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Domestic Violence and the Education of the Nigeria Pre – School Child

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Introduction

Literature tells us about three different views of children each relating to different era of civilization. The first is during the Greco – Roman times. During this period children were taken to be miniature adult and this depicted in the acts and paintings of that period. Children were not accorded any special status. As miniature adults, they were allowed to work on the fields and farms with little or no attachments to parents.

The second is the medieval period. With the decline of the Greco-Roman civilization, Christianity came to the fore. Under the religious tenets, man was born evil and so children were regarded as sinful, immoral and therefore their sinful nature needed to be exorcised through religious teachings and practices. As sinners, children were seen to be bad creatures and were subjected to various kind of punishment aimed at purging off their sinful nature.

Thirdly, is the age of enlightenment which emerged with the decline of the church. One the great philosophers of the time – John Locke (1632 – 1604), believed that a child's mind was a Tabular Rasa – a blank tablet on which experiences write, thereby determining the child's future. According to Locke, children were not innately bad but required adult-directed experiences to become good adult in future. Locke's proposition was opposed by another notable psychologist – Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712 – 1778).

Rousseau proposed what Santrock (2003) called 'innate goodness' view of children. Rousseau in book Emile, laid the foundation of what is known today as 'progressive or child – centred education'. Rousseau felt that education should adapt itself to the needs and abilities of children and not simply reflect adult priority. In a sense Rousseau was the first child psychologist. He observed children carefully and noted how they behaved and learned and tried to adapt education to the child's level of development.

Judging from the way and manner Nigerians handle their children, it appears we are still in the dark ages when children were accepted to be born sinful and evil and needed to be exorcised through punishment or that they are miniature adult that have to carry out our instructions and be molded into the image we carve out for them. This may be the reason behind our violence attitude to children accusing them of witchcraft and wizardry.

MEDIEVAL BELIEF IN WITCRAFT AND WIZARDRY

Recently in Nigeria children accused of witchcraft or wizardry face untold hardship, stigma and torture in the hands of family members and the society at large. The belief and practice of witchcraft and wizardry did not start and end in Africa with Nigeria inclusive. It has been an age long religion in the white man's country. The activities of witches and sorcerers are mentioned in the Bible. During the dark ages witches young and old were burnt alive in Europe. Things are different now. Witchcraft and wizardry in advance country have legalized institution from places of satanic worship to institution of

learning. It is a religion open to all who desire to be members. A visit to the internet gives you all the information you want including registering to be a witch online. One of the most recent children literatures or witchcraft and wizardry – Harry Potter – became international sell – out and translated into many languages and even translated into movie. Mentioning this piece on witches and wizards is very important because of the degree of violence meted out to Nigerian children that are accused of being a witch.

NIGERAINS' VIOLENT CHILD REARING PRACTICES

Most of our child rearing practices is now categorized under child abuse. Most Nigerians still do not acknowledge that fact and rather chose to use the word 'culture' to defend violent attitudes towards children even from birth. Western education to a large extent has not positively influenced our child rearing practices. UNICEF's report (2008) on violence against children in Nigeria is stated thus:

Physical and psychological violence against children occur both in schools and within families – not to mention violence that affect children living on the streets or exploited by adults. Although educational institutions should have the capacity to train and socialize children without exposing them to violence, corporal punishment is still considered as a positive educational tool. Reliable data on violence against children in Nigeria is scare because violence is often not reported as it occurs mostly within the content where it is regarded as 'normal' such as within the family circle or behind the privacy of homes. The predominant cultural belief is that children must be submissive to elders therefore behaviour not in conformity with this is punished. The Committee on the Right of the Child noted with concern that there is a generally high level of acceptance of domestic violence even amongst lawenforcement officers and court personnel. Another in Nigeria despite the various policies and legislations that have been put in place against the practice. Consequences of this practice include infibulations, shock due to serve bleeding, intense pain due to the traditional methods usually used, risk of HIV/AIDS and death in some cases.

