.
- Ask specific questions and demand specific answers.
- Do not give your kids the chance to lie.
- Make them check in with you before they leave the house for school.
- Make it a house rule that they call you if they are going to be late or are going to a new location.

Children and Sex Education

Often, it is difficult to educate children about the true meaning of sex. Most parents feel constrained and incapable of guiding their children in this subject. They simply feel shy and immediately imagine the topic to be too 'sacred' or sensitive to be delved into. Most of these parents think that they will be exposing their children to danger when they undertake such a task. Their idea about sex education is not so clear and they do not understand as well the importance of such a subject in the lives of their children. It is very easy for them to make sure that the material needs of the child are well taken care of than to impart the proper norms for understanding sexuality.

The main aim of sex education is to train boys and girls to correctly handle their nascent sexual instincts, which is natural, healthy and beautiful. It involves training them to manage this new awakening appropriately and live a life of purity until they enter marriage with a noble and holy purpose, if God calls them to that state of life. Sex, by definition, is a God-given characteristic: being male or female.⁴¹ It is the duty of parents to teach it best, because they are the better judges of their children's intellectual and emotional capacity and sensitivity. The starting point of assuming this duty is to impart good religious and moral principles, which serve as solid foundations for such an education.

Teaching children about sex

The Internet has brought people of diverse cultures and origins very close to one another. The world could be described no longer as a global village, but a very small parlor with all brands of possibilities. Kids today are accessing more information faster than ever before. Nothing indeed today appears to be hidden under the sun, since what transpires in one remote corner of the world is speedily felt and seen in another corner, thanks to the Internet. Consequently, sound education, especially in relation to children becomes inevitable, since without good teaching on this subject they may have trouble

³⁹ Pamela Wanda, *Bringing up Children in a Permissive Society* (Nairobi: Paulines, 2007), 43.

in negotiating this phase of their lives. Parents should avoid the assumption that a deliberate shielding of the child from such an important topic as sex education protects the child in any way from learning about sex from other sources. They are hearing about it every day on TV, on the Internet and with smart phones, through music, at school, from friends, and through advertisements of every kind.

As already stated, three reasons continue to present themselves as obstacles to parents from engaging with their kids in sex education. These reasons, strong as they may appear ought to be considered as obstacles that must be surmounted and they are as follows: First, feelings of embarrassment. Second, lack of adequate information on sex education. Third, fear and uncertainty.

Some of the following tips (in the form of frequently asked questions) may serve as helpful guide in the discharge of parental functions and decisions that are bound to arise when it comes to sex education in the family.

a) When should we start talking to our kids about sex?

Basically, when one discusses sex related issues with children, a conscious awareness and recognition of different stages of maturity must be kept in mind to respond appropriately to the child's age and development. Parents set an open atmosphere with their kids by consciously discussing the perceived sensitive issues concerning sex with them. This has to be seen as a noble assignment and has to be accomplished even with preschoolers. Recently, a Nigerian mother put up a short clip of where she was teaching her daughters (aged 2 and 3) what to do if someone touches their "bom-bom". It was clear that the young mother was responding to the daily news of child sexual molestation in Nigeria, and so she was not giving any chances. Thus, there is nothing wrong in creating a certain awareness in your child right from time. More still, parents are expected to go a step further as children get older to explain the uniqueness of gender, and of course the complementarity and differences between boys and girls, the essence and beauty of privacy, the noble vocation of both the celibate life and the family life and the profundity of God's design for families. This open dialogue answers a child's question only as far as they need to know, but teaches children that they can talk to their parents about these issues and that differences are part of God's design. The essence of this dialogue is to bring down the walls of unapproachability and to demystify the often erroneous perception of sex education as a *no-go* area. The idea is to create an atmosphere of trust, openness and honesty.

It is one thing to be determined to engage in sex education, and another thing to know what and how to go about it. This borders mainly on its sensitive nature, and therefore

must be well thought-out. Consequently, some of these steps may serve as basic guides towards accomplishing this noble project. As children move into puberty, necessity compels us to save them some complicated realities and concentrate on very simple issues like elementary biology, the process of the growth of a baby inside of a mother, and the way the processes of pregnancy and birth are designed by God.

By pre-adolescence, it is important to delve positively into issues about intercourse and the consequences thereof, personal privacy, the biology of pregnancy and the demands it imposes, and the God-given gift of sex within the confines of marriage. Indeed, sex is a gift, and its nature as *gift* has to be given a strong attention, since as a gift, it has to be handled in the manner and wish of the giver. The complementary role of the opposite sex has to be clearly explained, together with the beauty it gives to the created order. It is therefore important to talk to children about how to relate to the opposite sex in appreciation of divine beauty in human persons, in respect of the dignity of the human person, and in thankfulness to God for the beauty of his created order. Differences are fun and great, but need to be handled carefully.

Dialogue is often a pathway to unravelling both simple and perceived complications that come from the exigencies of life. During adolescence, it will be highly rewarding if parents maintain an open dialogue with their kids about sex, biology, the issues of human reproduction and the fact of sexual intimacy. Ordinarily, children, especially teenagers, will be hesitant and will initially feel embarrassed at the introduction of such subjects by parents. However, parents are encouraged to patiently, carefully and consciously initiate the discussion on these subjects not minding the initial resistance from their kids. Their hesitation, resistance or flat withdrawal from engaging on such subjects is merely borne out of ignorance or the overwhelming curious discoveries that they daily confront in their body mechanism and composition. They sometimes imagine that these experiences are exclusive to themselves, forgetting that their parents have in their own time passed through similar stages.

The fact that this is a sensitive subject that must be handled with care cannot be stressed enough. The emphasis here is not to instill fear in anyone, but to stress clearly a reality that must be confronted. In the following section, we will attempt to delineate the areas of attention, bearing in mind that the child's age and interest have great influences in determining the materials to be used and the scope or area of the educational engagement. Here are some of the basic things to be considered as you approach such a discussion with your child.

- Endeavor to avoid ambiguity in the choice and use of language. Experiences show that a proper use of the correct anatomical terms for body parts, which would have been a good way to begin, is considered vulgar in many cultures and languages.

