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## Children's Moral Development in Nigeria: The Parents, the Teachers and the Church

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**ABSTRACT:** *Good moral development is desirable to parents, teachers, the church and the society at large for social, economic, political and technological development in Nigeria. Improper moral development leads to behavioural problems which may be worrisome to the society. This paper therefore examined the basic issues of moral development in children in the context of Nigerian society. First it delved into the meanings of morality and moral development extending it to the roles parents, teachers and the church play for moral development. Consequences of improper moral development as applicable to Nigerian society were highlighted. Conclusions were made on what should be done to inculcate morality in children and adolescents in order to transform Nigerian society for better.*

**KEYWORDS:** Mature morality, immoral, amoral, virtues, integrity, corruption, norms, ethics, culture, antisocial behaviour, active conscience, morally bankrupt.

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### INTRODUCTION

Morality was defined by Smeltzer and Bare (2014) as the system one uses to decide what is right and what is wrong, and how conscience affects choice. It was also defined by Smetana (2018) as a system of rules that regulate the social interactions and social relationships of individuals within societies and is based on concepts of welfare, trust, justice and rights. It is a state of uprightness and integrity of an individual based on the accepted social order, norms and values. Morality is contingent on ethics, culture, norms and values of a particular society. The concept of morality helps individuals to determine what is morally wrong or morally right and to pass moral judgment on the behaviours of oneself or others. Conscience plays an active role in the sustenance of morality and one's level of morality is expressed in one's code of conduct.

Moral development, on the other hand, was defined by Smeltzer and Bare (2014) as the capacity of an individual to act in accordance with conscience and moral imperativeness rather than

egocentric values. Similarly, Crittenden (2010) defined it as the process through which children develop proper attitudes and behaviours towards other people in society, based on social and cultural norms, rules and laws. Moral development of children has been of concern to parents, teachers and religious organizations the world over. Teaching children to distinguish right from wrong and to behave in accordance with predetermined rules is the primary responsibility of parents (Crittenden, 2010) supported by other individuals and groups with whom children spend their early years.

The issue of morality has generated a lot of controversy in recent times tending to tilt morality towards subjectivity and cultural linkage. Each society develops its own set of norms, values and standards for acceptable behaviours. This has given rise to confusion about what constitutes morality across various societies (Bersoff & Joan, 2013). At present, there are no cross cultural standard values, norms and ethics. However, there are apparently universal standards to limited aspects of morality and code of conduct as killing, stealing, arson, etc are regarded as immoral irrespective of the cultural setting. Given that morality is dependent upon the culture, determining the limits of moral behaviour has become increasingly difficult as human capabilities, choices, and responsibilities proliferate with advances in technology and scientific knowledge. For instance, while some societies abhor abortion, homosexuality, substance use (some people are calling for legalization of Indian hemp), euthanasia, racism, etc, some show a degree of tolerance to them by way of legislation and others may be totally indifferent to them (Schulman & Eva, 2014). This puts parents, teachers and religious groups at cross-road on how to raise morally sound children who later in life will become morally mature to transmit the same cultural values to the next generation. This is because as the parents, teachers and the church may be making some efforts trying to raise moral children, the media including social media and peer groups tinted with obnoxious foreign cultural perspectives may be working synergistically to erode the gains that are likely to be made by parents, teachers and the church.

The greatest obstacle confronting development of morality in children is hypocrisy. Those concerned with moral development of children are not living up to expectation. So, modelling morality for children is increasingly becoming difficult. Some parents quarrel and fight in the presence of children and at the same time advising the children not to fight. Cheating, stealing and other vices are perpetrated by some parents who at the same time want to raise moral children. In schools, principals and teachers collect money from students to aid and abet examination malpractices. The money meanwhile is provided by parents who are fully aware of the purpose the money is intended to serve. Each year, the standard of what is considered acceptable entertainment drastically degrades. Hollywood and Nollywood actors and actresses, who are themselves parents, push immoral concepts through moves. Fashion industry and magazines take up the baton from there offering clothing to suit these roles. Indecent dressing next to nudity has become the order of the day. Morality has now acquired a blurred meaning as children can no longer distinguish between what is morally wrong or right. Convincing a young girl these days that going almost

