

Counselling Services Necessary for the Optimal Development of Elementary School Children in Nigeria

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Abstract

As adults, children are faced with myriads of problems - physical, emotional, social, cognitive, economic and psychological. When these problems are not taken care of, they would impact on their lives forever. Majority of adults' problems are traceable to their childhood problems that were not well-handled when they were kids. Children's problems call for professionally trained counsellors to help the elementary school children work through their problems, thus enabling them to live a fulfilled life. Professional counsellors have to render some counselling services that will bring healing to their problems and enhance their optimal development. Hence this article examined the concept of child counselling, challenges of the elementary school child, signs indicating a child needs counselling, and counselling service fit for the elementary school children. It is recommended, among others, that counsellors should use all avenues in the school such as staff meeting, Parents Teachers Association, school functions to solicit the cooperation of school head, teaching and non-teaching staff and parents to refer their children that show mood swing or behaving abnormally to the counsellor. They should sensitize them that kids' problems must be attended to properly and promptly.

Keywords: counselling, service, school, child, development

Introduction

Elementary education is the first stage of formal education. It is also known as the primary school education. It provides the child with basic understanding of various subjects as well as skills throughout their lives. It is the foundation of teaching and learning the 3Rs – Reading, Writing and Arithmetic (now known as Mathematics). Elementary education is given to children between the ages of 5+ and 11 in an institution. A child is any person below the age of maturity. Child Rights Act 2003 in Nigeria defined a child as any person under the age of eighteen years. A child is a young person; the difference that exists between a child and an adult is immaturity. He is faced with challenges that need to be addressed. The child is immature to handle his problems himself due to his age. The declaration on the Right of the Child that was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on November 20th, 1959, specifically stated that “the child, by reason of his physical and marital immaturity needs special safe guards and care.” The elementary school child is in his formidable years and needs to utilize his potentials in every area of their development.

The people to give the safeguard and care are parents, peers, siblings, teachers, counsellors, church leaders and others. Whatever they offer the child will either mar or make him responsible citizens. Unfortunately, many parents do not pay attention to their children's problems. Thus, they continue to live with their problems. At school they rely

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on teachers and counsellors for safeguard and care, which parents did not provide. In acknowledgement of the importance of primary education in the Nigerian society, the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2014) formulated the following goals for elementary school:

- a) Inculcate permanent literacy and numeracy and ability to communicate effectively;
- b) Lay a sound basis for scientific and reflective thinking;
- c) Give citizenship education as a basis for the effective participation in and contribution to the life of society;
- d) Mould the character and develop sound attitude and morals in the children;
- e) Develop in the child the ability to adapt to the child's changing environment;
- f) Give the child opportunities for developing manipulative skills that will enable the child function effectively in the society within these limits of the child's capacity;
- g) Provide the child with basic tools for further educational advancement, including preparation for the trades and crafts of the locality.

In pursuance of these goals, guidance and counselling should be one of the educational services that should be provided. The elementary education is the fulcrum to the success or failure of the whole education system. Hence, it is imperative for this group of learners to be properly guided to achieve their full potentials. When they are not properly guided, self-actualization becomes impossible and they cannot contribute their quota to the society. Some of them are faced with emotional, educational and behavioural challenges that need counselling intervention. According to Onwuasoanya (2007), primary school pupils cannot effectively and satisfactorily meet their educational, vocational and personal-social needs without counselling services. Furthermore, he accentuated that the problems they face are adjustment to school, under achievement, delinquent acts, anxiety, among others. The author also indicated that all these developmental problems associated with the primary school child needs intervention of a professional counsellor. The question now is, how can this group of individuals be given counselling services for their optimal development? Therefore, this paper explored counselling services necessary for the relief of the elementary school children's ills in Nigeria.

The concept of child counselling

Child counselling is quite similar to adult counselling. The difference is the optimal care and concern given to the child by the counsellor, and the use of media, to enable them change their thought, emotion, feelings and behaviour; and to acquire problem solving skills and make right decisions. Ackerman (2018) attested that child counselling offers a safe space and an empathetic ear while providing tools to bring about change in thought, feelings and behaviour. In agreement with this assertion, Olusakin (2000) in Ackerman is of the opinion that child counselling is to engage children so that they will talk about painful issues freely. The counsellor needs to use verbal counselling skill in conjunction with other strategies; for example, the counsellor might involve the child in play, or in the use of media such as miniature animals, clay or various forms of art. Alternatively, the counsellor might involve the child in storytelling, or take him on an imaginary journey.

