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## CHAPTER 22

### COUNSELLING AND CONSULTATION SERVICES FOR FAMILIES OF CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES IN NIGERIA

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#### **Introduction**

After marriage, couples dream of having a child that is the smartest, strongest, best-looking child on earth. However, when they discover that their child has learning disability, they are faced with the loss of the dream they had for the child. Similarly, when they suspect that the child is not coping well as other children in the school, their dream changes to shock and frustration. Niedecken (2003), expressed that as the child's condition continues to incapacitate him/her, the parents also go through "hellish" period of blame, self-accusations and feelings of guilt. The parents' major reactions on having a child with learning disability include; shock, denial, blame/guilt, anger and sorrow. These reactions could shatter their expectations and propel feeling of fear, frustration, shame and embarrassment. UNESCO (2018), stated that a child with learning disability is a serious challenge to the parents and the child. These parents need proper counseling and consultation services in order to cope with and meet the needs of the child. Counseling and consultation services help parents to accept and adjust to conditions of the child. Acceptance and adjustment help the parents to provide for the social, health, emotional and educational needs of the child. However, Lerner and Kline (2006), stated that not every parent goes through these stages serially. Understanding parents' emotional reactions about their child's disability is very important as it is the basis for offering them appropriate counselling and consultation services needed for successful upbringing of the child.

Counselling is relationship between two people, where one person attempts to assist the other to organize himself/herself better, to attain a form of happiness by adjusting to given situation. Counselling services on the other hand refer to services given to someone seeking advice in relation to a personal problem such as, marital relationship, emotional, social, academic or health problems. Woodman (2014), also stated that counseling service is a form of talk therapies or processes between a professional counselor and an individual with a problem. Milson (2002), stated that provision of counselling services helps parents to focus on academic and survival needs of their children with disabilities. These services according to Gargiulo and Bouck (2018), are intended to equip parents with strategies they can employ to manage their children with disabilities. Bakar & Ishak (2019), also opined that



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counseling services help to ensure a balanced and holistic psychosocial development to both parents and children with disabilities. Abdullah and Tamin (2010), stated that counseling services also help to give information to parents on where to get support to enable them assist the child with academics, daily living skills, develop self-esteem skills and improve child's relationships with family members.

Counselling services help parents to explore problematic areas of having the child with the disability and proffer solutions to the perceived problem. Parents are helped to openly discuss their problem with professional. Parents' knowledge of the child and services needed helps to increase the child's psychosocial skills, courage and self-confidence. Timid parents may not find necessary solution to the problem, but the thought of being able to share the problem with another person itself gives *satisfaction to them*. To provide counselling services to parents of children with learning disabilities, Milaham and Milaham (2020), expressed that the counsellor must have good attitudinal skill, listening skill and ability to communicate in simple and understandable language to the parents. Gargiulo and Bouck (2018), also stated that the counselor must understand that fathers' reactions are often different from mothers' reactions. Father's reaction has to be considered first before the counselling begins. Most mothers eventually come to accept the child's disability first than the father and look for help for the child. However, it is more difficult for fathers to accept the child's disability. Woodman (2014), opined that fathers seem to have less concern about the child's health and schooling than mothers. They have less interest in developing relationship with the teachers than mothers. However, both fathers and mothers according to Lerner and Kline (2006), go through four phases on discovering that their child is having learning disabilities; denial of the problem, resistance to seeking help, exploration of needs and resources and commitment to the child's future and care. Parents need counseling and consultation services as well as support from relevant professionals to be able to adjust to their new situation and to know what sort of care to offer their child with the disability.

Consultation service is the process of inviting someone to communicate his/her thought, opinion and feeling about a process, situation to someone who can help positively change the situation. It is a mutual interchange of opinion deliberating together between professional and a person with a problem. Gargiulo and Bouck (2018), noted that consultation service for parents with a child with disability is all about improving practices and processes, making decisions that foreground the parents' roles and responsibility to the child. Parents are properly consulted by a professional to place them in a better position to contribute positively in the child's life. Bakar and Ishak (2019), stated that when consultation services are given to parents, their socioeconomic, psychological and behavioural life will be improved. It is worthy to note that consultation is not letting a parent know about a decision that has already been made. It is not telling parents what is



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planned to do neither, is it having the parents to agree to or sign a learning plan. Consultation is a pedagogical refinement of an agreement.

