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Contributors

1. Adeniyi, Sakiru
Dept. of Yoruba
School of Languages
Adeniran Ogunsanya College of
Education
Otto/Ijanikin, Lagos
2. Afolayan, Bosede Funke
Dept. of English
University of Lagos
Lagos
3. Afisi, Oseni Taiwo
Dept. of Philosophy,
Lagos State University,
Ojo, Lagos.
4. Animashaun, Maruf
Dept. of Foreign Languages
Lagos State University,
Ojo, Lagos
5. Àkànmú, Dayò
School of Languages
Adeniran Ogunsanya College of
Education
Oto/Ijanikin, Lagos State, Nigeria
6. Amore, Kehinde Pedro
Dept. of English
Tai Solarin University of
Education
Ijagun, Ijebu-Ode, Ogun State.
7. Amosu, Kehinde Olorunwa
Dept. of Philosophy,
Lagos State University
Ojo, Nigeria.
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12. Macaulay-Adeyelure, Olawunmi
Dept. of Philosophy,
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13. Makinde, Solomon Olarenwaju
Dept. of Language, Arts & Social
Science Education,
Lagos State University
Ojo, Lagos, Nigeria.

- | | |
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Christianity and Child Training: An Appraisal of Proverbs 22:6

Komolafe, Hezekiah Deji, PhD

Abstract

Parenting is a tough job in present-day society. Christian values and morals appear to be fading away from one generation to another and yet less attention is being paid to child training. Since the Church is also one of the agents of child training, this paper appraises Prov. 22:6 and attempt to provide a good exposure to child training for the benefit of parents, church and the society at large. The researcher makes use of historical and exegetical methods for effective achievement of his goal. The findings reveal that agents of child training have positive or negative influence on a child and therefore recommends that while parents should learn to build self-esteem in their children by positive forms of communication, government should create an enabling environment for child training from kindergarten to secondary schools level. The Church should also re-emphasize the purpose of training and discipline of children to couples at worship centres and seminars. In conclusion, children are vessels and future of any society and therefore must be handled with utmost care.

Keywords: Christianity, agents, child training

Introduction

MANY PARENTS IN THE SOCIETY TODAY FIND THE REARING OF THEIR children in a godly way difficult and Christian homes are no exception. A lot of parents are amazed about the misdeed of their children which they expect to be morally upright. While some parents have a great misconception about child training as they think that their religious organization are the major agent to do so, others who recognizes the home as a major agent seems to have wrong approach on the training of their children. According to Udofia, "it is possible for one to be a successful banker, doctor, priest and an accredited government official yet, a poor family manager."¹

The question to ask is “who is a child?” Explaining about whom a child is, Jerome Kagan says that a child is a person between 18 months and 13 years of age. By the age of 13, most boys and girls have nearly doubled in height, quadrupled in weight and have also begun to develop sexually.² Kagan went further to say that strictly speaking; a child is someone who is not yet an adult.³ According to this definition, childhood extends from birth until sometimes past the age of 20 – the age at which most people reach their full adult physical growth. However, childhood is usually considered to be a shorter period. In most developed countries, it is regarded as one of the three stages that people pass through from birth to adulthood. The other stages are infancy and adolescence. Infancy extends from birth to about 18 months of age. Adolescence begins at about age 13 and lasts to adulthood. Childhood is the period between infancy and adolescence. In some developing countries, people are considered to be adults after they reach the age of 12 or 13, and adolescence is not regarded as distinct stage of development.

In the old testament, children are the gifts given by God and symbolically, a guarantee of the covenant between God and the people of Israel. Despite every gift, Abraham felt at a complete loss without children (Gen. 15:1-3). In the New Testament, children are principally a model or image for the believer to emulate (Mk. 10:13-14). Children are given two primary responsibilities in the Christian family: to obey their parents and to honour them (Eph. 6:1-3). Obeying parents is the duty of the children until they reach adulthood, but honouring parents is their responsibilities for a life time. God promises His blessings on those who honour their parents.

