

# THE DEVELOPMENT OF ASSERTIVE BEHAVIOUR IN THE GIRL CHILD AS A MEANS OF SURVIVING IN A HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

*Dr. (Mrs.) L.I. Salami and Mrs. B.E. Uwameiye*

## **Abstract**

It has been observed that, one of the reasons why male dominate their female counterparts in the social and political arena is because of their possession of assertive behaviour. This paper aim at educating the girl child/women on the acquisition of this tendency to enable them survive in the social, cultural, political and educational aspect of the society.

## **Introduction**

The long history of male dominance is recognizable in world events. Such dominance has tended to relegate women to the lower level where they have remained passive and seemed unconcerned about their situation. Various historical and religious practices purportedly encouraged women to be very passive in social, economic and political activities.

The genesis of such passive attitude exhibited by women may have been influenced largely by traditional child rearing practices. This is confirmed by Okeke (1979). Influenced and supported by Thio (1989) who observed that as soon as a baby is born, parents are anxious to know it's sex. The anxiety in parents is influenced by the belief that the baby's sex makes a lot of difference in it's future from the day of birth, parents expect and teach the baby to behave in a particular way. These differential upbringing of males and females by their parents are the major reason while the girl child behaves the way she does. From time to time these perspectives of interpreting womanhood have created problems for the society. These problems often are social as well as religious and have become more serious for the contemporary society where rapid changes due to technological innovations are taking place. As the world is becoming a global village, the question that comes to mind is, whether it's advantageous to continue to encourage women to be passive and submissive human beings? Studies have shown generally that encouraging may not be in the interest of women. The human race is in a constant change hence the attitude of the women must be affected by the dynamism. However, change in itself is supported and influenced by numerous factors, these factors in many cases may be dictated and their women with life styles.

Several theories have been propounded by renowned authors supporting the development of the child. Piaget's theory supports the importance of development stimulation. According to Piaget (1971), "any explanation of the child's development must take into consideration two dimensions: genetic dimension and a social dimension". This article will be concerned with the social dimension. Social transmission includes learning through languages, school and training by parents. According to Piaget the process of socialization is a structure an individual contributes in as he receives from it. Social action is effective when the learners are involved in the process of learning. The influence of the social environment is very important to the cognitive development of the child. The mind and the personality of the child develop in accordance to the influence a particular social environment has upon him. According to Harvinghurst and Nevgarten (1967), ... While normal development of the mind and personality requires a normal development of the mind and personality requires a normal physique (body, brain and nervous system), there kind of intellectual and social traits that develop primarily upon interaction between the social environment and the child biological potentials, upon what he learns, and upon what he experiences from social interaction.

The importance of the social environment as it affects the differences in the child's development, was recognized by Piaget when he observed that: "as the child grows older the influence of physical and social milieu increases. The rate of development however differs from one individual to another and from one social environment to another. Considering differences in environment and social transmission, in the development of the child, individual difference result, it's example, some are self

assertive while others are self-submissive. However, it's often observed that most women are socialized to be dependent, submissive, complacent and non persevering while their male counterparts socialized to be independent, initiative and assertive (Okeke, 1997). These differences undoubtedly result to gender roles.

### **The Study**

The premise of this study is the development of assertive behaviour in the girl child. Accordingly, this study aims at analysing the extent to which this tendency can assist the girl child in surviving at the local national, social, cultural, economic and political contexts. There is limited research into the development of assertive behaviour in the girl child.

### **The Nigerian Environment and The Girl Child**

In Nigeria, there are cultural diversities and their cultures in most cases appropriate traits that are oriented towards gender lines masculine or feminine. A variety of mechanisms ranging from oral traditional practices to formal education and legal system define acceptable behaviour for males and females. These standards are learned from an early age in the family and reinforced by peer pressure, community institutions and the mass media, hi the Nigerian society, children learn that males are dominant and should assert power whereas female are socialized to accept male dominance and be submissive to male demands. Females are taught to accept the roles that society assigns them, and hence punish "deviant" behaviour and ensure their sexual and social acceptance. This stereotyped roles has been termed by the society as feminine. For many Nigerian women, the feminine attitude, often prevent them from behaving assertively. Often this feminine belief has led to women lacking confidence in themselves, feeling worthless, with low self-esteem and believing that they aren't important. They are mostly subservient to avoid conflicts, others for fear of violence become naive and behave unseemingly.

