

**THE PLACE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD TRAINING (PROVERBS 22:6)  
IN BUILDING SUSTAINABLE NIGERIAN FUTURE**

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**Abstract**

The task of training a child is imperative (Proverbs 22:6) and its importance in building sustainable future for a nation cannot be over-emphasised because, as the Yoruba say, a child that is not built (trained) will sell the house built by the parent(s). However, it has been observed that most parents, nowadays, due to economic hardship and the search for better economic opportunities had little or no time for their children's upbringing. Many parents have therefore abandoned their responsibility of providing guidance to their children in the pursuit of wealth. Consequently, many parents now take their children to childcare, as early as two months, denying them the natural touch of the mother and exposing them to strange companions at day care centres or with surrogate mothers. This no doubt threatens early childhood training which is considered the most important phase of life that determines the quality of health, well-being, learning and behaviour across life span, and given the destructiveness of the absent/pre-occupied-parent syndrome that plagues the home life and the prevalence moral decadence in Nigerian society, this paper examines the place of early childhood training in building sustainable Nigerian future. Historical-critical method is adopted and relevant books and articles on the subject matter are critically examined. As part of the findings of this research paper, building sustainable Nigerian future is going to be an illusion without proper and effective early childhood training. It is therefore recommended that structures for proper and effective early childhood training be put in place by all stakeholders, that is, parents, government and schools.

**Keywords:** Early childhood, Training/education, Proverbs 22:6, Sustainable development

**Introduction**

Training of children according to Eade is a divine responsibility<sup>1</sup>. In fact, the Jews in ancient times regarded the presence of a child within family as a mark of divine favour greatly desirable (Gen. 15:2; 30:1; Ps. 127:3; Lk 1:7, 28). The Jews taught that nothing is more important than rearing a child in godliness and discipline.<sup>2</sup> No reward in life was more satisfying than to have a "wise son or daughter" and no sorrow was greater than to have reared a "foolish son or daughter" (Prov. 10:1cf. 15:20). Thus, the Scripture enjoins parents to train their children in the way of God (Deut. 6:4 – 9). This training begins from the moment

a child is born and continues until he/she starts to attend play groups and kindergartens. The learning capabilities of humans continue for the rest of their lives but not at the intensity that is demonstrated in the preschool years. With this in mind, children need positive early training experience from their parents and other caregivers to help their intellectual, social, and emotional development and thus lay the foundation for later character formation and school success in subsequent years. The parents must early enough fill the mind of their children with God's word before they are polluted with evil ideas from the world around them.

Researches have indeed proved that children taught at an early stage hardly involve in crime in their adolescent and young adult years. But today in Nigeria, criminal acts and corrupt practices are on the increase mostly because parents nowadays do not have time to train their children at early stages before releasing them into the hands of caregivers. While responding to the challenge of moral decadence among youths, Rotimi Amaechi, the former governor of Rivers state quoted by Theodore affirmed that parents, especially mothers, owed the nation a duty to instil discipline and good moral upbringing in the younger generation.<sup>3</sup> Since the importance of early childhood training cannot be over-emphasised in building sustainable development in Nigeria, hence the significance of this paper.

### **Conceptual Definitions**

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAYEC) defines early childhood as occurring before the age of eight, and it is during this period that a child goes through the most rapid phase of growth and development. Their brains develop faster than at any other point in their lives, so these years are critical. The foundations for their social skills, self-esteem, perception of the world and moral outlook are established during these years, as well as the development of cognitive skills.<sup>4</sup> Early childhood education is encouraged for the healthy development and nurturing of all these important foundations. Trends show that more and more parents are increasingly recognising this fact.<sup>5</sup>

On another note, early childhood training or education is a broad term used to describe any type of educational programme that serves children in their preschool years, before they are of legal age to enter kindergarten. It may consist of any number of activities and experiences designed to aid in the cognitive and social development of pre-schoolers before they enter elementary school. How and where early childhood training is provided can be very different from one nation to the other.<sup>6</sup> Formally, early childhood training programmes may be designed for three, four, or five years old children, and they may be provided in childcare, daycare, nursery school, preschool, or pre-kindergarten settings. They may be located in centre-based, home-based, or public school settings, and they may be part-day, full-day or even year-round. They can be privately run, operated by a local school system, or operated by a state or federally funded

programme. However, this research focuses more on the early childhood training provided at home by the parents.