In our contemporary society, Christian values and morals such as obedience, humbleness, decent dressings, respect for parents and a lot more seems to be fading away and it is a pity that less attention is paid to child training so as to correct the situation. Since the tender age of a child is the formative and foundation period for the spiritual life of a child, their carrier, mental and physical development needs to be given utmost attention by Christians in the light of the scripture of Proverb 22:6 which says “Train a child in the way he should go and when he is old, he shall not turn from it”

Some of the issues this paper has examined therefore include the agents of child training, the approaches to child training and the relevance of child training to the family, the church and the society at large.

Conceptual Clarifications

Christianity

Christianity has been defined as the belief and the practices of the followers of Christ, founded on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.⁴ Christianity is unique because it is not just a philosophy but claims the resurrection of Jesus as a historical fact. Christianity is also defined as a way of love and charity.⁵ Love is a fundamental principle in the teachings of Jesus, and it was emphasized by St. Paul

in 1 Cor. 13 “Love your God, and your neighbor....” Christianity is therefore not just a believe or conviction; it is also a way of worship, and gives guidance as to what principles a person should apply in his or her daily conduct. Disciples of Christ were first called Christians in Antioch and Christians in the early church were called the people of the Way, because they chose in faith those options which appeared foolish and weak. The role of Christians in the church and the society is to live according to “the way” of the kingdom of God.

Child training

There are few words in Hebrew which are translated to be “train.” However, it is good to note that Hebrew word *hanak*, “to train up,” is used in connection with rearing a child (Prov. 22:6). Greek word *sophronize*, “discipline,” occurs once in the New Testament (Tit. 2-4) and it is a word related to training. Besides discipline, there exist some other synonyms for the word training such as chastisement, teach or prepare.⁶

Chastisement is explained by Emmet Russell to be *musar* in Hebrew, from the verb *yasar*, means discipline, chasten, admonish, correct and Greek *Paideia*, means child-training.⁷ Parents have responsibility to discipline their children when they do wrong, but such discipline must arise out of love. The punishment parents give to a child out of love is therefore better called chastisement. Parents who love their children will not ignore their children's wrong doing, but will deal with it (Heb. 12:6-9, II Sam. 7:14-15, Ps. 89:26-33).⁸ Chastisements should be both a penalty for wrong doing and a form of training. It should teach the child to avoid what is wrong and do what is right, and so develop a life that is useful to himself and to others (Prov. 13:24, 22:15, 23:14,29:14). Parents, when chastising their children, therefore, should act with proper understanding and without bad temper (Eph. 6:4).

“Education” is another synonym for word “training.” And the word “Education” is from an English verb “Educate” which equally takes its root from a Latin word “*educare*,” meaning to “lead.”⁹ Leading out can be referred to as “pathfinder” “providing a guide to someone,” “giving solution to someone,” “rescuing an individual from difficulty.” It can also mean to provide enlightenment to someone so that he/she may discover himself. Merle Borrowman, in the World Book Encyclopedia and Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary have uniformity in their definition of the term. They have defined education as the process by which people acquire knowledge, skills, habits, values or attitude.¹⁰ If this statement is correct then one needs to be educated. As human beings interact with their environment therefore, education which embraces child training takes a life time.

Agents of Child Training

There are different aspects of development a child needs to have as he or she grows which must be aided by adequate training from different child agents. These

developments include: social, mental, physical and spiritual. The agents of child training include the family, the school, religious organizations and the society.

The first agent of child training to be discussed is the family. The child's first contact in the world is with his immediate family; the parents (mother in particular) who take care of such basic socialization practices as feeding habits, toilets training, sex education and brushing of teeth. Training of children appears to have been initially a parental responsibility; "Attend, my son, to your father's education and do not reject the instruction of your mother" (Prov. 1:8; 6:20; 23:22). Because of this responsibility, the child must respect his parents "Honor your father and your mother" were also the instructions of God in Exodus 20:12, Deuteronomy. 5:16 and Prov. 15:20, 20:20. If the mother took an important part in the training of her children (I Sam. 1:22-28, Pro 31:28) even when they are teenagers (Prov. 31:14) then she has build self esteem, confidence and values in such child. The father is often mentioned in the education of his sons (Prov. 4:4; 13:1) as soon as they become boys: discipline your son and he will be a comfort to you and give delights to yourself (Prov. 29:17, Deut 8:5). It was part of the father's duty to explain the meaning of family's religious rites (Exod. 12:26) and teach the commandments of the Lord (Deut. 6:7, 20-25, 32, 46). Christian parents have a similar responsibility (Eph. 6:4; 2Tim. 1:5, 3:15). Since parents were the ones initially responsible for the education of their children, other members of the family naturally could take part in this education as well, especially the grandparents (Ruth 4:16). From the paternal uncle, or even a cousin (Esther 2:7), the child could receive not only a general education but also teachings about the national, state and community traditions especially during the family celebrations (I Sam. 20:6) So also, family members should recognize themselves as agents of child training and try to contribute positively as much as possible into the life of the children around them.