Child counselling is a branch of counselling that focuses only on the mental well-being and mental issues that arise in children (Khalate, 2021). More so, in child counselling, the

counsellor caters for children who are below 11 years. They are given safe space to communicate in various ways. However, the researcher noted that child counselling is the therapeutic support given by a trained counsellor to children with difficulty in coping with social, emotional, behavioural and development challenges. In addition, Sengar (2019) defined child counselling as a therapy to assess the mind of the child and find his problems. It is important for a child who is dealing with emotional or mental distress.

The importance of child counselling cannot be over-emphasized because majority of adults' problems are traceable to what they pass through during childhood, whether it is small or great. Events that happened during childhood, even small and seemingly insignificant ones, can have a direct impact on one's feeling and behaviour as adult (Durham, 2020). Child counselling can help stimulate healthy, normal development, build an appropriate emotional repertoire and improve emotional vocabulary when the child works through with the counsellor.

Challenges of the Elementary School Child

The elementary school children are faced with some challenges. Sometimes, they are very excited, another time they are very sad because of their distinctive characteristics and behaviour pattern. Orubu (2002) opined that these qualities are manifested as children begin curious adventures, while others appear passive, shy and withdrawn. Their dispositions are positive and at other times negative. Despite their disposition, they are faced with challenges such as parental abuse, aggression, school phobia, poor home background, single parenting, poor social skill, rejection, learning disabilities, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and others that need a professional counsellor's intervention. Some of these challenges are explained hereunder.

a) **Parental abuse:** Parental abuse occurs when a parent inflict pain on their children physically or psychologically or on someone close to them. A child can suffer from parental abuse when he sees the father yelling at his mother or hit her even occasionally but in the presence of the child. A child can be suffering from abuse from the father, physically, emotionally or mentally, where he inflicts physical pain, emotional pain through attacking him with words and when he hurts his mother in front of him. World Health Organization (WHO) (2010), reiterated that exposure to intimate partner violence is also, sometimes, included as a form of child abuse.

b) **Aggression:** Aggression is when an individual behave forcefully and violently against another person. Davis et al. (2018) cited by Siever (2008) defined aggression as hostile, injurious or destructive behaviour often caused by frustration which can be collective or individual. Aggression is always an act of anger. Many children carry out aggressive act in school which is an undesirable behaviour that needs to be corrected so that the sufferer can adjust and live in a desirable manner.

c) **School phobia:** Phobia is excessive fear; thus, school phobia is the fear of attending school. Encyclopedia of Children's Health (n.d) defined school phobia as fear to attend school because attendance causes emotional distress and anxiety. The child who refuses to attend school has his reasons for doing so. Sometimes, it might be because of his poor achievement in school, being bullied, lack of learning materials, single parenting, or lack of attention from home. Cleveland Clinic (2022) observed that, at home, children who have school phobia struggle with:

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- ❖ Fear of violence at home or in their community.
- ❖ Financial instability.
- ❖ Food instability.
- ❖ Lack of adequate housing or homelessness.
- ❖ Lack of undivided attention from their parents or caregivers.
- ❖ Significant family changes, such as a relocation, divorce or death.

At school, children with school phobia are children who must have experienced:

- ❖ Bullying, teasing or threat of physical harm from teacher or school staff.
- ❖ Fear of criticism, punishment or ridicule from teacher or school staff.
- ❖ Learning difficulties, such as dyslexia (difficulty with reading and language) or dyscalculia (difficulty understanding math and numbers)
- ❖ Worry or intense fear about catastrophic events, such as fear of a school shooting.