Granted in some cultures and languages the correct anatomical terms may be embarrassing or vulgar when used in speech, but even in some of these cultures, milder descriptive terms still exist. Consequently, to remain focused and not be distracted by unwarranted imaginations, these decent descriptive terms acceptable to the particular culture and known by everyone should be used instead. By so doing, the child would ordinarily be offered another opportunity to learn prudence in speech and character and to be sensitive to the cultural norms of any given environment.

- Lead the child to begin to appreciate the beauty of differences in gender formation. Take out time to talk to the child about social relationships between boys and girls and the complementary functions they play in their particular constituencies. You would want to encourage healthy dialogue between boys and girls, which ought to be conducted within limits, in total respect and the fear of God. The reality is that girls and boys think and act differently and that makes for interesting interaction. This is not only acceptable, it is good. However, sometimes the interaction turns into flirting and experimentation. Privacy, sexual jokes, teasing, and touching games are part of the social interaction you would want to discuss. Be careful about your own teasing around relationships. Young people can become quite sensitive and self-conscious. You would want to be honoring and affirming as you talk about this sensitive subject.
- Talk about values that influence sexual decisions and God's design and plan for marriage, sex, and family. It is important for children of all ages to realize that living within God's guidelines for sexual purity produces the healthiest and strongest marriage relationships and avoids many emotional problems that come with sexual promiscuity. Use the many verses of the Bible that speak to the Christian perspectives on sex for instructing your children in this area. You can find the help you need from these biblical passages: Leviticus 18, Matt 5:28, Mark 7:22-23, Eph. 5:3, Gal. 5:19, 1Cor. 6:9, 13-20; 7:1-7; 13:4-8, 1Thess. 4:3-5. These examples are not exhaustive.

b) What happens if my child has shown an early interest in sex?

Humans are made differently, and this is the spice of life. Interestingly, our children must not have the same emotional and physical disposition towards us. This is a reality that must be accepted, because we are not only a product of nature but of nurture as well. The cultural circumstance of our time of existence has its special mold and influence on our very constitution and formation. Conscious of this, one will be better informed to confront the demands of the time for a more productive engagement. Sometimes children touch themselves or experiment and explore with other children, and by so doing expose themselves to more information and experience than is helpful to them.

An increased exposure to or interest in sex at an early age is not criminal. It is not at all a symptom of sickness, but is an opportunity for early attention and carefulness towards such a child. Although this may pose some difficulties for the upbringing of the child, it is not an impossible situation to handle. Here are some guidelines in this regard.

- Keep your fear and anger in check. You can do more damage to your relationship with your children by your intensity than by the act of experimentation itself. You want to set firm limits without making kids feel ashamed or guilty about their own sexuality and desires.
- Be firm in setting limits for your children regarding their involvement with other children. Kids need to know that sexual exploration and experimentation is not acceptable. When children engage in sexual stimulation at a young age, work to distract them, keep them busy, and gently encourage them to move away from such activity.
- Children who use privacy to explore sexuality need have their times of solitude curtailed. Keep them in common areas and in places where you can keep an eye on them. Children who exhibit greater sexual interest or curiosity generally need more discussions and teaching about issues of sex and sexuality in the light of divine moral guidelines. This is necessary to give the child a proper orientation when the mind is still very impressionable and receptive.

c) Which parent should do the talking to our kids?

Some people believe that dads should talk to their sons, while mothers should talk to their daughters about sexual issues. It is important, however, that both dads and moms have significant discussions with their kids, irrespective of their gender. The reality is that men think differently than women. When a mom talks to her son about sex she will likely emphasize different things and have a different perspective on the subject than a dad will. Likewise, when a dad talks to his daughter about sex he probably will approach it differently. Furthermore, when sexual issues become more important and correction is required, it is necessary to have both parents involved. Also, the reality in most families is that children often gravitate towards one parent than the other and that becomes the parent they confide more in. This is not wrong but a reality. So, who does the talking may be determined by the unique family dynamic. In all of this, there is need for a collaborative engagement among parents in the formation of their kids, and more especially in peculiar issues of this kind.

d) Should we talk to our children individually or together?

The answer to the question is 'both'. Open conversation about sex within the family

dynamics includes group discussions about the social issues, and maybe even about pregnancy and birth. Certainly, instilling personal convictions in children requires individual conversations. We have already noted that the ages of the children are important determinants in shaping the content of engagement of the parents with their children. One may be required to discuss more with an older child in private so as not to expose younger children to unwarranted and unnecessary information. To be exposed to such information when not ready, may become counterproductive and as such completely detrimental to the growth of the child it was meant to support. Open and honest conversations in family life both individually and together require that a parent feel comfortable with the dialogue. This requires some work, but it is worth it in the end.

e) What can I do to overcome my own issues of embarrassment with discussions about sex?

This forms a strong crux of our discussion so far. A person who has the responsibility of molding the character of another person must himself or herself be formed before he or she can truly form another. If a parent does not possess a reasonable mastery of his or her emotions, and sincerely struggle to overcome his or her embarrassment, then he or she would find it difficult to meaningfully respond to the challenges faced by his or her children in relation to sex education and awareness. It is important for parents to work hard to overcome embarrassment in this area. You can do several things to prepare yourself to adequately parent your children. First, talk to the Lord in prayers about your own sexual experiences. Consciously and calmly playback your mind to your youthful days and allow the experiences of the time to serve as a guide. Try to discover your areas of strength and weaknesses and consciously keep the two in view, since lessons from them will be of immense benefit. This, of course, demands energy and strength, since it is not easy to confront issues of the past, especially where they are hurtful. Care must be taken to not slip into depression or to endlessly accuse oneself over past failures and mismanaged opportunities; but to explore the experiences of the past for the advantages of the present. This could also be a healing process in cases of past hurts. Second, thank the Lord for your own sexuality. Acknowledge God in this important area of your life and you will certainly experience tremendous relief from anxiety and embarrassment.

Meanwhile, if you had it all smooth and figured out while growing up, you might want to use the experiences of others in the society to imagine how to respond to your child in a proactive way. Imagine your unmarried daughter pregnant at 17 or your unmarried son fathering a child at 18. You would want to do everything you can now to prevent this from happening. Recognizing that your kids are in the danger of making mistakes in a highly sexualized society, will fuel your desire to overcome any personal issues and allow you to be proactive with your kids in this area.