The second agent of child training is the school. A school is a place where formal education is obtainable. In the school, the teacher substitutes the parent. The child is developed mainly intellectually. However, children are expected to be taught values, morals, ethics and spiritual matters in schools. Dr. S.D. Udofia recognizes that African Educational system is rich with these virtues because in it the children learn moral, norms, custom and other heritage of the people. He also added that the goals of this educational system range from adaptation, integration, discipline, initiation, induction, to transmission and conservation of culture. However, he expressed his disappointment in Nigeria Education System because of the fading away of this virtues.¹¹

The third agent of child training is religious organizations. The church, for instance teaches morals and religious instructions (Ps. 119:11, 105). Through bible clubs, seminars and Sunday-school lessons, the character of the child could be molded profitably for the society. The training provided to parents in the upbringing of children may also directly affect the mind development of the child.

The fourth and the last agent is the society or the community. The moral climate of the neighborhood, the influence of the peer group; friends and others cannot be over emphasized in the upbringing of a child. Other influences come from mass media especially the television, which exposes children to lots of culture and social influence. The computer, internet, video, radio, newspaper, magazines, books etc also play some significant roles in influencing the personality of a child. Parents and guardians are expected to control what their children read or watch (Prov. 19:27).

According to Todd Ackerman, over the years, some sharpest reaction to the media has always come from parents and church groups who fear the negative influence of some programmes on the moral development of today's children.¹² In the media, some bad movie, songs, brutal killings/violence, cultic practices, sadomasochism, rebellion against authority, drug abuse, promiscuity, and homosexuality are typical themes surfacing in video after video. Such videos always have negative effect on children who watches them as they may at a time wish to practice what they see.

Exegesis of Prov. 22:6

The King James Version of this text says "Train up a child in the way he should go; and when he is old, he will not depart from it." The Revised Standard Version has the same word with the King James Version and they says "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it."

According to the New International Version (NIV), translation of this verse reads, "train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it."

While King James Version and The Revised Standard Version have similarities in words "will not depart" the New International Version has "will not turn." The meaning of the two words has however been interpreted to mean the same as we shall see in this paper.

In referring to the contextual meaning of the Hebrew word *hanak* from the clause "train up a child in the way he should go," C.F. Keil says it means the first instruction or education communicated to the child.¹³ Rolland W. Schloerb added that the use of the rod is encouraged as part of the educational process (Prov. 13:24, 19:18, 23:13-14). He also comments that this verse expresses one of the strong points of the Hebrew sages, viz -a-viz, their insistence on the moral training of the child by the parents.¹⁴ According to Kenneth Baker L and R. Kohlenberger, the imperative "train," includes the idea of "dedicate," so the training should be with purpose.¹⁵

To further explaining the word "train" in Prov. 22:6, William Poovey says that children may need to be restrained for their own good and the good of the family. He also added that though the training of a child includes disciplining or punishing for wrong act, yet some parents misuse their strength and authority to inflict cruel punishment in a child.¹⁶ Parents need to ask themselves whether they

are punishing their children out of frustration and anger or out of love?. Even in punishment, as the Proverb suggests love must be a guiding factor.