### **Biblical Basis for Early Childhood Training**

The Bible says “Train your child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Prov. 22:6). Primarily, the responsibility of training children is bequeathed to the parents and as much as possible should not be transferred to another person. Amolo<sup>7</sup> notes that among the Jews, the mother had the responsibility to teach the child in his/her early life, while the father had the sacred duty of teaching religious truth to his son and of giving him general education. However, the OT contains imageries of good and bad parenting models (Gen. 18:19; 1Sam. 1:22). For instance, Abraham is commended for raising his children in the Lord (Gen. 18:19) while Hannah relished the early childhood training of Samuel above pilgrimage to Shiloh (1Sam. 1:22). On the other hand, Ogunkunle observes that Eli failed in nurturing his sons spiritually and that wrecked the future of the entire family while Samuel’s pre-occupation with civic and religious matters at the expense of training his children resulted in the paradigm shift from theocracy to monarchy in ancient Israel.<sup>8</sup> All these reverberate and reaffirm the indispensable place of proper early childhood training in building sustainable development of a nation. In fact, the book of Proverbs is full of admonitions about upbringing of children with the effort of impacting them in both the affective and cognitive domains of learning in order to enhance healthy home and society.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, the Bible in Psalms 127: 3-5 states that

Children are an heritage of the Lord and the fruit of the womb is his reward; as arrows are in the hand of a mighty man so are children of the youth. Happy is the man that has his quiver full of them. They shall not be ashamed but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate.

Adelowo recasts that biblical passage as follows:

Trained children are a heritage of a country. They are arrows of development in the hands of a country. Happy is that country that has her domain full of well-trained youth. Such a country will not be ashamed in the committee of nations.<sup>10</sup>

In the same vein, a Yoruba adage holds that a child that is not built (trained) will sell the house built by the parent(s). This is crucial since the labour, attainments, and overall activities of parents are geared toward the well-being of their children. The fact is that every child has the tendency toward good and evil; what makes the difference is the training and it must start right from infancy by the parents. Therefore, nothing, no matter how valuable should take the place of this honourable task if the sustainability of Nigerian future is paramount. This is because of the fact that, poor upbringing creates adults who have poor values,

and who will eventually become a drain on themselves, other people, and society at large.

A parent is expected to be a trainer, nurturer and moulder of life coupled with spiritual guide. Children look to their parents and often imitate their behaviours. Therefore, it is of paramount importance for parents and children caregivers to set positive examples for their children. The hypocritical old saying “do as I say, not as I do” should be avoided as children often imitate whatever behaviour they observe, regardless of what they are told.

Most studies have confirmed that a parent has the greatest influence – greater than friend, school or the media in determining the character and direction of a child. However, the economic situation in Nigeria coupled with other factors such as the quest for women liberation,<sup>11</sup> and self-actualization<sup>12</sup> pose greater challenges to parents who are the key factors in the early childhood training. Agboluaje posits that some parents have abandoned their duty of providing guidance to their children in the pursuit of wealth which cannot be a substitute for moral teaching.<sup>13</sup> It is therefore no longer news to see children of 2 or 3 months old in day care centres or being left in the hands of surrogate mothers while the parents go about their daily businesses.

