

EFFECT OF MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS ON PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS: COUNSELLING IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper shows that the mental health of children is very important. This is not only because they are the future leaders but also due to the fact that good mental health brings about progress and achievement. The paper also shows that children can have mental health problems if care is not taken. As a result of this, the paper looked into the devastating effect of mental health problems, the causes, how to identify the problems and the counselling intervention that can be employed in solving some of the problems. Relevant recommendations were advanced.

INTRODUCTION

The future of our Nation Nigeria depends on the mental health and strength of our young people. This is because they are the future leaders of this great country. Primary school children are part of this young people who will make the future of this country bright. Therefore, their mental health is very important for efficient learning and proper development of their personality to take place. It is for this reason that the focus of this paper will be on the effects of mental health problems on primary schools pupils and their implication for counseling.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health Report (2008), "many children have mental health problems that interfere with normal development and functioning".

This shows that it is not adults alone who have mental health problems (probably due to their numerous responsibilities) but children have it, as young as they are. The report further says that, "in U.S. today, one in ten children suffer from a mental disorder severe enough to cause some level of impairment". This report is a thing of concern. If developed countries like USA have such a problem, then one wonders, what will become of a developing country like Nigeria, whose poverty rate is high and the standard of living is low. It demands that the issue of children's mental health problem should be taken seriously and not with levity.

Mental health in a simple way can be said to be a state in which the mind is sound and the thinking process is in good order.

Rochdale(2008) sees mental health as about how we think, feel and cope with life. Good mental health is about physical, emotional and social well-being as well as believing in our worth and that of others. It is clear that mental health is a good state of the mind. Where this is not so, there is bound to be mental health problem(s). Mental health problem is a serious situation that can affect every aspect of human life. In line with this, Plus (2008) shows that mental health problems can disrupt daily life at home, school or in the community. Without help, mental health problems can lead to school failure, alcohol or other drug abuse, family disorder, violence or even suicide. This shows that the end result of mental health problems can be devastating. Therefore, the need for good mental health counselling cannot be over emphasized. Good mental health brings about progress and achievement. The earlier, the importance of good mental health is realized and maintained, the better, especially in children. Thus, the need for mental health counselling which will begin at the primary school level.

The primary school children are between six to twelve years' old. Erickson (1950) theory of psychosocial stages of development in Chanhan (1991) shows that such children go through psychosocial crises known

as industry vs inferiority. Wikipedia (Encyclopedia) explains this stage as a period in which "To bring a productive situation to completion is an aim which gradually supersedes the whims and wishes of play. The fundamentals of technology are developed. To lose the hope of such 'industrious' association may pull the child back to the more isolated, less conscious familial rivalry of the oedipal time". It is important to note here that only a healthily developing child will pass through this stage successfully. A child with mental health will find it difficult to go through this stage. Erickson (1950) shows that each stage builds on the successful completion of earlier stage. He added that the challenge of stage not successfully completed may be expected to reappear as problems in the future. This is to say that the problem of a child with mental health problems, compounds and if attention is not drawn to it early enough, it becomes more difficult to resolve. Mental health problems can manifest in different ways or forms.

Some Common Mental Health Problems in Primary School Children

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Mental health problems in children manifest in different ways. Such as: Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, Anxiety, Behaviour disorders and Depression.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorders (ADHD)

The characteristics of these forms of mental health problem are inattention, impulsivity and hyperactivity. Pupils having these problems pay little or no attention to class work, he or she acts without thinking carefully about the outcome. They are too active, their quietness is only but for a short time. As a result of inattention, they find it difficult to understand what the teacher is teaching. Such a child becomes problem not only to his or her self but to others in the class. The class teachers will find it difficult to cope with such a child in the class. Plus (2008) shows that no one knows exactly what causes ADHD. It runs in families, so genetics may be factor. To confirm if a child has ADHD, there is need for a trained professional to have a complete evaluation on him or her.