Children with school phobia need counselling intervention strategies that would help them overcome phobia and love school attendance. The counsellor can offer counselling strategies to overcome phobia of all sort.

d) **Home background:** The home is the first institution and socialization agent of the child. The parents are his first teacher, hence, whatever the home offers the child goes a long way to affect his development and school performance. When the home environment is supportive, the child succeeds but when the attitude of parents is not supportive the child cannot succeed. Muola (2010) believed that home environment hinders or support children's overall development. Parents' attitudes play a dominant role and where it is supportive, it enhances children's overall performance. Pupils living in non-supportive home environment struggle in every aspect of life including educational life. Some homes cannot provide facilities that can assist the child in his academic pursuit. When the home lacks needed home facilities to study, it becomes difficult for the child to study at home. The study conducted by Clark and Goyler, (2007) agreed that positive domestic environment is a prominent indicator of pupils' success in their academics. Furthermore, teaching and learning process carried out at school is incomplete without the support of home environment.

e) **Single parenthood:** Single parenthood is leaving the nurturing of the child that is supposed to be for the two parents in the hand of one of the parents. This means care of the child is carried out in the absence of one parent. Tenibiaje and Tenibiaje (2011) defined single parenthood as when out of two people who are responsible for the nurturing and child rearing, one is not available, and the work meant for two people is now being carried out by only one person. When parents handle the care of their children alone, they may not have enough income for the adequate care of the child, because they would want to meet their most pressing need which is physical need. Fraser (2004) maintained that single parents do not have ability to provide consistent supervision and management, adequate family management practices and range of social and educational stimulating experiences. Due to less income, single parent children suffer in getting resources which make some of them to be victims of child labour, drop out from school or have poor performance and fail to achieve their dreams.

f) **Poor social skill:** Social skill is the ability to get connected to people and have successful interactions. Some school pupils cannot get along with others, hence, they stay alone because they cannot mingle with people. According to Cunningham (2022), pupils struggling with social skills have trouble picking up on social cues and following social roles. More so, it can make it hard for them to fit in, form friendships and work with

others. They may avoid interacting and feel isolated and alone with their struggles. Pupils with social skill problems experience difficulties in interpersonal relationship with peers, teachers and adults. This can lead to other problems such as violence, late coming to school, truancy and bullying.

g) **Rejection:** Some pupils are faced with different forms of rejection such as abandonment, preferring one child over another, not being fair when giving privileges, not having time with pupils and not paying attention to the child. Norman (2022) reported that rejection can be the following:

- Preferring one child to another
- Not being fair when extending privileges
- Allowing some siblings to have certain freedoms others do not (excluding age appropriate activities)
- Spending too much time on phone or online
- One parent leaving and not following through on commitment
- Lack of quality time together
- Making fun of a child
- Interrupting or not letting your child speak
- Not showing interest in what makes your child tick
- Biting sarcasm
- Withholding compliments and praise
- Never coming to your children's events

When children experience rejection, it creates havoc in their lives which leads to emotional and behavioural problems that can affect their all-round development.

h) **Learning disabilities:** Learning disabilities cover a wide range of difficulties individual face in academics. The individual shows one or more deficits in the essential learning processes such as inability to recognize and use letters appropriately, lack of reading skills and comprehension skills. According to Colman (2003), learning disabilities is a generic term for disorders characterized by substantial deficits in scholastic or academic skills including reading, mathematics and written expression. A child with learning disabilities finds it difficult to learn and succeed in school work. Hence, their learning problems must be taken care of so that they can achieve the purpose of being in school.

i) **Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD):** ADHD is a chronic condition that is marked with attention difficulty, hyperactivity and impulsiveness. It is one of the most common development disorder of childhood. ADHD child cannot follow through on instructions; he fails to finish school work/chores, due to oppositional behaviour or failure to understand instruction. They leave seat in classroom or in other situations which remaining seated is expected. They are always 'on the go' or often acts as if "driven by a motor." A child with this problem cannot do well in academics and may not complete his/her school years. They need the help of the counsellors. The counsellor can use play therapy to help the ADHD child.

