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Family Life Education and Counselling: A Sustainable approach to Curbing Contemporary Social Problems in Nigeria

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Abstract

Many school children suffer from lack of appropriate care, love and concern from their parents, guardians and others at home. Family life Guidance and Counseling has been identified as an important aspect by many countries in the world, owing to its internationally recognized role of improving all aspects of quality life and education among school children. Although G&C programme has existed in the Nigerian learning institutions, family life education has not been given much emphasis it deserves, and this has led to emergence of so many problems that are expected to be primarily addressed at home and through joint efforts of all stakeholders in the provision of effective Guidance and Counseling services. This is a position paper of descriptive survey design type, using secondary sources aimed at presenting the concepts of contemporary social problems in Nigeria and family life education and counseling. It also discussed on family therapy counselling techniques, problems that necessitate the provision of family life counselling, family life cycle, qualifications and roles of family life counsellors. Finally, ways were suggested through which these challenges could be overcome in form of recommendations.

Keywords: Family Life Education, Counselling, Contemporary Social Problems

Introduction

A significant portion of Nigeria's contemporary social challenges can be traced to the adverse effects of broken homes and inadequate parenting. Empirical evidence underscores that children who experience insufficient or inconsistent parental attention are more prone to emotional and behavioural disorders (Omotoso, 2017). Studies conducted in Nigeria reveal that adolescents exposed to negligent or authoritarian parenting—lacking both emotional responsiveness and appropriate guidance—show elevated rates of emotional and peer-related problems (Obimakinde et al., 2018). Moreover, children from fractured family backgrounds frequently display aggression, hyperactivity, anxiety, and other academic and social challenges (Mbah, Chigozie, & Umeh, 2022). Children require consistent time, affection, and parental engagement to feel valued, develop secure attachments, and allow parents to understand their strengths and limitations—thereby facilitating effective guidance. This relational closeness also enables children to express their thoughts and emotions, strengthening the parent-child bond. Regrettably, in many developing contexts such as Nigeria, modern family life education and counselling initiatives remain severely underdeveloped. Most support is limited to pastoral or culturally traditional forms of counselling, while formal family life education and preventive counselling remains largely unprioritized, despite its potential to address numerous societal problems.

Objectives of the Study

1. To highlight on the meaning and concepts of family life education, family life counselling, family therapy counselling techniques and Family Therapy Counselling Techniques.
2. To point out the significance of family life education and counseling as a sustainable approach to curbing social problems in Nigeria.
3. To explain the various Family Therapy Counselling Techniques that can be used to help families to adapt to different life challenges.

Concept of Family Life Education

Family Life Education means preparing individuals and families for the roles and responsibilities of family living. Because knowledge about human development, interpersonal relationships, and family living is not innate, some developed societies have needed to develop ways through which they may transmit the wisdom and the experience of family living from one generation to succeeding ones. Individuals learn about family living in the family setting itself as they observe and participate in family activities and interactions in their own and other families. Family life education for adolescents for instance is very essential as it addresses two important kinds of needs: (1) their current normative needs associated with changing physical, sexual, cognitive, social, and emotional developments, and (2) their anticipatory or future family-related



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needs to help prepare them for adult roles and responsibilities in marriage and parenting. Laurents and Shorter (2015) argue that divorce among Christians in Africa and to some extent, the world in general is caused by non-careful or hasty choice of a partner without knowing well his or her background and character. Important family life education content includes understanding one's self and others; building self-esteem; making choices, learning positive social interaction skills and the importance of appreciating peaceful coexistence; forming, maintaining, and ending relationships; taking responsibility for one's actions; understanding family roles and responsibilities; and improving communication skills (Hennon and Arcus, 2013). The Concerns for the potential negative impact of divorce on children call for special parenting education for parents in Nigeria because majority of social problems witnessed in the country get their roots from effects of broken homes and poor parenting for adults. Facilitating access to a wide range of parenting information, skills, services, and other forms of support for parents can assist potential couples. Marriage education programmes have been developed in many developed countries to provide premarital couples with opportunities to gain knowledge about and discuss the critical issues and tasks of marriage, to acquire behavioural skills and problem-solving strategies to enhance their relationships, and to evaluate their relationships, including untested assumptions, and/or unrealistic expectations (Stahmann and Salts, 2014).