Anxiety according to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2000), is the state of feeling nervous or worried, that something

bad is going to happen. That is, being fearful Santrock (2005) opines that anxiety is a vague, highly unpleasant feeling of fear and apprehension. It is normal for students to be concerned, or worried when they face challenges. Researchers like Bandura (1997) found that many successful students have moderate levels of anxiety. Plus (2008) explains that fear anxiety are part of life. You may feel anxious before you take a test or walk down a dark street. This kind of anxiety is useful; it can make one alert or careful. The fear or anxiety situation causing it stops. When the anxiety persists and gets worse over time, it can, lead to chest pain or nightmares. Anxiety can be in the form of panic disorder, obsessive - compulsix disorder, post- traumatic stress disorder and phobias. To sum it all, Santrock (2005) posits that high levels of anxiety and worry can significantly impair student's ability to achieve.

Child behaviour disorder is also known as conduct disorder. According to plus (2008), all kids misbehave some times, behaviour disorders go beyond mischief and rebellion. With behaviour disorder, children have a pattern of hostile, aggressive or disruptive behaviour for more than 6 months. The warning sign include; having or threatening themselves; others or pets; Damaging properly; Lying or stealing; Poor performance in school, skipping school; Early

smoking, drinking or drug abuse; Frequent tantrums and arguments; Consistent hostility authority figures.

Depression also known as Dysthymic disorder is serious medical illness that involves the brain. It's more than just a feeling of being 'down in the dumps' or 'blue' for a few days. The symptoms include, loss of interest or pleasure in activity you used to enjoy, change in weight energy loss, feeling of worthlessness, difficulty sleeping or oversleeping. Depression can run in families. (Plus, 2008). According to National Institute of Mental Health Report (2008) the depressed child may pretend to be sick, refuse to go

school, cling to parent or worry that parent may die. Furthermore, they see depression as a serious disorder that can cause significant problems in mood, thinking and behaviour at home, in school, and with peers.

Having seen some common mental health problems, it is at this point necessary to consider how to identify these problems.

Identifying Mental Health Problems in Pupils

Mental health problems show symptoms such as excessive – anger, fear, sadness or anxiety, Chauhan (1991) categorized the symptom into three as shown in the table below.

Table 1: Showing Symptoms of Mental Health-Problems

S/N	Symptoms	Characteristics
1.	Physical	Shuttering, stammering, scratching head facial twitching, biting nails, rocking feet, restlessness, drumming with fingers and vomiting.
2.	behaviour deviations	Aggression, lying, bullying, poor school achievement, hyperactivity, negativism and sex disturbances.
3.	Emotional	Excessive worry, fear, inferiority, hatred, extreme timidity, tempertatrum, persistent anxiety, conflicts and tension.

Sources: Adopted from Chauhan Advanced Educational Psychology.

Detecting these symptoms requires professional skills of a psychiatrist. But then, at the early stage of manifestation, some of these symptoms can be detected through (a) observation and 'interview (b) the use of tests.

Observation: Parents, teachers, counsellors all those involved with

can observe the behaviour of children at home, church/mosque and school (playground, library, music class etc). They can organize interview section to reach definite conclusion regarding the individual case of mental health problems.

Use of Tests: Pertaining test, there are a number of psychological test

inventories and rating scales which have been developed by psychologists such as:

- i. **Haggerty - Olson Wickman behaviour rating schedule** (used in rating various traits of behaviour).
- ii. **The Bell Adjustment Inventory** (measures adjustment of an individual in major life situation).
- iii. **The Moony Checklist** (used in finding out maladjusted children)
- iv. **The Roger's Test of Personality Adjustment.**

(For screening adjusted and maladjusted children).

- v. **Taylor Anxiety Scale** (used in screening children with excessive anxiety)

These tests are foreign tests; they can be modified to fit into our indigenous set up.

Causes of Mental Health Problems

There are numerous factors in the child, home, society and school which can lead to mental health problems. They are summarized in the table below.