Signs indicating children need counselling

There are some signs that are glaring in the life of a child that indicate he needs counselling. These signs are lack of interest in previously loved activities, sadness, irritability, fearfulness, aggression, anxiety, problem with academic work, loneliness,

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withdrawal and misbehaviours. Tee-Melegrito (2021) opined that a child may need counselling if they experience:

- Repeated displays of deviant behaviour
- Problems in different areas of life such as family, relationships, or academics
- Excessive worry
- Persistent sadness
- Low energy levels
- A lack of concentration
- Change in appetite
- A sudden change or loss of interest in previously valued hobbies or interest
- Thought of self-harm
- Social withdrawal
- Physical complaint that do not have a cause or do not respond to treatment

For younger children they may include

- Clinginess
- Separation anxiety
- Bed wetting
- Excessive fearfulness
- Agitation and irritability

In agreement with Tee-Melegrito, Wood (2020) in Children's Bureau gave six signs that indicate that a child needs counselling to include:

- Deviant behaviour
- Sudden shift in usual interest and habit
- Excessive worrying and sadness
- Regression: few common regressions are:
 - Bedwetting (when already night trained)
 - Frequent temper tantrums
 - Separation, anxiety and clinging
 - Excessive anxiety and fearfulness
 - Language regression (using baby talk)
- Social isolation: A few ways of isolation are:
 - Eating lunch alone
 - Avoiding play dates and other social activities
 - A lack of desire to leave the house for any reason
- Talking about self-harm

Just like adults, children have problem that need to be solved. When parents and guardians fail to understand them, the next option is the teacher or the school counsellor. Children counselling strategies are different from that of adults because they cannot verbally express their experiences appropriately.

Counselling services that can be administered to elementary school children

In administering counselling services to children, the counsellor has to come to the level of the kids. Administration of counselling services can take different forms such as play

therapy, role playing, storytelling, guided imagery, display of charts and pictures, art and crafts and normal activities, among others.

a) **Play therapy:** Play therapy is using play activities to help children express their feelings more easily with the assistance of a professional counsellor. It is a fundamental means in which the child explores and interacts with people and materials. Play therapy enables children to demonstrate their behaviours. Landreth (2012) defined child-centred play therapy as:

A dynamic interpersonal relationship between a child (or person of any ages) and a therapist trained in play therapy procedures who provide selected play materials and facilitates the development of a safe relationship for the child (or person of any age) to fully express and explore self (feelings, thoughts, experiences, behaviours) through play, the child's natural medium of communication for optimal growth and development (P.11).

As children communicate their emotions and challenges through play the counsellor constructs activities that will help heal the child. Play therapy helps the child to walk through their issues in a fun or exciting way. For example, a child can intentionally injure another child. Instead of rebuking the child (offender), the counsellor points out the feelings of the injured child. "She is crying because of the injury you have inflicted on her, she is bleeding. Did you do well? What will you do to make her feel better?" Such sympathetic words can prick the mind of the offender and make her sad and apologize to the injured child. In this situation, the offender will recognize the emotional state of another person. This will enable the offender to empathize and experience other's feelings, thus preventing maladaptive behavioural attitude in children (Okobiah & Okorodudu, 2006). Play therapy is best used for younger children between the age of 3-11 using toys and games. It is a very good means of establishing rapport with children. As children start playing games naturally, they start communication with the counsellor. Playing games can help a child learn self-management strategies. For example, blowing bubbles can help relieve anxiety. Games, such as checkers and battleship, help children in impulse control by thinking of the consequences. Moreover, memory games, such as card matching help a child with ADHD, increase his attention span and improve memory (Kilpatrick, 2022). Balloon game helps children release anger in an appropriate way. Play therapy can be used to treat ADHD, depression, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD), physical and emotional trauma, sexual abuse and others.

b) **Role playing:** Role playing is a kind of fun for children to learn and develop useful skills. It is a well-established practice and a useful approach for children to understand themselves and others. With the help of the counsellor the children take roles and change roles. The children are made to re-enact real life events and stories that will affect their lives. Skills developed in role playing meet the demands of everyday realities. Such skills are

- Ability to see someone else's viewpoint
- Increase their empathetic skills
- Negotiation skills
- Expand their story-telling skills
- Resilience

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It also:

- Encourages creativity and imagination
- Enriches language and enhance communication skills
- Develops social and emotional skills
- Enhances physical development