The purpose of family life education is to strengthen and enrich individual and family wellbeing (Thomas and Arcus 1992). Major objectives include (1) gaining insight into one's self and others; (2) acquiring knowledge about human development and behaviour in the family setting over the life course; (3) understanding marital and family patterns and processes; (4) acquiring interpersonal skills for present and future family roles; and (5) building strengths in individuals and families (Arcus and Thomas 1993). It is assumed that if these and other similar objectives are met through family life education, then families will be better able to deal with or prevent problems and will be empowered to live their family lives in ways that are both personally satisfying and socially responsible. Family life education programs are preventative, intended to equip individuals for their family roles rather than to repair family dysfunction. An underlying assumption of family life education is that it is relevant to individuals of all ages and to all families whatever their structure, stage of the life course, or special circumstances (Arcus, Schvaneveldt, and Moss 1993). In the United States and other developed countries, most family life education programmes for children and adolescents are provided in school settings in form of school subjects. While for adults, family life education takes place through different organized public programmes.

Concept of Family Life Counselling

Most problems witnessed in children and adolescents are products of problem homes (Sambo, 2016). Family therapy or family counselling is a service designed to address specific issues that affect the psychological health of the family, such as major life transitions or mental health conditions. It may be used as the primary mode of treatment or as a complementary approach. Parental counselling deals with parent-child relationship especially in different dimensions. Families can benefit from counselling when they experience any stressful event that may strain family relationships, such as financial hardship, divorce, or the death of a loved one. In addition, it can be effective in treating mental health concerns that impact the family as a whole, such as depression, substance abuse, chronic illness, and food issues, or everyday concerns, like communication problems, interpersonal conflict, or behavioural problems in children and adolescents.

Family counselling aims to promote understanding and collaboration among family members in order to solve the problems of one or more individuals. For example, if a child is having social and academic problems, therapy will focus on the family patterns that may contribute to the child's acting out, rather than evaluating the child's behaviour alone. As the family uncovers the source of the problem, they can learn to support the child and other family members and work proactively on minimizing or altering the conditions that contribute to the child's unwanted behaviour. Every marriage and family has problems, but sometimes those problems seem so difficult that it seems impossible to address them—at least with your knowledge and in your own power. Family therapy is a branch of psychotherapy that is meant to help initiate change and nurture development in intimate relationships between family members and couples.



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Family Therapy Counselling Techniques

According to Premier Mind Institute (2017) family life counselling has come to occupy a central position in the world of mental health, on the premise that healthy families rear and sustain healthy individuals. The family unit's stability is key – particularly to children and adolescents – to healthy and happy lives outside the home, in relationships external to the family, and to success in adulthood. The following are five family life counseling techniques that are widely used by Premier Mind Institute:

Structural Therapy

Structural family therapy assesses power dynamics within the family unit, and analyzes each family member's assigned "role" within the family unit. Family hierarchies are examined and analyzed, and the amount of power that each individual family member has is examined and, if necessary, redistributed. Structural therapy seeks to empower each family member and to individualize the needs of each one, in addition to establishing respect between all family members.

Milan Therapy

This therapeutic technique focuses on the analysis of belief systems harbored by individual family members or by the collective as a whole, and challenges family rituals and practices particularly as they relate to conflict. By forcing attention to these belief systems – unconscious and subconscious – Milan therapy seeks to dismantle and disempower belief systems that perpetuate conflict within family units.

Strategic Therapy

Strategic therapy closely examines patterns of interaction and conflict between family members and seeks to increase awareness and mindfulness of these patterns. A more direct approach than some other family therapy techniques, each individual family member is assigned work in order to improve how they interact with their other family members, particularly those who may be facing unique challenges or struggling with mental or neurological illnesses or disorders. This therapy technique also subverts the authority of the most dominant family member, allowing communication changes to evolve positively between family members and the symptom sufferer.

Narrative Therapy

Narrative therapy helps individual family members to shape their personal narratives by recognizing and embracing individual positive qualities, skills, and gifts in order to help them constructively confront and conquer problems they may be facing within their family unit or within their own individual lives. Narrative therapy encourages patients to break free of the influence of negative or destructive influences that may undermine internal recognition and embrasure of one's own value, capability, and competency. Narrative therapy is also used in other areas of counseling, such as community or individual counseling and therapy.