What about sex on digital technologies?

The television set, smartphones, computers and the Internet have become a source of worry to many parents. This is a legitimate source of worry to responsible parents. Many parents are concerned about how television portrays sexual issues and sexual behavior. A lot of programs and commercials have one sexual package or the other ingrained in their content, even when the item in discourse or the advertised item has nothing to do with the sexual coloring. Sexual appeal, as it is called in advertising, is now used out of context. For instance, what has a brand of beer got to do with beautiful ladies in bikini? Unfortunately, this has become a daily routine in the television and social media industry. It is therefore the duty of parents to search out the programs with healthy content for their kids. Some programs are beautifully packaged for the welfare of children and family life.

You can use television to strengthen your communication with your child. In earlier recommendation concerning the media, parents are encouraged to watch TV with their child and to use the programs as a springboard for discussions. Use some of these opportunities to discuss sexuality, real-life issues and family values with your child. In addition, parents can limit television viewing to programs that they feel are appropriate for their children.

Be an approachable parent

Let your children know they can come to you with questions. Starting early with sexual education can help you communicate with your child now and during the challenging teen years. Some guidelines to help you become an approachable and communicative parent are:

- Let your child know that he or she can come to you for information.
- Be willing to repeat information until your child understands. Repetition, they say, is emphasis. Do not be bored by repetition, and do not just do it merely for the sake of it, or derive unnecessary joy in it.
- Check out what your child already knows by asking what he or she thinks.
- Keep your answers simple. Think about what your child can and cannot understand.
- Realize it is okay to say, 'I don't know.' At the same time, it may not also be helpful to manifest ignorance at every question. Knowledge is power, and every parent must endeavor to be informed and be able to make relevant contributions on important issues of discourse. Not necessarily in all, but reasonably on some at least. There are many good books for you and your child to read together.
- Relax. You want to help your child understand that sexuality is a valuable part of

human experience. Review the facts of reproduction if you need to.

- Have a sense of humor and make this learning experience fun for yourself and your child as well.

To become more comfortable talking about sex with your child, privately practice it first. Discuss a topic with yourself in the bathroom mirror, talk with a friend or role-play with your husband or wife, switching roles of child and parent. Imagine as much as you can all the possible questions the child can posit and carefully search for answers to these, without ignoring the consequences every step and word could make on the child.

Choose books carefully

When selecting a book on sexuality for your child, it is important that you read it first. A book may be more explicit than you think, or you may find you need time to practice reading it aloud. Look for books that:

- Are clearly written in a child-friendly manner so that your child can easily understand it.
- Treat men and women in their uniqueness but without necessarily placing them in stereotypical social roles.

Consider the author's background. For example, a priest, pastor or religious sister may write from his or her religious perspective. A physician may focus on the physical aspect of sexuality rather than moral or emotional views. Make sure that whatever book you are using is either based on the principles of the Bible concerning sex or not contradictory or contrary to them.

Saving Children from Sexual Abuse: What parents should know

Child⁴² sexual abuse is any interaction between a child and an adult (or another child) in which the child is used for the sexual stimulation of the perpetrator or an observer. The central characteristic of any abuse is domination of the child by the perpetrator through deception, force, or coercion into sexual activity. Children, due to their age, *cannot* give meaningful consent to sexual activity. This topic is very important given the daily occurrences that are reported in Nigerian media. Hence, we consider giving some tit-bits adapted from the research by the American Psychological Association (APA) very appropriate since some of the issues here are universally applicable.

⁴² For our purposes in this section, the term "child" includes adolescents below the age of consent.

⁴³ American Psychological Association, "Child Sexual Abuse," <http://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/child-sexual-abuse.aspx> (accessed 21 March, 2018).

Child sexual abuse includes touching and non-touching behaviors⁴³ that are considered inappropriate:

- sexual kissing
- inappropriate touching or fondling of a child's genitals, breasts, or buttocks
- masturbation
- oral-genital contact
- sexual or digital (with fingers) penetration
- pornography (forcing a child to view or use of the child in casting)
- child prostitution
- exposure or "flashing" of body parts to a child
- voyeurism (ogling of the child's body for fantasy)
- verbal pressure for sex

Who are the victims of child sexual abuse?

Children of all ages, races, ethnicities, cultures, and economic backgrounds are vulnerable to sexual abuse. Child sexual abuse occurs in rural, urban, and suburban areas. It affects both girls and boys in all kinds of neighborhoods and communities, and in countries around the world.

Who are the perpetrators of child sexual abuse?

- Most children are abused by someone they know and trust.
- An estimated 60% of perpetrators of sexual abuse are known to the child but are not family members, e.g., family friends, babysitters, childcare providers, neighbors, or even teachers.
- About 30% of perpetrators are family members, e.g., fathers, brothers, uncles, cousins.
- Just 10% of perpetrators are strangers to the child.
- In most cases, the perpetrator is male regardless of whether the victim is a boy or girl. Heterosexual and gay men are equally likely to sexually abuse children. A perception that most perpetrators are gay men is a myth and a harmful stereotype.
- Some perpetrators are female. It is estimated that women are the abusers in about 14% of cases reported among boys and 6% of cases reported among girls.
- Child pornographers and other abusers may contact children via the Internet.
- Not all perpetrators are adults. An estimated 23% of reported cases of child sexual abuse are perpetrated by individuals under the age of 18.

Other common characteristics of perpetrators

- A history of abuse (either physical or sexual),
- Alcohol or drug abuse,
- Little satisfaction with sexual relationships with adults,
- Lack of control over their emotions,
- Mental illness in some cases.

How prevalent is child sexual abuse?

- Research has shown that approximately 1 in 6 boys and 1 in 4 girls are sexually abused before the age of 18.
- However, accurate statistics on the prevalence of sexual abuse of children and adolescents are difficult to collect because it is vastly underreported and there are differing definitions of what constitutes sexual abuse.
- Boys (and later, men) tend not to report their victimization, which may affect statistics. Some men even feel societal pressure to be proud of early sexual activity regardless of whether it was unwanted.
- Boys are more likely than girls to be abused outside of the family.
- Most mental health and child protection professionals agree that child sexual abuse is *not uncommon* and is a *serious problem* in most nations of the world today.