nude on the street or campus is wrong when she thinks that is the height of fashion is an uphill task. Radio and television stations are not left out. Playing music, doing advertisements and showing pictures that glorify immorality have become common features in these mass media. While modern society finds it difficult to stop people from committing immoral acts, individuals must realize that their actions do carry serious consequences. The reason why many problems such as crime, war, cultism, rape, killing, kidnapping, adultery, etc are exploding around us is that children are no longer given moral lessons and so can no longer differentiate right from wrong. Preaching tolerance rather than moral education is not adequate. Nigerians must understand that happiness, prosperity and fulfillment for all will not result from immoral and perverse lifestyles. We must take steps to stop Nigeria from sliding further from immoral state to amoral one-a society that has gone from decaying morals, to one without morals, without rules and without future. Morally sound children can only be produced through sustained moral lessons, guide, love and care.

Spirited efforts should be made by all and sundry to reduce high rate of turning out children who are morally bankrupt. The cost-benefit analysis for the society undoubtedly favours children who are morally mature. An appreciable percentage of children who are morally poor make the society susceptible to violence and crime which are a risk factor for underdevelopment. Therefore, it is imperative for parents/guardians, teachers, or any primary caretakers to examine what they are doing that stall the development of morality in children and how they can take proactive measures to mould the characters of their children or wards for a better society.

### **The roles of parents in moral development of children**

The family is the nucleus of the society. Whatever happens in the family extends to the larger society. A child born into a family is received with jubilation or joy. The child is seen as a blessing to the family. For the child to develop to her full potential and contribute meaningfully to the family and society, she must be nurtured properly. Parents adopt different types of parenting styles for this purpose. The four major types of parenting styles adopted by parents in nurturing the children include authoritative, authoritarian, permissive and neglectful parenting styles.

Authoritative parenting style is the parenting style where the parents make the rules, explain the rules to the children and expect the children to observe the rules and at the same time create an enabling environment for the children to keep the rules. In authoritative parenting style, demandingness and responsiveness of equal proportion are the characteristics of parents in this group. The parents usually make the rules and explain the rules to the children. Consequences for violating the rules are also spelt out to the children. The two key terms in parenting are demandingness and responsiveness. Parents should not leave children at early years to decide on what is morally right or wrong. Rather, the parents should set the standard for the children by making moral rules for the children based on the norms of the society. That is to say that parents should teach the children the codes of conduct of the society. The parents should determine the

type of things children look for in the internet or social media, the type of movies the children watch, or music they listen to, the friends they keep, where they are and with whom, the type of clothes they wear, the type of books they read, etc. Responsible parents should explain these to the children before hand and expect compliance from the children. When children do not comply, corrective measures should be taken. Parents must feel free to administer punishment as a last resort to the children when the need arises. The Bible has made us to understand that we should not spare the rod to spoil the child. So, it is important to chastise the children while giving them the direction to take so that when they grow, they will not depart from it.

On the other hand, parents must be responsive for the needs of their children. That is, parents should strive to carter adequately for their children or wards. Placing children under unbearable conditions and expecting them to be law-abiding can be counterproductive. Therefore, authoritative parents try to balance demandingness and responsiveness as children are made sufficiently happy to observe rules.

In authoritarian parenting style, parental demandingness is high while parental responsiveness is low. In this parenting style, parents make rules and expect children to strictly observe them. The rules must not be violated. The parents do not owe the children any explanation for the rules, but insist the rules must be observed. Violation of the rules is meted with heavy punishment. Children under authoritarian parenting live in fear. Raising moral children under this parenting style can be difficult as repeated physical punishment especially beating harden them or possibly compel them to run away from the home and the chances of developing antisocial behaviour by the children are high.