Transgenerational Therapy

Transgenerational therapy examines intergenerational relationships and conflicts in family units, and closely examines and breaks down problematic or destructive belief systems that are often transmitted between one generation and the next. This method can be especially useful when more than two generations of a family are living in the same home and facing conflict – for example, grandparents, parents, and children all living together. This technique is often used in tandem with Milan therapy. Family life counselling is often short-term, averaging five to twenty sessions. Family therapists may use one, two, or even all of these techniques depending on the individual needs of the family in question and also depending on the individual diagnoses of each family member that may impact family dynamics and conflict. The goal of family therapy is to establish a harmonious and healthy family unit, and to give each family member skills and tools to deepen healthy relationships with their families at least for years (Premier Mind Institute, 2017).

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Challenges Necessitating Family Life Counselling

Families in contemporary society often encounter a range of complex and multifaceted challenges that necessitate professional intervention. Marriage and family life counsellors are trained professionals equipped with both theoretical knowledge and practical expertise to assist individuals and family units in addressing and resolving critical relational and developmental issues. According to Mbiti (2016), prevalent family-related challenges include insufficient preparation for marriage, misconceptions about marital expectations, adverse childhood experiences, ineffective communication, conflicting interests, mental health concerns, behavioural disorders, financial instability, cultural and social disparities, maladjustment within marriage, infidelity, interference from extended family members, educational attainment disparities, disillusionment with family life, separations arising from necessity, and spousal incompatibility.

Three Major Stages of the Family Life Cycle:

Stage I: The beginning family

The first sub stage of the family life cycle is the period of establishment. It begins with marriage and continues until the first child is born. It is also called “getting acquainted” stage, when two partners try to know each other’s psychology and behavioural prospects. Both the partners should learn to manage the resources of time, energy and income properly to achieve their long term goal in their married life.

Stage II: The expanding family

The expanding family stage covers a longer period than the beginning family stage and includes a number of sub stages. It begins with the birth of the first child and ends when the last child leaves home. The first sub stage is known as child bearing and pre-school and is also marked by the accumulation of goods. This in turn brings about the development of attitudes that influence future family living. During this period parents take necessary steps to make adjustments with their relations and new child as well. The parents have to shoulder different responsibilities to keep pace with rapid change of the situation. The elementary school period begins a series of overlapping experiences that cover the time when the children are about 6 to 12 years of age. During this sub stage the children begin their formal education and make their first independent contacts with the outside world. In this sub-stage parents are primarily concerned with the educational and health needs of the children, creating an environment in which the children will have a feeling of belongingness. Parents will provide nutritious food, suitable clothing and adequate housing to children for physical development as well as provides opportunity to them for social contacts outside the home for social and emotional development.

The High School Period

It includes the teen age period of children i.e., within 12 to 18 years of age. Parents will assist to their children whole heartedly in their high school or vocational education to solve their educational, social, recreational and vocational problems by which the children become independent and self-reliant individual.

The College Phase

It covers the college period of children. The chief parental duties now-are helping them in choosing a suitable college and financing their education. So during this period a lot of financial adjustment is needed by parents. They have to spend more from their savings for college expenses. The parents have to carry out all activities with planned budget during their period.

Their planning should involve three steps:

(a) Planning (b) Controlling the plan in action (c) Evaluation.

They should give more emphasis on surplus budget during expanding family stage.

Stage III. The contracting family Stage

This stage begins when the first child leaving home as a young adult and ends when the last child leaves home for a life of his or her own. It is marked by the departure of young adult for service or marriage. It is a period of adjustment for parents and children. The parent’s financial assistance may be needed for the establishment of children.

The period of financial recovery begins after the children leave home and become self-supporting. Current expenses drop rapidly’ Debts that have accumulated over the previous stages are paid off and saving for the future takes a large share of the income. Some persons develop their former professional interests like writing, painting, music, teaching etc.; some persons develop their creative interest to get financial benefit.