### **What the Girls Child Deserves in a Dynamic Society**

The most important change the girl child deserves is the power to determine the course of her own without constraints. They should be allowed to make their own decision without relying on others to decide for them, and socialized to act rather than react. The girl child should be properly nurtured to develop her sense of power which she has been denied to exercise. Females have been taught to swallow their anxiety, bury their anger, personal anguish and disappointment which are produced by powerlessness and non-assertiveness. It becomes eminent that not only should the traits be on equal competition of the sexes. For e.g. for success, money, prestige or authority which are the external barometres of power of assertiveness within the girl child, which will enable her to be creative, positive and forceful. That will in turn give her feelings of worth and purpose and foster a strong conviction to overcome feelings of anxiety, helplessness and hopelessness. These traits can only be exhibited by developing the assertive tendency in the girl child.

### **Characteristics of Assertiveness**

Assertiveness is the ability of expressing one's feelings. While stating one's views and desires directly, spontaneously and honestly. An assertive person is about herself and about others too, respects the feelings and rights of other people. Assertiveness enable a person to evaluate a situation, •choose how to act without reservation. Be truthful to herself and never forgets that other people have rights too. Winning or losing seem unimportant compared to the value of expressing herself and choosing for herself. Goals may not always be actual process of assertiveness.

An assertive behaviour has been misconstrued as a means of cover for aggression, some think that assertiveness is just a milder, "nicer" form of aggressiveness. Yet the two are entirely different sets of behaviour with definite objectives and motivations. There characteristics can be developed and motivated in an individual. To do that, the first step is to know how the individual feels about herself learning assertive behaviour. Most women from childhood may have developed attitudes that inhibit learning and exhibiting assertive behaviour some such inhibition may have been as result of societal expectation. Some of these expectations are been expressed as follows:

- 1) I should be seen and not heard.
- 2) I am helpless when it comes to taking action that produce change.
- 3) I don't like risk-taking, it scares me.

- 4) I'd rather let somebody else be the leader, I'm a good follower.
- 5) What other people thinks is more important than what I think.
- 6) It's better to put up with things than rock the boat.
- 7) If I ask for what I want people will think I'm selfish.
- 8) It's better to be liked than speak up and be seen as a troublemaker.
- 9) If assert myself I will seen as aggressive.
- 10) If became competent I may never find a husband,

For many women, the aforementioned attitudes are regarded as being feminine and prevent them from behaving assertively. Women who feel it's not feminine to be assertive have two alternatives to behave passively or to be cunning and indirectly aggressive. The result of either approach is to avoid opportunity of developing assertive tendencies.

### **An Approach to Assertive Learning**

At what age should the students be taught assertive behaviour? When a child of pre-school age gets into school, they have learnt informally a wealth of information. The child's age allows her to do without knowing what she is doing and full of fake information then as she grows into secondary school, the school and outside it begin to give challenges and a wealth of information to the child. This is further reinforced in the tertiary institution where they have bewildering variety of knowledge skill, capacity, experiences, attitudes, purposes, prejudices and values among others (Burgess, 2000). If education is to offer any help towards solving the problems of individual or of society must do so directly by helping individuals. The learner needs to be encouraged to reflect on their present position and what has been their experience, hitherto, assertiveness is a skill that has to be learnt and cannot be learnt without practice. Biggs (1990) reported that there are 3 phases of human learning process and product personal factors tend to be those, which exist prior to learning and include both personal and situational factors. Personal factors include student characteristics such as prior knowledge, home background, values, personality, situational factors include course structure, curriculum content, methods of teaching and assessment and rules and regulations.

In institution and classroom situations, the process factors determine the way in which a student goes about learning and include motives of learning and strategies for engaging in the process of learning to reach the desired outcome. The product phase refers to the learning outcome achieved.

### **Ways of Encouraging Assertive Behaviour Tendency in the Girl Child in Schools**

It is observed that schools are no way gender neutral. According to Okeke (1990), success at school is usually measured in terms of those behaviour associated with males — competitiveness and aggression, boldness, independence. Yet girls are being socialized to be docile, obedient, dependent and the like. A female that is assertive, bold and competitive is likely to do well in most school subjects but these characteristics should be encouraged in the girl child because they conflict with the upbringing pattern.

The girl child should be socialized to be assertive and not submissive knowing fully well that it will help her succeed in her academic pursuance.

In schools the girl child should be encouraged to go into the masculine areas like the sciences, vocational and technical education (as well as engineering) areas which will help to give her a feeling of dominance or belonging to the male class. This in turn, will no doubt help her to be bold and assertive in the classroom situation such will remove the hidden curriculum that covertly discourage females from these areas.