Children with disability and the risk of abuse

Children with disabilities are at elevated risk of abuse, particularly, if the disability impairs their perceived credibility, e.g., blindness, deafness, and mental retardation. Those with a prior history of sexual victimization are extremely likely to be victimized. Some research estimates an increased risk of over 100%.

Family characteristics as risk factor

- Absence of one or both parents is a risk factor
 - Some research found that children living with only one biological parent are twice more vulnerable to the risk of sexual victimization.
 - Children living without both biological parents were at three times the risk of sexual victimization.
- Older children from father-only families were also at increased risk of sexual victimization compared to other children.
- Presence of a stepfather in the home doubled the risk of sexual victimization for girls.

Parental characteristics associated with increased risk

- Researchers have found that parents with a history of childhood sexual victimization are at an estimated risk 10 times greater for having a sexually abused child
- Multiple caretakers for the child
- Caretaker or parent who has multiple sexual partners
- Drug and/or alcohol abuse
- Stress associated with poverty
- Social isolation and family secrecy
- Child with poor self-esteem or other vulnerable state
- History of abuse among other family members (e.g., siblings, cousins)
- Unsatisfactory marriage or intimate partner violence for the mother
- Parents leaving child at home alone without adequate supervision

What are the effects of sexual abuse?

- Not all sexually abused children exhibit symptoms (some estimate up to 40% of children are asymptomatic) however others experience serious and long-standing consequences.
- Child sexual abuse can result in both short-term and long-term harm, including mental health problems that extend into adulthood.
- Sexual abuse can affect psychological, emotional, physical, and social domains of the child's life, including increased risk for:
 - a) Depression
 - b) Guilt
 - c) Fear
 - d) Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
 - e) Dissociative and anxiety disorders
 - f) Eating disorders
 - g) Poor self-esteem
 - h) Somatization, i.e., the expression of distress in physical symptoms
 - i) Chronic pain

Behavioral problems can include,

- a) Sexualized behavior – which brings elevated risk for pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections
- b) School/learning problems
- c) Substance abuse
- d) Destructive behavior
- e) Sexual dysfunction in adulthood

- f) Criminality in adulthood
- g) Suicide

What are the warning signs of sexual abuse?

Consider the possibility of sexual abuse when the child exhibits:

- An increase in nightmares and/or other sleeping difficulties
- Angry outbursts
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Difficulty walking or sitting
- Withdrawn behavior
- Pregnancy or contraction of a venereal disease, particularly if under the age of 14
- Propensity to run away
- Refusal to participate in physical activities
- Regressive behaviors depending on their age (e.g., return to thumb-sucking or bed-wetting)
- Reluctance to be left alone with a particular person or people
- Sexual knowledge, language, and/or behaviors that are unusual and inappropriate for their age

Nonchalant attitudes ought to be completely avoided in the rearing and upbringing of children. Every report by a child must be taken seriously. Presumption can be very catastrophic here, and negligence of any sort could be regrettable. Take it very seriously when a child reports sexual abuse by anyone. However, this does not imply that one jumps into conclusion of sexual abuse once these symptoms are shown. Care should be taken to get to the truth of the matter. Meanwhile, make sure that you know your child's friends and their families. If you feel uneasy about leaving your child with someone, don't do it. Sometimes it is best to let your instincts lead you.

Prevention: What steps can parent or caregivers take?

Teach your children:

- Basic sexual education - a health professional can provide basic sexual education to your children if you feel uncomfortable doing so.
- That sexual advances from adults are wrong.
- To communicate openly - they should feel free to ask questions and talk about their experiences. Make it clear that they should feel free to report abuse to you or any other trusted adult. If you are concerned about possible sexual abuse, ask questions.
- The difference between 'okay' and 'not okay' touches.

- Accurate names for their private parts and how to take care of them (i.e., bathing, wiping after bathroom use) so they don't have to rely on adults or older children for help.
- That adults and older children never need help with their own private parts.
- That they can make decisions about their own bodies and say 'no' when they do not want to be touched or do not want to touch others (including refusing to give hugs).

What should parents do if they suspect abuse?

- Give the child a safe environment in which to talk to you or another trusted adult.
- Encourage the child to talk about the abuse, but be careful not to suggest events that may not have occurred.
- Guard against displaying emotions that would influence the child's account of what happened. Listen, stay calm, and remain supportive of the child with words and gestures.
- Reassure the child that he or she did nothing wrong.
- Seek assistance for the child from a psychologist or other licensed mental health provider.
- Arrange for a medical examination for the child. Select a medical provider who has experience in examining children and identifying sexual and physical trauma. It may be necessary to explain to the child the difference between a medical examination and the abuse incident.
- Many states require that individuals who know or suspect that a child has been sexually abused must report the abuse to local law enforcement or child protection officials.
- Ask for help - There are a number of organizations focused on providing assistance to families dealing with child abuse

Concluding Tips for Parents

Responsible parenthood is not an easy task. To *be there* for your children is an all embracing, lifelong assignment. It can sometimes be challenging to manage the demands of the daily pressure arising from work and home. It is not often so easy to maintain a balance between these pressures, in addition to responding to weekend social events and some decent bonding time with the kids and spouse or even get some time for oneself. It is normal to feel frazzled and overwhelmed and you may even imagine that you just cannot keep up with the demands of life every day.

An unmanaged stress can heat up the family and create unnecessary tension among

family members. Parents therefore must endeavor to keep their stress under check so as not to transfer it to the children and by so doing, upset the peace of the home. When parents allow stress to overcome them, the possibility of health breakdown in whatever form is likely to set in. When the effectiveness of parents is terribly impaired and injured by stress, the children are bound to become the most unfortunate victims. Happy and relaxed parents are a source of joy to themselves and to the entire family. They are energized to respond effectively to the family demands. They can be more tuned to their children, take care of them better and have more fun with them. Parents are a child's guide to life and the fountain of that most important emotion - love. It therefore follows that when the guide is injured and disoriented, the entire family, especially the children lose their orientation and may feel directionless. Notwithstanding that life itself is punctuated with stress of various kinds, one must not allow himself or herself to be overwhelmed by these to the point of being defined by them. Simply put, every undue stress must be considered as an enemy that must be dealt with, and when one is stressed, honest effort must be made immediately to deal with it accordingly. Below are some helpful tips to avoid and beat stress.