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Some may spend money for travel. So the period of financial recovery calls for social and vocational adjustments that look toward retirement. People must plan regarding their time, money and energy to feel independence in their later life. They must make time plan to spend their leisure time for watching the television, reading the spiritual and story books, so that they can develop feeling of fulfillment and adequacy despite their age.

The last sub-stage is the time of retirement. The wants of individuals during this stage usually grow less intense and the need for care and protection increases. It is the period of adjustment to physical changes, to changes in environmental conditions, to changes in human relations, and often to changes in income. For those who can make the necessary adjustments and who have health and strength, human relations will continue to be satisfying even though the physical setting of the home may change. This is the period not only a vocational arts but also management of time energy and money are important both to the family and to the aging person.

Significance of Family Life Counselling

Family life counselling provides a structured, supportive environment for addressing intra-family conflicts and promoting healthy relational dynamics. Research indicates that counselling can enhance communication, problem-solving, and conflict resolution, while fostering empathy, trust, and resilience (American Addiction Centers, 2017). Additionally, counselling assists families in recovering from crises, establishing healthy boundaries, and reducing relational stressors, thereby contributing to a supportive and cohesive family environment.

Qualifications and Roles of Family Life Counsellors

Family life counsellors play a crucial role in guiding individuals, couples, and families through periods of relational strain, transition, and psychological distress. Their responsibilities include observing family interactions, diagnosing and addressing psychological and behavioural challenges within the family context, facilitating conflict resolution, and supporting clients through life transitions such as divorce, bereavement, or unemployment (All Psychology Schools, 2017). Typically, family life counsellors hold at least a master's degree in counselling, psychology, or social work, with specialized training in family therapy and guidance. They are equipped to manage a wide range of issues, including child and adolescent behavioural problems, marital conflict, domestic violence, infertility, substance abuse, depression, anxiety, and crisis intervention (Adegoke, 2004). While counsellors may have different methods and preferred treatment techniques, they must all have at least a minimum level of experience with the treatment of: Child and adolescent; behavioural problems; Grieving; Depression and anxiety; Domestic violence; Infertility; Marital conflicts; Substance abuse (All Psychology Schools, 2017).

In order to treat these and other family issues, the counsellor must:

- i. Observe how people interact within units;
- ii. Evaluate and resolve relationship problems;
- iii. Diagnose and treat psychological disorders within a family context;
- iv. Guide clients through transitional crises such as divorce or death;
- v. Highlight problematic relational or behavioral patterns;
- vi. Help replace dysfunctional behaviors with healthy alternatives;
- vii. Take a holistic (mind-body) approach to wellness (All Psychology Schools, 2017).

In order to treat these and other family issues, counsellors must:

- viii. Observe how people interact within units;
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- xi. Guide clients through transitional crises such as divorce or death;
- xii. Highlight problematic relational or behavioural patterns;
- xiii. Help replace dysfunctional behaviors with healthy alternatives (All Psychology Schools, 2017).

A family life counsellor must undergo academic and professional training in guidance and counselling and obtain at least a masters Degree in counselling after a bachelor's degree in counseling, psychology or social work. This education trains counsellor for guidance with a wide range of problems, including:

- i. Personal conflicts within couples or families;
- ii. Unexpected illness, death, or unemployment;
- iii. Developing or maintaining a healthy romantic relationship at any stage;

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- iv. Behavioural problems in children;
- v. Divorce or separation;
- vi. Substance abuse or addiction;

Concept of Contemporary Social Problems

Social problems are conditions or phenomena that adversely affect large segments of society and are perceived as undesirable at specific moments in time. A definition from Oxford's sociology textbook articulates that a social problem must possess both objective and subjective dimensions—namely, measurable harm and collective acknowledgment of the issue's problematic nature (Rubington & Weinberg, 2021). Britannica defines a social issue as a state of affairs that negatively impacts individuals or communities and is often subject to public debate regarding its causes and solutions. Importantly, for an issue to be considered a social problem, it must affect more than just an individual; it must be recognized as a concern by a substantial portion of the community. Contemporary examples in the Nigerian context include child labor, sexual violence (rape), kidnapping, suicide, homicide, environmental pollution, examination malpractice, migration, drug abuse, corruption, smuggling, and human trafficking—issues that collectively challenge societal well-being and stability. These social problems are of critical concern to various stakeholders, including government bodies, families, NGOs, and individuals. However, their root causes are often attributed to systemic deficiencies—one of which is the lack of robust provision for family life education and counselling at the grassroots level. Such interventions could serve as primary preventive measures, mitigating emerging social problems before they escalate.