In role playing, a child who is dreading to communicate with classmate or adult, the counsellor takes the role as the client. The client then sees what he tends to do. The next step the client considers how to do it next time. The scene can be replayed several times until the child builds up confidence levels and deals with fears. The counsellor helps to desensitize the client so that he feels less fearful. Role playing is a very important counselling method for children. It can be used for the deaf. It can be used for different challenges such as aggressive behaviours, stress, mental health, social skill problems, among others.

c) **Story-telling:** Story-telling is a therapeutic intervention that allows children to express their thoughts and feelings. Story-telling gives children deeper understanding of themselves. Children love story-telling; hence to captivate their attention, stories told should be interesting, funny and engaging. Story telling can be used to meet children's need at any time in the counselling session. It is an alternative communication strategy used by counsellors. In counselling, it should be used as a technique within the context of an overall treatment plan, rather than as a treatment approach in and of itself (John, 2019). It can be inserted in the therapeutic intervention at any time where it is necessary.

Story-telling should be planned to meet the needs of the children it is prepared for. In story-telling, instruction should be guided or structured to follow what matches the child's problem. From the counsellor's intervention, the client learns an important lesson that can change his behaviour. Story-telling can be used to treat communicative and social skills problems, behavioural problems, aggression, anxiety and sleep problems.

d) **Guided imagery:** Guided imagery is a relaxation technique involving sitting or lying down quietly and imagining that one is in a favourable place like beach and beautiful scenes. Klein and Nunez (2020) said guided imagery is a type of focused relaxation or mediation. Focused relaxation involves concentrating on a specific object, sound, or experiences in order to calm one's mind. In guided imagery the individual needs a quiet place, a mat, or crouch. It can be used to treat anxiety, stress, depression, sleep issues and pains.

e) **Display of pictures:** Pictures are motionless photography that can carry information that can be learnt through observation by the observer. Nwankwo (1995) reiterated that picture refers to non-mobile aspects of behaviours intended to influence client's behaviour in a desired direction. Pictures can convey idea and meaning to children as they view the images. Photography captures the therapeutic nature of image; it is concerned with talking, viewing, manipulating, presenting and interpreting of the image as well as a primary or supplementing form of counselling (Ginicola et al., 2012). Charts is beneficial because children develop interest in different kinds of behaviours. It is a very good counselling service that can be utilized by the counsellor. For example, scene with adult or children participating in profitable activities such as sharing, helping cheerfully, playing together, taking turns in queue, studying, among others. The counsellor can lead children to create verbal scenes out of the pictures. By so doing, the children are given the opportunity to express themselves, share their opinion, laughter and have fun.

Motion pictures in television programmes, videotaped movies of people engaging in different activities could be helpful in character building in children. After viewing, they can be asked lessons learnt from the scenes viewed. They can pick a pro-social behaviour of people they have watched; thereafter modification of their maladaptive behaviours can take place. Pictures displayed by counsellor should be appealing to children. This is why Directives Center on the Exploration of Photographs said that clients have found photograph to be appealing to them or created themselves to elicit verbal responses (Weiser, 2004).

f) **Arts and craft method:** Art and craft method enables children to express their negative feelings and emotions which they have not been able to express. According to Shah (2021), art therapy is a medium for helping kids deal with challenging emotions and express their thoughts and feelings. It is a medium where kids can express their suppressed emotions which they may not be aware of. Sometimes it may be difficult for them to express their emotions in words but the same emotion can be released through any of those creative mediums. Furthermore, it helps to process the things that have happened to them and helps reduce stress and anxiety as they work through those challenges. When kids are allowed to manipulate substances such as moulding clay into different shapes, carvings, calabash and yam decoration, weaving of all sorts, drawing and shading/painting, clear and logical thinking is stimulated.

This medium helps children develop skills about helping, sharing, and operating as a group in a cooperative venture towards achieving a common goal. These activities provoke their intellectual development, spur their creative potentials and make them good thinkers. Kilpatrick (2022) confirmed that counsellors may give a child an assignment, such as copying, picture completion or instructions to draw a particular thing, at other times, free choice of art media. The counsellor looks at the themes of the art work and asks the child to discuss his project. From it, the counsellor learns what concerns the child and how the child is dealing with those concerns internally. He can then know how to help the child.