Given the above situation, Hildebrandt submits that the imperative, “train up a child in the way he should go...” (Prov. 22:6) confers anxiety and guilt to countless parents who have faced the uncertainty and confusion of child rearing.<sup>14</sup> Much of this confusion which manifests during the adolescent age as Sala notes, lie on parental failure through: 1) Deprivation of instruction and care during the important years of a child’s life, 2) Abandoning the child to television set for a tutor and, 3) Having a baby sitter for a surrogate mother. If parents around the world are failing, the result is a failing society and an unsecured future.<sup>15</sup> Above all; the home is the first school where the child learns. The child as a result acquires initial training/education from his/her parents. Indeed, the parents according to Agulana lay the psychological, moral, and spiritual foundations in the overall development of the child.<sup>16</sup> But how do we train the child to become useful to himself, the community and the nation at large? This question is answered in the next sub-heading.

### **Holistic Approach to Training a Child in Biblical Perspective**

Using a biblical model, a holistic approach to training a child right from infancy is modelled in the life of Jesus.<sup>17</sup> How Jesus’ life was shaped in a holistic fashion is revealed in Luke 2:52: Jesus grew in wisdom (mentally) and stature (physically), and in favour with God (spiritually) and men (socially). Children are impacted most effectively by a holistic approach. A holistic approach impacts life mentally, physically, spiritually and socially. Mentally, the children’s minds are trained through informal and formal education which should begin early in life. This comprises of both religious and secular education. The parents and the children caregivers should unlock the unlimited potentials of the children through right, adequate and effective education<sup>18</sup>.

Physically, children must be trained and their needs be provided for so that they can grow up to face challenges that may face them as they grow into adolescent and adulthood without fear. Spiritually, a child should be trained in the way of the Lord by exposing him/her to Scriptural passages that teach morality and godly living. Parents should make it a point of duty to pray for their children and also pray with them. They (parents) should also train their children to pray always. A prayerful child is a successful child; and a prayerful family is usually an established family. Socially, the children should be trained to love one another but dissociate themselves from bad companies. They should be taught basic things such as ethnic language, values and attitudes like honesty, integrity, respect for constituted authority, responsibility, kindness, truthfulness, forgiveness and so on. They should also be provided with computer, chatting and communicational machines but they must be thoroughly monitored and guided in using them. The training of a child must not be toyed with and should be carried out with care and love. A well-trained and successful child is an asset to himself, society, and country at large.

#### **Effects of Lack of Proper Early Childhood Training**

Lack of proper and effective early childhood training has enormous negative effects on the child, the family, the society and the entire country at large. Highlighted below are some of the effects of lack of proper and effective early childhood training<sup>19</sup>:

1. Juvenile delinquency/social misconducts
2. Involvement in criminal acts in their adolescent and young adult years.
3. Bringing disgrace /shame to parents and families.
4. Uselessness to themselves, family, society and nation at large.
5. Inability to compete educationally, socially and emotionally with other children who had proper early childhood.
6. Creation of adults who have poor values and who will eventually become a drain on themselves, others and society at large. Thus, in the contemporary Nigerian society, core moral and ethical values are being smashed daily. Hence sustainable development is elusive.
7. Sorrowful parent-child relationship in the years that follow.

#### **Benefits of Early Childhood Training**

According to Chaplin,<sup>20</sup> the following are the benefits of proper early childhood training:

1. Rest and gladness of heart to his parents and family members (Prov. 29:17; 10:1a).
2. Minimal crime and violence.
3. Higher educational levels and educational attainment.
4. No dependence on government for support.
5. Behaving in a responsible manner; path to a glorious adult life.

Those and many other benefits will enhance healthy home, society, and nation at large.