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“To put the world right in order, we must first put the nation in order; to put the nation in order, we must first put the family in order; to put the family in order, we must first cultivate our personal life; we must first set our hearts right.” – Confucius

The goal of family therapy is to work together to heal any mental, emotional, or psychological problems tearing your family apart (Lee, 2010). Family life education aims at making family members aware of their various responsibilities and duties. For instance, it is apparent that the goal of spending quality family time is to love, understand, and develop your child as a happy, well-adjusted, and contributing member of society. This can help in minimizing so many contemporary social problems in Nigeria. Family life counselling entails services rendered by a counsellor to individuals or members of a group in an organized institution or setting with particular reference to family (Uguadu, Njoku & Onyemerekeya, 2014). If well adjusted, families can be the sources of joy, happiness, love, caring, support, affection, commitment and a sense of belonging as well as involving relations, responsibilities and duties. Regardless of the structure or type of family unit, the level of unity, cohesion and consequently the well-being in the home environment are mostly contingent upon social and psychological factors attendant to variety of situations (Genyi, 2008). Family life counselling is intended to treat the entire family, not just the troubled individual. The goal is to renew and maintain the natural family structure and support group with an emphasis on returning the individual to a healthy family and community life (Nartey, 2018).

Contemporary social problems in Nigeria can be prevented or resolved through the provision of family life education and family life education by designing and delivery of:

1. Family support service centers - which can serve as based focal points to promote and improve the social well-being of every individual in the family.
2. Single-parent Family support services – This is a programme that assists in improving and maintaining the psycho-emotional single-parent families towards stability, growth and acceptance of the new family unit through initiating counselling encounters, support groups, programmes for children and public education.
3. Divorce and Remarriage Counseling Services – This is helping with adjustment skills for divorced couples and how to cope with newly reconstructed families.
4. Family Violence Prevention and Intervention Programme – This helps victims, perpetrators of family violence and community to become aware of family violence through public enlightenment and out reach through casework and workshops.

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5. Suicide Prevention Services - Helping at-risk emotionally unstable and depressed family members to overcome their emotional challenges and situations amicably through different but suitable techniques such as self-control and relaxation (Uguadu, Njoku & Onyemerekeya, 2014).

Above are some of the services that need to be provided for families to prevent or minimize tensions so as to stabilize the home and outer environment for individuals in order not to lead to consequential social problems in the larger society. In family counseling, the husband, the wife and the children work together as group to resolve the problems of each member under the assistance of the counsellor (Ibinaiye, 2014). Thus, the interaction improves communication and understanding to change destructive patterns and see themselves and each other in new ways. This in turn can enhance better family living as well as better parenting, and better parenting results to better child and adolescent up-bringing, and better up-bringing can prevent or minimize antisocial behaviours.

Conclusion

The contemporary social problems in Nigeria have been compounding so many detrimental effects on individuals, families and the society at large. Based on the above discussions, it can be concluded that family life education and family life counseling are two distinct but similar services that can be provided for every society to prevent and/or minimize the prevalent contemporary social problems in any country, particularly Nigeria. In other words, if these two services could be recognized and put in place by families, communities, governments and NGOs in collaboration with counsellors, majority of the problems can be checked in some few years to come.

Recommendations

Based upon the forgoing assertions, the paper presents the following recommendations:

1. Government at state and federal levels should revisit and appreciate the significance of guidance and counseling services especially family life counseling and formulate policies regarding its provisions to families in the country.
2. Counsellors in Nigeria should join hands together towards organizing ways of helping Nigerian families in resolving parenting and other family issues that usually tantamount to behaviour disorders, resulting to social problems.
3. Family life education should be considered as a subject to be taught in Nigerian schools, colleges and universities so as to educate children, adolescents and adults about true and ideals of family life and responsibilities.
4. Family support service centers should be established in both rural and urban settlements to help families resolve primary issues and concerns before such problems grow beyond family level and become societal or national issues/problems.

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