Always try to be in the present!

The family life is always a theater of activities. While this helps the family life not to be boring, it also means a life fully packed with stress, when one attempts to meet up with all the demands. Confronted with this reality, the best option remains to focus on what one is doing and resist every temptation to be consumed by the past or inseparably attached to the expectations of the future. Sometimes stress is caused by trying to do too many things at a time. Mums, though great at multitasking, need to focus on one or perhaps even very few things at a time. For example, while cooking, sometimes try not take a phone call or supervise the child's homework, at the same time. Try and enjoy cooking and not make it just a chore. Put on your favorite music. Perhaps even involve your child in the cooking, depending on his or her age. And you can be cooking and spending time with your child, thereby "multitasking" in a more natural way.

Take one moment or one day at a time

- Realize that you cannot do it all. Just focus on the present and prioritize on a day-to-day basis.
- There might be days when you neglect your work and be with your children. Or there may be days when children take a backseat and you want to focus on your work or the house or even just yourself.
- Learn to say 'it is okay' and move on. Sometimes there could be moments of regret but effort must be made not to allow it to degenerate to depressive points of guilt.

Mistakes are expressive of our humanness, but should not define our worldview and future actions. Therefore, do not feel guilty. Guilt is a negative attitude and further drains positive emotion and energy. Just calm down and take one thing at a time.

The practice of meditation could be helpful

Meditation can help you focus and to stay calm. There are many ways to meditate. You need to find the one that works for you. Basically, going to a quiet spot (for instance, a chapel), closing your eyes, first let all thoughts just flow and then focus on one thing (a repetitive chant, picturing something pleasant, your favorite gospel phrase, etc.) are some basics that are a good start. You can improve with consistent practice. Meanwhile, meditative postures and regulated breathing are holistic since they are good for the body and the mind. You can even practice such breathing exercise while in your car, while in a queue or in a lift. Every bit helps.

Learn to exercise regularly

Nothing beats stress better than exercise. Exercise releases relaxing and happy hormones called endorphins that make you feel good. Walking, running, playing tennis, swimming etc. are all great ways to exercise. You can equally register with a gym or fitness center to help with discipline and consistency.

- You could take your children to the park and try to play with them.
- Wherever possible, use the stairs.

Good meals and sleep are recommended

- During times of stress, make sure that you eat good nutritious meals. Do not skip meals or over-eat. Eat slowly and enjoy eating. Sometimes, the simple basics of life can be very calming. Some major meals at least should be celebrated. It does not pay to rush through meals, since that will be a terrible disservice to oneself and to the entire family.
- Also, make sure that you are getting adequate sleep. Some tips to help you sleep: Have a warm bath (if weather is cold), have some warm milk or herbal tea before you sleep, read a good book before sleeping, meditate and bring yourself down to prayer.

Take out time for yourself

- Even if you work and are away from the kids, if you really have the urge to get away and catch some fun, do not feel guilty. Just take up some fun activity or spend time

alone. You will come out relaxed and recharged to have fun with your family.

- Take time to read, listen to music or enjoy your favorite hobby. Or take a fun class - Naija dance, poetry (Spoken Word) classes or photography classes.
- Express yourself. Expressing yourself and having a creative outlet can also soothe frayed nerves. Play a musical instrument, paint or just write. You do not have to be a professional writer. Just scribble down your thoughts in a journal. It pays really to simply jot snippets in your journal.
- Repetitive activities like knitting, needlework or breaking melon can also help you focus on the present and calm you down.
- Or some pampering like spa, massage, the beauty salon, even some retail therapy or shopping. Massage is supposed to be very beneficial for stress.
- Even doing nothing. Go to a café and have a cup of coffee or tea just by yourself - some casual reading, making a to-do list, just thinking or watching people can be very relaxing.
- If you want to go on a retreat or getaway by yourself or with someone else, go for it, if you feel it will rejuvenate you. Discuss with your spouse and make sure that you verbalize that doing so will recharge you for caring and having fun with the family. Do not be shy or hesitant. Be calm, confident and make sure you express yourself to your spouse in an objective manner. You will be surprised how understanding he or she can be if you broach it the right way.

Anticipate stress and deal with it

Life is never perfect. Anticipate times of stress and realize that the time will pass. Come up with ways to deal with that stress proactively. For example, if you have a lot going on and added to that are guests coming for a visit, get extra help so that you can spend time with the guests.

Take stock and make a list

When overwhelmed, sit down and make a list of all that you have to do and prioritize. Just the act of charting and composition of the list of your anticipated actions, will give you a sense of control and direction. You will feel calmer and will most probably realize that things are not that bad after all.

Vent

Typically, women are good at venting. To vent is to release what is in one's mind, to let the steam off. Women often vent to their friends and mothers about everything - how

tough life is; to their spouses, how unruly the kids are, a bad hair day, anything! As long as you are aware that you are venting and have a close relationship with the person you are venting to, venting can be positive and gets ‘bad stuff’ out of your system leaving you feel lighter and calmer. Having a strong, mature and reliable support group is never a bad thing.

Spend time with your spouse

- Make sure that you and your spouse spend some time with each other - communicate, catch up and have some romance in your relationship. Kids enjoy the security and fun of happy parents who love each other!
- A good dialogue, intimacy, and having fun together will strengthen and spice-up your relationship, and help you deal with things as a strong team.
- Go for a movie, a candle-lit dinner, try and have an early bed time for kids so that you can catch up with each other on an everyday basis without interruptions.
- If you have that luxury, leave the kids to bond with the grandparents and go for a getaway basking in each other.

Go out with your friends as well

As parents, sometimes, you should try and leave your families and go out with your friends. A dad's night-out or a mum's movie or lunch or a mum's night-out can be great and refreshing too. It can be a good change to interact and have fun with other folks and a change is always refreshing. Take the initiative and form a group with folks you work with or other parents in your child's school and you will be surprised how everyone will be grateful that you started a group going.