In the school situation, boys usually harass girls out of workshops or laboratories because they see the various courses as their domain and this is further worsened by illustrating the subject matter own content with examples and illustrations of concepts from traditional areas of interest and experiences of males, so if there is de-emphasis in gender, in illustrations girls can work be assertive in the workshop and work along with boys in workshops and laboratories freely.

More important, are teachers' behaviour and expectations of male and female students. Being members of the wider society, teachers come to school loaded with stereotype assumptions about female

and male students. They expect specific behaviour and achievement level for females and males and subsequently behave towards each sex verbally and non-verbally conveying the expectations which thereby create a self fulfilling prophecy. It is true that in co-educational classes, teachers allow the boys to dominate the class discussions, ask questions, assume leadership of group work, secure teachers attention or interaction giving them advantage over the girls. The girls should be encouraged to be assertive in class, ask questions, lead groups, and refuse to be dominated by boys in the classroom.

School administrators should search out young girls in the primary school level who possess the assertive tendency and encourage and support them through gifts and scholarships to develop the tendency.

Strengthen the knowledge base and competence of career counsellors to promote assertive tendency in the female students. Counsellors are individuals who have undergone training in the theory and practice of counselling normal people, individually and in groups. They aim to help individuals direct and achieve their goals and improve their lot. Counsellors also create through the exercise of their skills and environment help students explore their own feeling without fear, learn how to cope more effectively with decision making and examine their values and objectives without risk of condemnation. From the aforementioned the girl child is in dire need of the services of a counsellor. The counselled girls can then be used as role models and mentors so as to modify gender stereotyping attitudes and behaviour among school children. There is no doubt that schools' curriculum must begin to address the peculiar needs of the girl child.

### **Curriculum Innovation**

Nations of the world strive to achieve the best for their citizenry and this is embedded in the educational curriculum. Therefore, a curriculum is useful if it meets the needs of the society and is relevant to the system of the people. It becomes imperative that educational curriculum must incorporate societal needs, its problems and values at any particular time. Curriculum has been defined as the planned experiences offered to the learner under the guidance of a school (Raynor, 1972; Onwula, 1990). Although the nation's educational curriculum has undergone many reviews still it does not suit the purpose of the generality (Abdu, 2000), society is not stagnant hence curriculum must undergo constant reviews. It is clear that there is an urgent need to develop a new curriculum for specific social groups with peculiar conditions. Apart from the traditional school subjects, general knowledge can be introduced to address some important gender specific problems that will benefits the girl child.

The curriculum should address the following emphasis:

- \* The need to educate the girl child;
- \* The potentials of the girl child;
- \* Child care and guidance;
- \* The development of behaviour;
- \* Teenage pregnancies and its attendant problems;
- \* Family planning and sex education.

### **Developing the Assertive Behaviour in Women**

There are four basic steps to acquiring this new behaviour, they are as listed by Phelps and Austin (2000).

- 1) **Description or Modeling of Behaviour:** This demands the proper understanding of the differences between assertive and aggressive behaviour. Then, talking or observing someone who is assertive may ginger such behaviour. Research has shown that learning takes place as a result of observation.
- 2) **Practicing the New Behaviour:** The learner should start from simple to complex situations but must always choose a situation in which she is likely to experience control. Tacking difficult areastoo fast, may bring negative consequence which could discourage her from asserting herself in future.
- 3) **Reinforcing the Desired Behaviour:** The act of being assertive itself is rewarding and embrace behaviour that you are likely to be rewarded, rather than punished for. The goal of assertion may

not be "victory", but being able to express your needs and desires openly and honesty is rewarding.

- 4) **Receiving Accurate, Rapid Feedback:** When you are practicing assertive behaviour, ask your friends to give your feedback on your behaviour as the following questions:

- Did my assertive words match my body image?
- Did I use my voice, gestures and posture assertively?
- Are there specific areas that need improvement?

Which ones.

Combining knowledge of what assertive behaviour is with actually performing it and receiving reinforcement and feedback will provide the women with a strong foundation that she can build on. Practice and preparing beforehand will make it much more likely one can continue to behave assertively.

### **Developing Assertive Behaviour in the Girl Child**

- 1) Girls should be brought up to be dependable not subservient;
- 2) The girls child should be given the same, toys as the boys;
- 3) Make them to be free in asking any type of question;
- 4) Do away with stereotyping expressions;
- 5) Create an environment that is neither masculine nor feminine (neutral) for the child to grow in;
- 6) The child should be encouraged to participate in open discussion.

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