1. THE CRIES OF OUR INFANTS

Our children from birth experience violence from their care – givers including their mothers. The cries of babies that should attract attention, love and care, usually attract shouts, spanks and screening from care – givers at home, in day – care centres and even in schools. Violent statements such as, 'shut up', 'I will slap you', 'when you are tired you stop crying' are screamed at children as young as two years old.

2. THE EIGHT-DAY RITUALS

The baby goes through harmful rituals on the eight day of his birth. Elaborate ceremonies are conducted for naming of children on the eight day in most communities in Nigeria. The newly born is exposed to noise and more importantly he or she experience the taste of hot pepper in the mouth as one of the rituals of the ceremony; signifying the difficult ahead. Circumcision for either baby boy or girl is done on that same eight day as culture demands. The female circumcision (Female Genital Mutilation – FGM), is still practiced in some communities as culture demands.

3. CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Pre – school kids are tutored and raised up under the culture of violence. Children are flogged,

punished and beaten for any misbehaviour in the home and in the classroom. Some families starve the children of food as a form of punishment. Studies have proved that what happens in the classroom is not developmentally appropriate for our pre – school children (Idogo, 1987, 2010). It is a common sight to see a child of three trekking a long distance with his or her senior siblings to school. When the child cannot meet up with the senior she receives, spanking or flogging from the senior to hasten up.

4. CHILD LABOUR

We still see children as miniature adults that are expected to carry out some duties at home, in the farm and in the market beginning from age three. There is a proverb that says, 'the child is the father of the man'. Indeed, the child starts fathering the man from a tender age. Children (under six year of age) hawk during school hours and some do not even go to school but have to assist one way or the other to subsidize the family income.

EFFECT OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ON PRE – SCHOOL CHILDREN

Child abuse and domestic violence often occur in the same family and are linked in a number of important ways that have serious consequences for the safety of all family members as well as for members of the larger community. First, where one form of family violence exists, there is a strong likelihood that the other one does too. Second, research shows that the impact on children of witnessing parental domestic violence is strikingly similar to the consequence of being directly abused by a parent, and both experiences are significant contributors to youth violence. Third, many of the factors highly associated with the occurrence of child abuse are also associated with domestic violence, and many of these are the same factors that put children at risk for youth violence and adult violence crime.

Studies suggest that family violence is oftentimes transferred to the children especially from their mothers who tend to express their revenge on their children. Pre – school children regress developmentally, and suffer from series of behavioural problems such as insomnia, nightmare, anxiety and violence towards their mates. Domestic violence has many effects on the different levels of the child's cognitive development. Attachment to caregivers which is an important aspect of the child's development is negatively affected. Some long – term affects from witnessing violence hurts the child's psychologically development and later on having difficulty with their behaviour and emotional problems.

THE EFFECT OF VIOLENCE ON THE CHILD'S BRAIN

About 98% of the child's brain is formed by age three years. Babies are born learning. The science of brain development tells us that the first three year of life are very important for building the young child's brain. The brain doubles in size by the child's first year. During this time the brain is preparing the ground work for a lifetime of learning and the future school success. Brain formation is influenced by what happens to it before and after birth. The impact of the mother's emotional state on the baby's brain is very crucial. Studies suggest that pregnancies marked by excessive fear, emotional stress and anger may produce irritable infants. Intense feeling release chemicals which affect the brain's functioning by passing from the mother's blood stream into the circulatory system of the infant.

After birth, the newborn's brain is wonderfully malleable to experience. Early experience can dramatically alter the way genes are expressed in the developing brain. Good experiences help the

brain developing well (Lally 1998). Each child weaves his or her own intellectual tapestry, the quality of which depends on active interest and involvement in a wide variety of stimuli. The home environment provides the raw material for the growth and development of the brain. In a home where domestic violence exists, it will surely have a detrimental effect on the child's brain – whoever is the victim of the violence. This assertion is supported by the studies listed below:

1. In Teicher, M.H. (2002), teachers provides an in – depth overview of studies suggesting that early maltreatment can have enduring and measurable effect on a child's developing brain, diminishing growth and reducing activity in key areas.
2. The U.S. department of Health and Human Services (2001) published the findings of a study conducted with approximately 826,000 children who were victims of abuse and or neglect. Each one of these children already may have suffered damage to their growing brains. Their brains may locked into perceiving the world as cold or dangerous place. They may have great difficulties responding to the caring concern of others. Because their brains energies have been developed the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional capabilities one would expect of them.
3. Bremner, J.D. (1999), conducted a study on the lasting effects of psychological trauma on memory and the hippocampus. The result showed that childhood abuse and other extreme stressors can have lasting effect on brain areas involved in memory and emotion. He further stressed that the hippocampus is brain area involved in learning and memory that is particularly sensitive to stress.
4. According to U.S. News & World Report (1996) fear that results from violence can also harm a child's brain and it may not be reversible. Excerpt:

“Once viewed as genetically programmed, the brain is now known to be plastic, an organ molded by both genes and experience throughout life. A single traumatic experience can alter an adult's brain: A horrifying battle, for instance, may induce the flashbacks, depression and hair – trigger response of post – traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). And researcher are finding that abuse and neglect early in life can even more devastating consequences, tangling both the chemistry and the architecture of children's brain and leaving them at risk for drug abuse, teen pregnancy and psychiatric problems later in life.”

5. In his study of the effect of trauma in the preverbal period of infant, Gaensbauer T.J. (1995) describes five children who went through traumas during their preverbal period (7 to 15 months), and discovered that the developmental implications of early trauma, particularly if it is severe, appear to be significant.

Having considered the above clinical implication on the effects of domestic violence on the pre – school child, it behoves us to do something worthwhile to change the situation both by prevention and intervention. This is very important to getting our pre – school children ready for easy transition to formal schooling which is one of the goals of our National Policy on Education (2004).

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. CREATION OF AWARENESS

It is evident that domestic violence has debilitating multiplying effect on the individual, the family and the

society at large. The first step towards the control of domestic violence is to create awareness through the media and various agencies related to health. Awareness of the effect of domestic violence on children is essential so that every one would be informed especially those who live rural communities. Awareness creation should also be extended to parents. Seminars and workshops on good parenting should be organized for young couples planning to have children and to expectant mothers.

Inclusion of the effects of domestic violence in the school curriculum would go a long way to equip the teacher on how to handle children experiencing domestic violence. Parents Teachers Association is another good venue to disseminate such information to parents.

2. ESTABLISHING PREVENTIVE STRUCTURES

The most important structure is to promulgate an Act making any form of violence against children by parents a criminal offence that can earn them imprisonment or have the children taken away from them. It is not an option to love, care and educate your children. It is mandatory. Once you chose to have children, then you must be prepared to give the children all it takes to raise them up healthy and responsible citizens. It is interesting to note that some state governments in Nigeria have not accented to the Child Right Act.

The second is to have every state if not in every local government area, a government-funded child-friendly home, with trained staff, to take care of children who suffer from domestic violence. This is different from what we have in existence now; remand homes for unruly children. Such homes will be responsible to place affected children in foster homes and monitor their growth, development and education.

Parents who are involved in violence relationship and extend same to their children should be provided with clinical counselling sessions. Husbands who beat their wives in front of their children should be aware of the damage they are doing to their children's mental development. People should know that there are places to go for help if they are victims of domestic violence.

3. AVAILABILITY OF DATA

There is dearth of information in almost all areas of our children's life. We do not know what is happening to our children in their families, in their communities and in their school. How do we know if parents are violent to their children? Social welfare workers in Nigeria seem not to be making any impact. This area should be looked into and the necessary empowerment given to those concerned.

CONCLUSION

With the empirical evidence of the debilitating effect of domestic violence on our children, and its multiplying effect on all and sundry, the government should as a matter of necessity enact laws to prevent any form of domestic violence on our children. Most states have not adopted the Right of the Child Act. We should openly acknowledge that certain aspects of our culture as it relates to child – rearing practices need to be completely overhauled. Our traditional rulers, community development workers and women organizations should be made to be abreast with the research findings and assist in changing peoples' traditional belief through awareness creation in women groups especially in the rural communities.

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