Na'ar is another word to be studied. It is a masculine nominative singular noun.¹⁷ It could mean boy, lad, youth: or infant Ex. 2:6 (3 months old); just born (I Sam. 4:21) not weaned (I Sam. 1:22) of lad just weaned (I Sam. 1:24) or of young Ishmael (Gen. 21:12) Joseph, Gen. 3:2 (17 years old); both equals to youth. It could be a word used with special stress on youthfulness (Prov. 22: 6, Jdg. 8:20) or of marriageable age (Gen. 34:19). Some other meanings the word could have are personal attendant, house hold servant, Numbers 22:22 or retainer, follower as used in Genesis 14:24.

In talking about the contextual meaning of *na'ar* in Prov. 22:6, George Arthur Buttrick says the word refers to the early stage of a child when the mind of the child is impressionable.¹⁸ Kenneth Barker and John Kohlenberger III further say there is a standard of life of which children should adhere.¹⁹ Of course, they would have to be young enough when change for the better is still possible. In other words the word stresses on ones youthfulness or early age which is the formative period of one's life.

The Hebrew word *derek* is the next word to be examined. Its general meaning includes way, road, path (Gen. 35:3, 48:7), journey (I kg. 18:27, 19:7), of direction, almost or quite equals to toward (Job 24:18), way of manner (Isa. 10:24-26). It could also mean figure of course of life, or action, undertakings, etc (Deut. 28:29), of duty (commanded etc) Prov. 22:6; 21 etc or of moral action and character (Gen. 6:12).²⁰ In explaining the word *derek* as used in the clause "train a child in the way he should go." C.F Keil and F. Delitzsch says that the instruction of a child or youth, the education of a child or youth, ought to be conformed to the nature of the child or youth. The matter of instruction, the manner of instruction, ought to regulate itself according to the stage of life, and its peculiarities. ²¹ The method ought to be arranged according to the degree of development which the mental and bodily life of the child or youth has arrived at. They added that *mimenah* (from it) refers to that training of a child or youth, in conformity with his nature, which becomes a second nature, that which is imprinted, inbred and becomes accustomed.

In explaining the word "way" as used in Prov. 22:6, it is the process of helping our children to choose the right path, as they must discern differing paths for each child. It is natural to want to bring up all our children alike or train them same way. This verse is said to imply that parents should discern the individual and special strengths that God has given each one. While we should not condone or excuse self-will, each child has natural inclinations that parents can develop. It is further being said that many parents want to make all the choices for their children, but this may hurt them in the long run. When parents teach their children how to make decisions, they do not have to watch every step they take. They know their children will remain on the right path because they have made

the choice themselves. Thus, parents are advised to train their children to choose the right way.

Zaqen (adj.) is another word that simply means old in respect of human beings (Gen. 19:11). Barker and Kohlenberger explain the word “old” in Prov. 22:6 not only to mean having lived for a long time (no longer young) but also to mean the stages of life of an individual when the result of what he has been taught is expected or period of accountability which does not necessary mean when he is old in terms of age.²² They also added that proper training of children should extend throughout their live. According to them, the consequence is that when they are old, they will not depart from it.

The Hebrew word *sur* (vb.) is the last word to be examined. According to Schloerb, it generally means turn aside, out of one's cause. In I Sam. 6:12; it could mean depart as seen in the case of the Israelites (Ex. 8:2) or of lifeless things which also means to be removed, oppressor's yoke (Isa. 14:25). The phrase “he will not turn from it” (Prov. 22:6b) means the child is likely to change from it. This implies that the later life of a child, largely depends on the early child training given to him. Schloerb says that while the greatest joy that parents can have is a wise child (Prov. 23:15-16, 24); the most tragic sorrow is to have a foolish one (Pro 17:21, 25).²³

In his interpretation of Proverbs 22:6, Matthew Henry says that there is a great duty expected particularly by those that are the parents and instructors to children. In that learning age, parents and other child instructors such as teachers, religious leaders and so on are expected to prepare children for what they are designed for. They are to catechize them, initiate them and keep them under discipline.

Some Approaches to Child Training in Christianity

In this section, proper and the improper approaches to child training shall be examined but emphasis will be on the proper approaches to child training. Important hints that could make child training successful shall also be unfolded.