Healing power of simple things

- Sometimes, when stress consumes you, just stopping all interruptions (email, face booking, pinging, tweeting, phone calls) and just being silent can really calm you down.
- Take deep breaths. Close your eyes, inhale slowly and exhale slowly. Do this a few times. You will feel a sense of calm.
- Yes, it is tough to smile when all is going wrong. Just try and smile. You will be surprised. Remember when your child is sulking, and you say smile and they try and manage a weak smile and the smile gets only better and bigger. It is the same with you.
- Hugging can be therapeutic. When stressed, go and hug your children, your spouse, your parent, your friend... You will be surprised how that works its magic

and charges you.

- Let the stressful times pass. Instead, close your eyes and imagine something positive and relaxing, for instance, the gushing waves of the sea, a sunset, mountains, greenery, your child's smile. You will be surprised how recharged you will feel at the end of the day.

Family vacations and getaways

You could go with other families or just bond with your family. Just a change of scene and being away from home can really be relaxing and rejuvenating. Budget time and resources for these. Consider this as important as anything else.

APPENDIX I

I COMMITTED MURDER BECAUSE OF MY MOTHER A Chilling Abortion Story ⁴⁴

As parents we run the risk of providing solutions under the guise of seeking what is best for our children when at the end of the day, these are only meant to serve our own needs such as maintaining our public dignity. With such solutions, basic morality is compromised, the child is scandalized and even compelled to take decisions that leave behind scars of internal wounds that may never heal properly. The big question therefore is: In the face of moral challenges, what type of solution do you offer your child – one that is consistent with what you have taught him or her over the years or one that goes against these moral codes? Do you push your child to take decisions that ends up devastating him or her for life? You may have the best intentions, but when your child is confused because of an error he or she has made in life, do you sufficiently ensure that he or she consciously becomes part of any solution that you may come up with? This story is an attempt to grapple with the internal agitations of a child whose mother encouraged to take a solution that contradicted all he or she had believed. While the immediate problem may appear solved, a bigger one may have emerged, one that may defy any type of solution.

The Story

Sitting in my lonely apartment, furnished with the simplicity that smacks of one who either loathes materialism in its barest expression or has become uninterested with the glamour that goes with modern life-style, I could easily pass for an orphan. Stretched on the bare length of the long and only upholstery in the living room, and folded in an over-sized sweater, quivering with a fever that had left the impress of misery and depression on my face, I struggled to find some inkling of happiness in distraction. I fumbled with the T.V. remote desperately, flipping the stations in quick successions and finding no satisfaction in the movies, news channels and sports. The latest releases of the NIGEZIE could not assuage my interior restlessness, even the endless vibes of the MTV could not succeed in converting the rhythm of my mind into a fair melody. I was completely disparaged with the twirl of the cosmos encircling me at that material

⁴⁴ Ikenna Paschal Okpaleke, "I Committed Murder Because Of My Mother: A Chilling Abortion Story," *The Life Magazine* (2011/2012): 19-20.

moment. At last, I decided to seek solace in the Tele-Mass, opting for a possible virtual liturgical 'sanation'. I clicked the EWTN.

It was the evening of the 25th day of February, 2011. The Tele-Mass was not the show of the moment. Two persons were discussing. I wanted to hear them out. I remembered the show. It was THE WORLD OVER with Raymond Arroyo. I sat up to discover the topic of the day and the identity of the one being interviewed. The guest on the show was Abby Johnson, a former Director of a Texas Planned Parenthood, an international organization that has been championing female reproductive health, including abortion. Abby co-authored with Cindy Lambert a book, *THE unPLANNED*, a story of her romance with the abortion world of Planned Parenthood, which is today gathering a lot of interests. I sat further up, because there was a connection to my plight. "Has this interview the power to distract me from my pain, depression and guilt?" I quizzed interiorly. "Could this show offer me the little momentary subterfuge from the clinical and psychological demons that vindictively haunt me?" Or "Is my fresh wound about to suffer an unpalatable dressing with salt?" I sought courage in my already despicable condition and decided to stay on course.

Abby was once a pro-choice member, but now a pro-life member. She had crossed the bridge. Perhaps, more serious is the fact that she embarked on a campaign of exposing the ills of her former camp. Her book was a fire-buster. Her mouth, a human 'WikiLeaks'. She gave out a lot of information which hitherto were unknown; that Planned Parenthood receives a US Federal funding of \$363 million annually; that they make an average of \$1.2 billion annually; that they do not provide mammography services to women as they claim; that 54% of women who are having abortion were using contraceptives when they got pregnant, in other words, that contraceptives increase the rate of unwanted pregnancies; that abortion is evil, and so on and so forth. She went on and on. My fever escalated. My pulse-rate skyrocketed. As if that was not enough, she blurted out a chilling statement: "*You will never regret being a mother.*" I froze. My guilt chastised me the more. I felt at sea. I felt gone. "*What have I done?*" "*Will I ever be forgiven by God?*" "*Can I even forgive myself?*" I questioned and questioned rapidly. Some pro-choice fellows who dialed in called Abby "a liar." Yet, deep within, I knew she was telling the naked truth. Truth hurts, especially when it comes blunt. Yes, it really hurts, especially when I recalled I was pushed into doing it. It was my mother.

A naive and beautiful teenager was I. I was very pious then and so found no man worthy enough for me at that material moment. However, my naivety got the firmer grip of me when it caused an eruption of my capacity to love in the face of my unimagined fascination. Ike is his name; a masterpiece of the masculine dimension of humanity, a perfect specimen of manliness and all its concomitant paraphernalia, a handsome and

intelligent breed, a gentle and disciplined character. He had the charm that could thrill even the noblest of ladies. I couldn't but fall for his person without even enough display of the wooing antics of men. Whenever he smiled at me, my heart skipped a fraction or two. His gait was grace. His voice was soothing. He became my hero in shining amour. I jumped out of my circumstantial barricades. I could then pride myself of having 'my man', the king of my heart, whose face never ceased to dazzle mine. My world glowed and glowed. I became extravagantly happy and my beauty shone the more. I was the queen of the moment. Iyke swept me off my feet with his favorable response. I was his diva. Never have I been treated like a lady before and after. Never have I known such an effulgence of love before and after. Never have I cherished life before and after. I felt like the princess of Camelot. I beheld Canaan.