Permissive parenting style is the type of style where the parents give the children free hand to make decisions for themselves. Permissive parents can still be responsive to the needs of children but they are poor in demandingness as they do not direct the children or tell them what to do. Peer group influence is serious among the children of permissive parents. The children usually learn from their mistakes.

Neglectful parenting style is characterized by low demandingness and low responsiveness of the parents. In fact, demandingness and responsiveness are non-existent. Again, the children are given free hand to make and execute their decisions. Parents do not provide direction to the children. The children pilot their affairs as they please as parents do not interfere. Parents also do not place priority on taking care of the needs of the children. They do not monitor the activities of their children. Children learn from their mistakes. Peer group influence is high among the children of permissive parents and the chances of developing antisocial behaviour among the children are high.

### **The role of teachers in moral development of children**

Children spend a good proportion of their time in school and in presence of teachers. The teachers are not only interested in imparting knowledge to the children, but they also interested in molding the character of the children as imparting knowledge is almost impossible in atmosphere of unruly behaviour. School rules and regulation are usually spelt out to the students. The societal ills including fighting, stealing, indecent dressing, cheating, fraud, exam malpractices, etc are not tolerated in the school. Children who violate the rules are usually penalized so as to discourage them from repeating the mistakes or to serve as a deterrent to others. Hence, teachers go a long way to complement the efforts of the parents in character molding of the children.

However, some teachers sometimes sabotage the efforts of teachers towards the character molding of the children. Some school managers sometimes indulge in arbitrary charging of levies from the students which implies that they have tolerance for fraud. Some teachers indulge in fraudulent activities by organizing examination malpractices for the students. Furthermore, some teachers quarrel openly in the presence of the students thereby sending a wrong signal to the children.

### **The role of the church in moral development of children**

The church plays an active role in shaping the character of the children. The church preaches against immorality and the Bible made us to understand that there is no place in heaven for sinners. We are often reminded how sins offend God. In the Old Testament, people who committed sins were visited with punishments. So, the church contributes in no small measures in the moral development of children by virtuous living.

However, the activities of some churches leave much to be desired in the role of the church in moral development of children. Some churches renege on this noble role when they deviate from preaching for salvation and preach for prosperity. The new generation churches which lay emphasis on wealth for the people rather than winning soul for God are not helping in the moral development of children. For the church to succeed in the task of molding the character of children, it should be able to instill the fear of God in children. Children should be reminded that people who die in sin are sent to hell where they suffer everlasting torment which is not good for them. Children who grow up in the fear of God are of better conduct than those who grow up in the fear of parents as God is omnipresent. It is the fear of God that can regulate the behaviour of the children when they are away from the watchful eyes of the parents. Hence, the church helps to root the children in God and the fear of God keeps the children in perpetual control.

### **Consequences of improper moral development**

Mature morality is a desirable quality needed by every society for development and peaceful co-existence among the members of the society. Moral education is therefore necessary to inculcate discipline which fosters fairness and opportunities for moral reasoning and self-control (Oladipo, 2018). Parents/guardians, teachers and religious leaders should teach good morality to children

and as well demonstrate it. When children grow up amidst unfairness, vulgarity, cheating, lying, bribery, deviant behaviour, arrogance, torture and tension but are taught good virtues, they cannot see the relevance of moral education in their lives. According to Crossman (2010), psychoanalytic theory which was developed by Sigmund Freud in 1960's states that all humans have natural drives and urges that are repressed in the unconscious. Again, all humans have criminal tendencies which are curbed through the process of socialization. A child that is improperly socialized could develop a personality disturbance that causes him or her to direct antisocial impulses either inward or outward. Those who direct them inward become neurotic while those that direct them outward become antisocial and criminal citizens. Hanrahan (2006) warns that there is a high rate of transition from antisocial behaviour among children or adolescents to adult criminal activities later in life. Successful adults who once exhibited adolescent antisocial behaviour indulge in white collar crimes or other less risky crimes with a high chance of being uncaught. Longitudinal studies reported in Hanrahan (2006) revealed that as many as 71% of chronic juvenile offenders had progressed from childhood antisocial behaviour through a history of early arrests to a pattern of chronic law breaking in the United State of America. Kidnapping, embezzlement, pipeline vandalization, fraud, product adulteration, political assassination and malpractices, inflation of contract figures, kickbacks and frivolous award of salaries and allowances to politicians have become the order of the day.