The first approach to child training in Christianity is the life style of the parents. Many parents do not even know what they could teach their children at each age. While an inconsistent Christian living can be considered as an improper approach of child training, living an exemplary Christian life should be encouraged among parents. It is believed that parents who love their children will fulfill their duty to instruct and discipline them. But they will not be able to do this, if they are ill-instructed or ill-disciplined themselves (Deut. 11:18-19, II Sam. 7:14-15, Prov. 1:8, 13:1, 24:19, 29:17, Eph. 6:4, I Tim. 3:2-5, 5:14, Heb 12:7-11).²⁴ The teachings that parent give their children must be supported by the example of right conduct in the own lives (Rom. 2:21-24, I Thess. 2:10-12). Parents must practice self-sacrifice for the sake of others, so that the family is a place where people learn how to love others, forgive others, honor others and serve others (Eph. 4:31-32, Matt. 20:25-27, John. 13:12-15).

An atmosphere of love and effective communication is another appropriate approach or necessity for child training. Parents are expected to create time to be with their children and encourage open communication between themselves and their children (Deut. 6:20-25, Josh 4:21-24). The bible goes against parents misusing their authority or treating their children unjustly. For the fact that the bible says children must respect and obey their parents (Eph. 6:1-4; Col. 3:20-21), does not mean that parents should function in an atmosphere of harsh authority. On the contrary, it will function best where there is an atmosphere of self-sacrificing. As parents desire to direct their children in the way they should go, they need to be flexible, and remember that each child has his own free will. They should give their child a legacy of love by empowering him or her to maturity. They should put a permanent ban on the toxic verbal weapons of judging, belittling, blaming and fault finding. They should begin to employ nurturing communication which builds, supports and cares. They should place subtle, destructive, discounting messages with positive, affirming, nurturing messages. They should learn to communicate verbally and nonverbally: "I love you for who you are." Wright Norman says that using loving, effective communication increases our child's self-esteem and reduces the frustrations of parenting.²⁵

Shelter and good finance are basic needs in the training of children especially where they are of different gender. According to Null Johnson, a family of five with adolescent children living in a one-room apartment will expose the children to unsightly scenes which would not help the moral development of the children. They may pick up negative examples which they likely try to experiment.²⁶ It is also essential that parents must try to meet the financial status of their children. Every child wants to belong and therefore desires to have dresses, shoes, phone and other materials like his or her peer group. So, lack of adequate finance, is a poverty drives which could make children victims to do what they would not have done such as prostitution, gambling, stealing and other unacceptable conduct.

Favoritism is improper approach of child training that is common among parents. In some homes, the father love the male child and pay more attention to the neglect of the female child. This must be avoided as much as possible because it could lead to a divided home. By extension, a divided home breeds disunity in the society and disrupt peaceful coexistence in many community. When a mother is not enjoying the unity of his family because of the quarrel and mistrust in the home, the children would probably not appreciate peace in other peoples' home or in the society, because they have not experience the beauty of peace. The children may not only hate one another but also become debris to other people and their actions and behavior will endanger the cooperate existence of the society.

It is important to note that training of a child must not only be an intellectual assignment but also be handled spiritually. Child training must include discipleship and prayer for sustaining grace for the child on a regularly basis. Prayer is a necessity for proper child training in Christianity. Stormie Omartian

says that being a perfect parent does not matter but being a praying parent does.²⁷ In her *The Power of a Praying Parent*, she shares how parents can pray through every age and stage of their child's life. She advised parents to learn how to turn to God and place every detail of their child's life in God's hands and care. Their safety, character development, peer pressure, school, marriage, family relationship, adolescence and career choices are to be handed to God in prayers. With the use of proper approaches to child training, parents would be helped to achieve good fruitfulness in their labour over their children.

The Relevance of Child Training

The relevance of child training in Christianity cannot be over emphasized. S.D Udofia says that experience has shown that children who are not properly trained and disciplined are instrument of reproach and dishonor to God, their parents and the society as shown in the case of Eli's children.²⁸ On the contrary, well groomed children shall bring honour, peace, development and progress to their parents and the society at large. Some of the benefits of proper child training to the family, church and the society have been discussed as follows:

The family

It is a common knowledge that children often play the role of nation building. Proverb 29:17 says "train up a child and you shall have rest." From this scriptural passage, it is obvious that parents will rest if children are well trained in Christ likeness. Nation building is one of the great roles that the children play. Failure in child training may cause family and national disaster. The Bible has it that for lack of proper training, God's threat to Eli's house through Samuel was accomplished in I Samuel 4, when in a battle with the Philistines, the Ark was captured, Israel defeated, and Eli's two sons died the same day and Eli himself died from the shock of the sad news.²⁹ However when talking about the benefits that accrue from properly groomed children; our mind should go to the blessings that came to Jacob's family through Joseph. It is a known fact that his comportment in Egypt resulting from his moral and spiritual upbringing brought God's blessing and prosperity to Portiphar's house and to the entire land of Egypt (Gen. 37-50). Also, proper child training assisted Daniel, Shadrech, Meshach and Abednego in Babylon. Thus the inability of parents to properly train and discipline their children may cause family and national disaster.

The Church

The relevance of the child to the church and the kingdom of God is worth of consideration. When a child of ordinary capacity and destitute of property is converted to God and admitted as member of the church, he or she frequently becomes worth more to the cause of Christ than many wealthy persons who are converted in the evening of their time and even at the noontide of life. It is being said that "the saving of a child's soul offers a double opportunity." Double opportunity here means to save a soul from eternal destruction and to develop

a life and talent for the services of God. Festus Odedoyin says that child training can make a child to do exploit for the Lord. There are many examples of such children who were evangelized and nurtured to adulthood in the Bible. A typical example from the new testament is Timothy. In 2 Tim. 3:14, Paul charges Timothy to continue in the gospel he learnt from his mother and grandmother Lois and Eunice for that would strengthen him to be a giant for Christ.³⁰ According to Biblical record, Timothy later became the bishop of Ephesus. Child evangelism is an act of obedience to God's commandment. The Bible says "therefore go and make disciples of all nations... (Matt. 28:19). Here, children are inclusive." Christ also spoke specially in the gospel of Mk. 10:13-16 that the kingdom of God is for the children. A child needs regeneration and preparation for the second coming of Christ.

The society

Proper child training is very relevant not only to the family and church but also to the society at large because it also help the children not to become perverse, ungodly or even street children. Preventing them from becoming wayward or ungodly children eventually make them unable to perpetuate ills or evil being perpetuated by the ungodly or street children. Some of these ills include petty theft, internet scams (yahoo boyz) and prostitution for survival. Wayward children or youth are bad precedent in the society as many children or youth might likely follow their path to dishonor their parents and the society. They are a threat to our social and moral norms as they are giving to flagrantly violating entrenching their stay. That will be posing a serious threat to the societal peace standard.

Some untrained children often turn to the street and extort money by force without the fear of enforcement agencies. In Nigeria, some of them have been variously "employed" as political tugs and have been known to be ruthless effective instrument for political assassinations. They are extremely vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS since they are in a world of their own where the strongest survive.³¹ Many among them set out on the part of rape and as such, they become portend danger to the society as some innocent ladies and women turn out to be a victim. In light of this, many citizens are afraid to walk freely in society.

Conclusion

Ignorance on child training approach has been unfolded to be responsible for the waywardness of some children in our society. Child training, as discussed in this paper, involves the family, the school, the church and the society at large. Right approach to child training helps in the total development of a child which includes his spiritual, physical, mental, moral and social development. By participating actively in the character formation of their children early in life by using the right approach of training, parents will help in shaping and sharpening the psychosocial outlook of their children, develop strong ethical orientations

that enables them to recognize the difference between right and wrong and the importance of making good choices.

Thus, for child training to be appropriate and be able to avoid the danger and problems associated with lack of child training, some steps are hereby recommended. While the parents are expected to know what to teach their children at different stages of developments, they are also to live an exemplary life so that their children can be encouraged to obey them. They are to give room for an open and effective communication with their children. Children should be given room to express their feelings (both their likes and dislikes even about their parents' behavior). Parents are to discipline their children and sometimes explain the reason of such discipline to the child (especially for those who could understand). Parents are encouraged to take note of holistic training which Prov. 22:6 is trying to convey. However, value should be placed on spiritual over the others. Emphasis should always be made by parents and other training instructors on the need for children to fear God in all their undertakings.

ENDNOTES

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