Table 2: Showing Factors Leading to Mental Health Problems

S/N	Factors	Characteristics
1.	Child	Child's physique, adoption, personal inadequacies, emotion shock, long sickness / injury, eating habit, exercise and rest / sleep.
2.	Home	Poverty, broken home, parental attitudes value placed on sex of the child.
3.	Society	Value placed on sex of the child, societal, cultural norms e.g. female Circumcision.
4.	School	Inadequate training of teachers, inadequate curriculum, lack of recreation facilities, class room climate, examination system and stringent policies and lack of counselors in schools.

Source: Literature Reviewed.

Mental Health Counselling Intervention

Shertzer and Stone (1974) observe that some psychologists have identified the preservation or attainment of positive mental health as the goal of counselling. And that if this is reached, the individual achieves integration,

adjustment and positive identification with others. He learns to accept responsibility, to be independent, and to gain behavioural integration. This is what the counsellor can do.

In handling mental health problems of children, the counsellor's goal

should be that of using his technical skills to

1. Help each counsellee attain and maintain an awareness of self so that he can be responsible for himself.
2. Help each counsellee confront threats to his being and thus to open further, the way for the counsellee to increase his concern for other's well-being.
3. Help each counsellee bring into full operation his unique potential incompatibility with his own life and within the ethical limits of the society.

Many psychologists have testified to the fact that **Talking** will help those having mental health problems. The talking referred to here is having an encounter with a counsellor. Therefore, counselling is an important therapy to solving mental health problems. The counsellor will handle the counselling section, focusing on the peculiar mental health problem at hand, depending on the root cause of the mental health problems. Some of such counseling sections are: (a) mental hygiene counseling (2) eating counseling (3) exercise counseling.

Guide to Mental Hygiene Counseling

Chanhan (1991) opines that mental health is a science which deals with the process of attaining mental health and prevents mental illness. Mental hygiene is a means to make people of mental health. It provides measures to achieving health. Counsellors should ensure that the following goals are attained as the counselling goes on. The counsellees are made to (1) Realize his/her potentialities (2) provide means and measures to develop positive attitude towards the fact that the present problem can be resolved. (3) the individual is made to make use of his abilities effectively. Making the counsellee see the need for a good lifestyle is equally necessary. This is because a healthy lifestyle will help them manage their mental health and well-being.

Guide to Eating Counseling

Mental Health Association (2008) shows that mental health professional's point out that good eating habits are vital for people wanting to optimize the effectiveness of coping with possible side effect of medication used to treat mental illness. The counsellor should discuss the need to eat fresh fruits and vegetables, foods high in omega-3 fatty acids, such as fish, nuts, seeds and eggs. Protein, whole grains. Making the

right nutritional choices can affect more than the fit of clothes on us. It can have an impact on our mental health. National Institute of Mental Health Report (2008) reports that, a balance diet is essential to maintaining good mental health.

Guide to Exercise Counselling

Children should be encouraged to go through well organized exercises. This will help to burn off excess fats. It will make the different organs of the body to function well. It will also provide a huge range of fun experience that will help a child get out of distress situation. Exercise has positive impact on mental health. It reduces anxiety.

Conclusion

Looking at the importance of children's mental health, it is necessary for every hand to be on deck to ensure that pupils are helped to maintain good health condition. One of those who can make this happen is the counsellor. The way to detect pupils with mental problems and guides to help counsel them have been discussed.

Recommendations

- ❖ Counsellors should help to detect pupils who are likely to have mental health problems on time.

- ❖ Lack of counsellors in primary schools is contributing to mental health problems. Government should ensure that more counselors are trained and employed at the primary school level.
- ❖ Parents should take good care of their children / wards. They should provide good condition/ atmosphere needed for healthy growth and good mental development.
- ❖ Schools should handle children with care and inculcate in them good eating, reading and healthy habits.

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