Though I was at the threshold of adulthood, I took the risk of breaking my schedule in order to be with my heartthrob. It started with text-messages to midnight calls, casual hanging-outs to real dates. Day by day, the human magnet gained strength. The first day we kissed was the 14th of February, 2008. It was Valentine. He took me to *Destinee Restaurant* on a date. In the middle of the lunch, he dropped his cutlery and looked me straight in the eye. He reached out and took my hand in his. I felt the chill run through my spine. Then, he pulled my head closer and planted a wet kiss on my lips. I nearly choked. It tasted chocolate. I felt a sensation that I had never experienced before. I wanted to beg for more but he was done for the day. After that day, the kisses became regular and from there we started tracing the outline of our carnal edifices. And so, it happened that on that fateful evening of 17th May, 2009, Iyke had invited me to the club. We danced ourselves into frenzy and when the music turned soul, he took me to the wall under the dark and gray shadow of the pale lightings of the club. He whispered into my ears and led me into an adjoining room. In the early hours of the next day, I woke up in a messy state. I had lost my virginity. That was the first burden of guilt that came my way.

At the passage of twelve days, I started feeling something but I couldn't place it. In about four weeks, the signs were glaring to my bossy mom. My monthly period was nowhere. I was pregnant. I was battered. "*Something has to be done*," she suggested, after torturing me with an overdose of scolds. Everything, according to her, was at stake; my uncompleted education, my partner's indisposition for marriage yet, the moral and social face of the family and the burden of both childbirth and child rearing. I felt my world crumbling before my very eyes. I loved Iyke and wouldn't mind becoming the mother of his son. My mother insisted and persisted upon her insistence even as her panacea contrasted with her Christian faith and practice. Recruiting the counsel of one of her girlhood friends, abortion was offered as the most possible option for me. "*This is the best thing for you to do now, my daughter. After all, most people do it these days*", she advised. I shuddered at the mention of it. "*This is murder!*" I fired back. I was fighting alone. My gallant hero was

nowhere to be found after I spilled the beans. He switched off his phone and never called me again. I was left alone to suffer my fate. However, I slept with the resistance stand of mine, trying each moment to convince myself never to accept their command. I prayed and cried, but no one seemed to have heard me. I felt like the unwilling lamb that was forcibly led to the slaughter house.

I remember with utter disgust how the medical doctor, I mean, the abortionist without fear of sounding immodest, reached into me with his forceps and carted my baby away. It was already six weeks by now. I remember with utmost horror how tiny droplets of blood were dripping off the remains of my innocent one. I remember with capital hate how the imp nurses tried to convince me that it was no murder, but the removal of a 'tissue' from my system. I remember the look on my mother's face, how strange she appeared. Today would have marked the first birthday of my child if he or she were born. I would have helped my baby blow off the first candle of life, rather I became an accomplice, a signatory to the extinguishing of this very life. I became a murderer. How can I live to forgive myself? How can I bear this unbearable guilt? How can I forgive my mother who dribbled me into making the wrong choice? Today, my options stare me into my face. I could have eloped. I could have gone to a motherless babies' home. I could have sought help outside my private wailings. Abby has opened my wounds. She has marked the anniversary of my trauma in a most painful way. I regret that I could not mother the child I murdered.

Still on the now wet couch, I managed to rise and kneel. No one else would understand my story except the one that understands all things. Of course, my ordeal was kept from the world in order to keep my face, but before Him I had lost the face long ago. I think I am ready to reclaim it though I doubt if I would be easily forgiven. I had many things to pray for and knew not where to begin. I needed to pray for my forgiveness. I needed to pray for the forgiveness of my mom and her counsellor and all other accomplices. I needed to pray for the courage to forgive my mother who had since become my bitterest enemy. I needed to pray for the strength to pick up my pieced life and go on. I needed to pray for the capacity to love and to present myself for love again in yet a deep way. I needed to pray for the healing of my wounds. I needed to pray for my child to forgive me. I needed to pray to avoid giving bad counsels even when it hurts badly to do the right thing. Just as I was about to kneel, my mom bumped in.

APPENDIX II

POPE FRANCIS ON PARENTING

Excerpts from *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love)⁴⁵

The Essential Role of Parents

Parents always influence the moral development of their children, for better or for worse. It follows that they should take up this essential role and carry it out consciously, enthusiastically, reasonably and appropriately (no. 259).

Parents need to consider what they want their children to be exposed to, and this necessarily means being concerned about who is providing their entertainment, who is entering their rooms through television and electronic devices, and with whom they are spending their free time. Only if we devote time to our children, speaking of important things with simplicity and concern, and finding healthy ways for them to spend their time, will we be able to shield them from harm. Vigilance is always necessary and neglect is never beneficial (no. 260).

Helping Children Mature

What is most important is the ability lovingly to help [children] grow in freedom, maturity, overall discipline and real autonomy. Only in this way will children come to possess the wherewithal needed to fend for themselves and to act intelligently and prudently whenever they meet with difficulties. The real question, then, is not where our children are physically, or whom they are with at any given time, but rather where they are existentially, where they stand in terms of their convictions, goals, desires and dreams (no. 261).

Inevitably, each child will surprise us with ideas and projects born of that [inherent inner personal] freedom, which challenge us to rethink our own ideas. This is a good thing. Education includes encouraging the responsible use of freedom to face issues with good sense and intelligence (no. 262).

⁴⁵Pope Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation (19 March, 2016), *Amoris Laetitia, On Love in the Family* (Rome: Vatican Press, 2016).

Moral Training of Children

A person's affective and ethical development is ultimately grounded in a particular experience, namely, that *his or her parents can be trusted* [emphasis added]. This means that parents, as educators, are responsible, by their affection and example, for instilling in their children trust and loving respect. When children no longer feel that, for all their faults, they are important to their parents, or that their parents are sincerely concerned about them, this causes deep hurt and many difficulties along their pathway to maturity (no. 263).

Parents are also responsible for shaping the will of their children, fostering good habits and a natural inclination to goodness. . . . Moral formation should always take place with active methods and a dialogue that teaches through sensitivity and by using a language child can understand (no. 264).