Immorality breeds corruption leading to slow movement of files in offices, police extortion, bad roads, port congestions, queues at passport offices and gas stations, ghost workers syndrome, electoral irregularities among others. Based on this, Olagunju (2012) noted that:

*Corruption now appears to have become a permanent feature of the Nigerian polity. It has become completely institutionalized, entered into the realm of culture and value system. It is now a norm and no longer an aberration. The young ones are born into it, grow up in it, live with it and possibly die in it. The aged are not left out as they are re-socialized and begin to conform to it.*

A nation afflicted with improper moral development among the citizens counts her losses as bribery, fraud, extortion, embezzlement, favouritism, nepotism and parochialism conspire to rub the people of the resources needed for development. Nigeria is not an exception. This explains the infrastructural deficit Nigerian Nation is experiencing today. The hospitals and schools are not built and the few available ones are begging for renovation and equipment. Teachers, doctors and other civil servants are poorly remunerated with few or no operating equipment. The roads are not constructed or are in bad shape. Contracts for important projects are usually signed, the money released but the projects are usually abandoned. Jobs are not created, but the few available ones are given to people who have Godfathers. The manufacturing sector is weak reducing the country to import-dependent one with double digit inflation ravaging the nation. Medical tourism is the order of the day. The political office holders embark on medical treatment abroad rather than



develop the health sector thereby depleting the resources meant for development. This explains why despite the huge resources Nigeria is endowed with, there is abject poverty and infrastructural deficit in the land.

## CONCLUSION

Nigerian nation is experiencing confusion in value identification more than ever before. Children no longer have a clear-cut idea about what morality should be. At home or in school, it is difficult to find moral role models. What children observe these days in the basic moral institutions (families, schools and churches) are people who may be good in passing moral judgment but not good in moral conduct. What children need is not only moral education, they also need moral models. Moral education is teaching or instruction in moral or ethical rules of conduct (Tonbra, 2013). Moral education is needed in decision making process in order to provide value clarification directed toward good moral decision.

The task of nurturing the children to limelight is enormous. Children can only realize their potentials and contribute meaningfully to the society when they are morally upright. Rebellious and wayward children can only bring shame, grief and misery to themselves and their families as most of them may develop antisocial behaviours and later in life become adult criminals. They are most likely to experience a good number of crises in their life time. Some of them may suffer untimely death or even contribute directly or indirectly to the death of their parents or other family members.

For Nigerian nation to experience all round development, character and moral education of children and youths is a better strategy to tackle the root causes of corruption in Nigeria. Character and moral education will give the young people good moral compass, set clear standards of behaviour and enable them to acquire ethical values, such as honesty, integrity, respect, responsibility, self-discipline, active conscience and reliability, qualities necessary for good leadership.

The parents themselves should be exemplary in their conducts. Moral instruction produces more desirable results when it comes from someone of high integrity who is also a moral model than someone who cannot match his words with action or from whom does not practice what he preaches. Parents must understand the importance of keeping watch over their children. They should monitor the type of music the children listen to, the type of movies they watch and the type of peers they keep as friends. Parents need to understand that children exhibit destructive tendencies of watching pornographic materials and listening to “blue” music using handsets or other devices when they think they can do so in safety. The gains made by verbal moral instruction from parents, teachers and the church on the children’s morality can be undermined when parents, teachers and the church relax their watch over the children. So, concerted efforts to raise morally

upright children who will become leaders of tomorrow must be sustained by parents, teachers and the church. It is when this is done that collective interests rather than selfish interests will be protected and social, economic, political and technological development of the nation can be guaranteed.

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