Art medium is not limited to drawing and colouring but also includes activities of writing stories, choreographing, dancing and writing and performing dramas. This counselling service can be used to treat family problems, depression, anxiety, sexual abuse, aggression and violence.

g) **Music:** Music is a combination of vocal or instrumental sounds used for emotional expression. The counsellor can use both folksongs and electronic composition that matches the child's emotion to alleviate his emotional ills. The counsellor tells the child the importance of the song to relieving his challenges. The child can be asked to listen and sing the song until he gets relieved of the challenges. Using music is very important when a child is faced with problem of loss. The song for therapy should be very interesting and to the liking of the child, if the counsellor is to pick the song. The child can be asked to pick a song that equates his/her problem situation. Songs can be used effectively for sadness and loss. The counsellor encourages the child to listen to the music continually until the child works through the problem. Music therapy provides a creative way for kids to move through trauma, and become whole, not just a diagnosis (Peterson Family Foundation, 2022). Music have healing effect on an individual's emotions and brings about wellness because it suits the mind. American Music Therapy Association (AMTA),

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cited by Peterson, avers that this form of treatment can promote wellness, manage stress, alleviate pain, express feelings, enhance memory, improve communication and promote physical rehabilitation.

h) **Normal activities:** Normal activities are things children love to be engaged in that give them happiness and satisfaction. When a problem child participates in normal activities, it can help alleviate the pains and challenges he is passing through. The counsellor can find out from a problem child the best activities that interest or give him happiness. Such activities can be playing games with other children, watching movies, sporting activities, among others. Getting involved in normal activities in school is very important in helping a problem child. National Association of School Psychologist cited by Kilpatrick (2022) stated that encouraging the child to participate in normal activities such as playing sports, spending time with friend or watching a movie can provide distraction and normalcy to help deal with grief.

Conclusion

The child is the focus of education. Therefore, the child must be given the necessary assistance to work through their challenges in the school with the inclusion of guidance and counselling services as a springboard to develop wholesome beings. For this to be achieved, it becomes imperative to examine closely the counselling services that can help the elementary school child get the best out of schooling. There is the need for all stakeholders to understand the counsellors' role in the education of the school child and be able to harness their professional expertise to work with teachers for the education of the school child. Hence, the paper explored counselling services necessary for the optimal development of elementary school child in Nigeria. It reviewed the concept of child counselling, thereby highlighting challenges of the elementary school child, signs indicating that children need counselling and also the counselling services that can be administered to school children.

Recommendations

1. School counsellors are at the heart of intervening in the problems of elementary school children. The counsellors should apply counselling skills and specialized knowledge of child counselling approaches to handle kids' challenges. They should see themselves as caregivers' and surrogate parents giving safeguard and care as their responsibility to ameliorate kids' problems.

2. They should use all avenues in the school such as staff meeting, Parents Teachers Association, school functions to solicit the cooperation of school head, teaching and non-teaching staff and parents to refer their children that show mood swing or behavioural challenges to the counsellor. They should sensitize them that kids' problems must be attended to properly and promptly so that it will not go off hand.

3. There is the need for the employment or the provision of more trained professional counsellors in elementary schools. Headteachers should allow professional counsellors to practice counselling in elementary schools because the problems of the secondary school students must have started from the elementary level. When kids' problems at this stage are nipped off, they will be able to work through their psychological and developmental problems with ease and actualize their full potentials.

4. Counsellors in this institutional level should educate pupils on signs indicating children need counselling so that they can help encourage their peers to tell their class teacher who in turn sees the counsellor on behalf of the child and later send the child to the counsellor. In addition, the child can seek the help of the school counsellor directly when convinced by peers.

5. Counsellor should possess charming qualities that will attract pupils to them naturally. Such qualities include being cheerful, smiling, neat and well-dressed, well behaved, sympathetic, good communication skills to the level the children, empathy, patience, being observational and so on. They should not be frowning because it will repel pupils from coming close to them.

6. There is need for the public to be enlightened that children pass through challenges that need professional counsellors to handle. There should be enlightenment for parents to watch out for such signs that indicate children need to see a counsellor. This would enable them to seek the school or private counsellor. Counselling Association of Nigeria, government and other stakeholders should work together to carryout enlightenment programmes to the grassroots so that children are relieved of problems that would likely affect their future.

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