Good habits need to be developed. Even childhood habits can help to translate important interiorized values into sound and steady ways of acting (no. 266).

Moral education has to do with cultivating freedom through ideas, incentives, practical applications, stimuli, rewards, examples, models, symbols, reflections, encouragement, dialogue and a constant rethinking of our way of doing things; all these can help develop those stable interior principles that lead us spontaneously to do good (no. 267).

Correcting Children Lovingly

It is also essential to help children and adolescents to realize that misbehavior has consequences. They need to be encouraged to put themselves in other people's shoes and to acknowledge the hurt they have caused. Some punishments—those for aggressive, antisocial conduct—can partially serve this purpose. It is important to train children firmly to ask forgiveness and to repair the harm done to others (no. 268).

Children who are lovingly corrected feel cared for; they perceive that they are individuals whose potential is recognized. This does not require parents to be perfect, but to be able humbly to acknowledge their own limitations and make efforts to improve. Still, one of the things children need to learn from their parents is not to get carried away by anger. A child who does something wrong must be corrected, but never treated as an enemy or an object on which to take out one's own frustrations. Adults also need to realize that some kinds of misbehavior have to do with the frailty and limitations typical of youth. An attitude constantly prone to punishment would be harmful and not help children to

Appendix II

realize that some actions are more serious than others. It would lead to discouragement and resentment . . . (no. 269).

Patience is Needed

In proposing values, we have to proceed slowly, taking into consideration the child's age and abilities, without presuming to apply rigid and inflexible methods. The valuable contributions of psychology and the educational sciences have shown that changing a child's behavior involves a gradual process, but also that freedom needs to be channeled and stimulated, since by itself it does not ensure growth in maturity (no. 273).

The Importance of Family Life

The family is the first school of human values, where we learn the wise use of freedom. Certain inclinations develop in childhood and become so deeply rooted that they remain throughout life, either as attractions to a particular value or a natural repugnance to certain ways of acting (no. 274).

. . . One of the most important tasks of families is to provide an education in hope. . . When children or adolescents are not helped to realize that some things have to be waited for, they can become obsessed with satisfying their immediate needs and develop the vice of "wanting it all now." This is a grand illusion which does not favor freedom but weakens it. On the other hand, when we are taught to postpone some things until the right moment, we learn self-mastery and detachment from our impulses. When children realize that they have to be responsible for themselves, their self-esteem is enriched. This in turn teaches them to respect the freedom of others (no. 275).

The Need for Sex Education

The Second Vatican Council spoke of the need for "a positive and prudent sex education" to be imparted to children and adolescents. . . It is not easy to approach the issue of sex education in an age when sexuality tends to be trivialized and impoverished. It can only be seen within the broader framework of an education for love, for mutual self-giving. In such a way, the language of sexuality would not be sadly impoverished but illuminated and enriched. The sexual urge can be directed through a process of growth in self-knowledge and self-control capable of nurturing valuable capacities for joy and for loving encounter (no. 280).

Young people need to realize that they are bombarded by messages that are not beneficial for their growth towards maturity. They should be helped to recognize and to seek out

positive influences, while shunning the things that cripple their capacity for love (no. 281).

Passing on the Faith

Raising children calls for an orderly process of handing on the Faith. This is made difficult by current lifestyles, work schedules and the complexity of today's world. . . . Even so, the home must continue to be the place where we learn to appreciate the meaning and beauty of the Faith, to pray and to serve our neighbor. . . .

Handing on the faith presumes that parents themselves genuinely trust God, seek Him and sense their need for Him . . . (no. 287).

Children need symbols, actions and stories. Since adolescents usually have issues with authority and rules, it is best to encourage their own experience of faith and to provide them with attractive testimonies that win them over by their sheer beauty. . . . It is essential that children see that, for their parents, prayer is something truly important. Hence moments of family prayer and acts of devotion can be more powerful for evangelization than any catechism class or sermon (no. 288).

In all families the Good News needs to resound, in good times and in bad, as a source of light along the way. All of us should be able to say, thanks to the experience of our life in the family: "We come to believe in the love that God has for us" (1 Jn. 4:16).

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Every generation the world has ever seen have witnessed the evolution of things, the so-called 'signs of the times'. In this cycle, humans are not left out. *The Art of nurturing* is a life manual for the new generation parents who are open to being teachable to the evolving world which their children live in. The insights shared are arrows in the hands of the modern day parent who wishes to be on top of his or her parental responsibilities. The work broadly covers a range of social, emotional, religious and intellectual awareness every new generation parent needs in the tool box.

The Art of Nurturing is a well thought-out and carefully written book. The principles discussed in it cover every stage of the development of a child from infancy to teenage years. As a mother, I find its methodical and holistic approach easy to understand and apply. It is a must read for anyone interested in mastering the science of parenting.

Chisom C. ONWUMERE -

Mother, CEO Somchiz Kiddies Home.

In a time where one wants to avoid personal responsibility, the authors dare to place the fundamental interest of parents in the upbringing of children back on the foreground. In a non-moralizing style they bring many elements that are worth looking at in the education of children. However, this book is not just for parents. Everyone who is involved in the education of children will find this book worthwhile and highly original: parents, but also grandparents, teachers, leaders in a youth movement, catechists and priests/pastors. Indeed, I consider this book a must for anyone with a big heart for the education of children, in Nigeria and Africa, but also far beyond.

Joseph JANSSEN -

Belgian author and Director, Saint-Francis College.

The book is informative, educating and very interesting as it touches major aspects of nurturing children towards being useful to themselves and the society at large. I unreservedly recommend it to parents, guardians, teachers and anyone who is in the duty of mentoring and nurturing children. This is the best I have ever read on the topic!

Chiamaka ILOBI-CHIMEZIE -

Mother and Executive Director, Chimex Phoneland

The Art of Nurturing is an encapsulation of all facets of child upbringing. The authors are able to illustrate the relevance of religious and social obligations of parents and they skillfully blended these views to accommodate the exigencies of a modern day parent. Their ability to proffer solutions that will help parents to explore the hearts, minds and ways of the growing child is highly commendable.

Roseline Ihuoma NDIMELE -

Mother, Community Leader and Professor of Linguistics, Abia State University.

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