### **Early Childhood Training and Building of Sustainable Development in Nigeria**

It is a truth saying that today's children are tomorrow's leaders. Thus, attempts to build a nation without building/training the children are efforts in futility. Therefore, in building sustainable development in Nigeria, early childhood training must not be neglected or toyed- with. Chaplin posits that early childhood training/education is a critical determinant of economic development. Failure to grasp this truth not only by public policy makers but also by parents and others in society will continue to give Nigeria what we are currently experiencing in terms of low economic growth coinciding with a high level of criminality.<sup>21</sup> Thus the need for giving a child the necessary training right from infancy because every child has the tendency towards good and evil. It is the training that makes the difference.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, to train a child successfully is to achieve both human and physical development in a country.<sup>23</sup> Children that are properly trained in their early developmental years grow up to become responsible citizens wherever they find themselves. Such children will grow and contribute their quotas humanly and physically to the development of their country. Besides, the involvement of a child with proper early childhood training (if at all) in corrupt, criminal/violent practices in the society will be minimal compared to a child who lacks proper early childhood training. There is no doubt that most of the perennial problems confronting Nigeria today can largely be attributed to poor upbringing of the children. This is because of the fact that, proper early childhood training lays the psychological, social, moral and spiritual foundations in the overall development and actions of the child. No wonder why juvenile delinquency and moral decadence among the youths is increasing at a very alarming rate while corrupt practices have virtually permeated the life style of every Nigerian adult. We have to go back to the drawing board and see how the faulty foundation of poor early childhood training can be overcome.

### **Stakeholders in the Early Childhood Training/Education**

Parents are the primary caregivers as far as early childhood training is concerned and nothing, no matter how valuable should take the place of this honourable task. Parents therefore have important roles to play in building sustainable development in Nigeria by giving proper training to their children in their early developmental years. Parents should not wait until they are confronted with disaster as a teenager hits the wall before they get serious about what is happening to their teens. The parents must therefore be well equipped with necessary skills and materials to train their children in their pre-school years. But above all, parents should train their children by example. As they say, example is better than precept.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, the day care centres and early childhood schools (pre-nursery, nursery and primary schools) established by government or individuals have a great role to play in the training of children in their developmental years. Their curriculum must be appropriate for children and the teachers must be well trained. In Nigeria today, there are many private day care centres and early childhood schools admitting three months old children but not all of them have required skills, facilities and well trained teachers for that purpose. Many of such schools/centres are only opened as income yielding ventures with little or nothing positive to contribute to the training of the children in their developmental years. This is inimical to building a sustainable Nigerian future. Nigerian government should therefore as a matter of urgency set up a separate commission for early childhood training as it is in many other countries.<sup>25</sup> Essentially, the commission should be asked to formulate policies, monitor and regulate all activities regarding early childhood schools and day care centres established by government and individuals in Nigeria.

Finally, the church like any other religious organisation in Nigeria has a great role to play in the training of children in their formative years and even beyond.<sup>26</sup> Children sections of the church must be given special attention by church leaders. In fact, church leaders themselves should have special training on children ministry. Likewise, children teachers must be well trained to meet the need of the hour. Seminaries and Bible colleges should develop a curriculum on children ministry.<sup>27</sup> Above all, church must be ready to spend for the training and welfare of children. Today in Nigeria, there are many religious people but only few are godly. This can be largely attributed to the faulty foundation laid during the early childhood training. The church therefore in order to check this menace must make proper early childhood training a priority.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this paper, the following recommendations are made:

1. Nigerian government should establish a separate commission that will formulate necessary policies, monitor and regulate all activities regarding early childhood schools and day care centers in Nigeria.
2. Parents and children caregivers should be well equipped with necessary skills and materials needed for the training of children in their early developmental years.
3. Only well-trained teachers with relevant qualification(s) and/or experience should be employed to teach in early childhood schools and day care centres.
4. Parents and teachers of infants should utilise creative ideas and activities in training of children.
5. Parents should train their children by example. A father who is a drunkard, and a mother whose business is prostitution or adultery are not

on the path of training the child to be successful in life. They are a veritable source of destruction in this regard.

6. Ideal virtue of womanhood in raising children should be promoted and rewarded

### **Conclusion**

It has been established through this paper that the role of proper and effective early childhood training/education cannot be over-emphasised in building sustainable development in Nigeria. Thus, all attempts to build a glorious Nigerian future with sustainable development without proper early childhood training are tantamount to efforts in futility. Therefore, parents, government, early childhood schools, children-teachers, church and all stakeholders should work together in the building of sustainable Nigerian future and development through proper and effective early childhood training. It cannot be overemphasized that children constitute key players in the future of any nation.

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