Children with learning disabilities are those with disorders in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or to do mathematical calculations Milaham and Zaram (2013), described learning disabilities as conditions such as; perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia and developmental aphasia. These conditions do not include children who have learning problems mainly as a result of visual, hearing, motor handicaps, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. Furthermore, Gargiulo and Bouck (2018), stated that children with learning disabilities are an extremely heterogeneous group of diverse learners, each with unique learning strengths and needs and most often misunderstood and frequently less served by their parents. Milaham and Zaram (2013), further stated that a child is considered to have learning disability if he/she exhibits severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability in one or more of; oral expression, listening comprehension, written expression, basic reading skills, reading comprehension, mathematical calculations and mathematics reasoning.

Family is a social group made of father, mother and their children. It is a system in which the action of individual members has an effect on the family as a whole. Okeke (2001), described the family as an interacting communicative network in which every member influences the nature of the family system and is in turn influenced by the system. The family system is such that any problem affecting a member will definitely affect other members. Family is the most important institution to any child. It is the primary arena that a child acquires his/her initial experience, interacts and learns from his/her interaction with parents and other siblings. Parents have the most important influence on their children, whether normal or abnormal (Mamman, 2007). Their actions or inactions affect the child negatively or positively.

This chapter, therefore discusses challenges of children and families of children with learning disabilities counseling services and consultation services for families of children with learning disabilities and implications of counseling and consultation services for same children and their family members.

### **Counseling Services for Families of Children with Learning Disabilities**

Counseling services are help professionals give to an individual to cater for specific needs of such individual. Alao (2017), stated that families of children with disabilities have opportunities to benefit from counseling services offered by professionals needed for promoting their potential and abilities to handle the children with the disability. For effective parenting, families must be given information about the various services they need in order to train their children well. First, the services given must enable them have positive feelings and attitudes



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towards the child with the disability (Ozoji, 2005). This is because pity, low expectations, misinformation and biases often preclude effective parenting. Families must be given accurate and direct experience or information about the child and how to facilitate accurate awareness and acceptance of the child through provision of services as;

**Family Therapy:** This is useful when the family's difficulties come from disturbed relationship within the family. It helps parents to meet demands of their children. In this therapy, support is given to families in relation to specific difficulties and demands in the home. Tutorial services are given to family members by a qualified counselor to reduce stress experienced by parents or family member resulting from the child's disability. Such stress may arise from catering for the child's challenges of independent living, socialization and schoolwork. The counselor helps the family to develop schedules to help the child that is frustrated either because of his/her disability, poor organizational skills and referral services or his school work. Milaham and Milaham (2020), noted that in family therapy, the parents are assisted to address concerns about low self-esteem, social status and long-term educational and career adjustment. The most valuable effect of family therapy is its ability to reinforce and strengthen family bonds. It helps to draw the family closer together.

**Play Therapy:** This therapy is useful as a tool to provide significant headway to parents to be able to adjust or make their child with disability adjust. Play activities must always be child-centered and based on his/her condition. Parents must be made to understand these to be able to use it at home to help the child feels heard, cared about and understood. Rathnakumar (2020), stated that play therapy helps parents to undergo a sense of mastery and control, increase self-acceptance, direction, responsibility and learn to rely on their internal locus of evaluation. Play includes spontaneity, intrinsic motivation and pleasure. Play allows them to access and explore their world, develops the skills which expand their physical, cognitive, and emotional abilities. During play, the child is help to recognize own needs.

**Family Support Services:** Since parents are every child's most important resource, their importance should be magnified in their children who experience a prolonged, or even persistent, period of dependency. Providing support services to parents in their effort to give care is a very important function of the counsellor. George (2017), noted that family support service depends not only on the characteristics of the child's degree of cognitive impairment, level of independence, and behavioral challenges, but also on structural, functional and external characteristics of the family. It also includes: providing advocacy, parent training, counseling and social networking with other families through parent support groups.

**Mindfulness:** This is a process of learning to pay attention and be aware of the present moment by bringing the child's whole being into the process. It is practice of calming the mind and relaxing the body in order to see life more clearly. The basis here, requires the parents to have a judgmental mental positive attitude



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towards the child, have patience, trust in self and feeling that the child is a human being with the disability, strive to and allow self to be as one, accept the present moment and status of the child and let go the “imagined” and face the “real”.

**Behavioral Modification:** This is one of the most effective services that counselors can give to parents to change their behaviour towards the child with the disability. Here the counselor teaches parents positive reinforcement strategies that can be used to increase the child's task-related attention and activity and decrease his/her disruptive behavior at home or in school. Shari and Spagna (2004), stated that in behavioural modification, parents are taught to provide play activities, give concrete rewards as reinforcers to the child with a view to change his/her undesirable behaviour.

**Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (Talk Therapy):** This is a practical approach that helps the individual parent with a child with learning disability to change his/her thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors towards the child with the disability. Talks therapy with the parents is based on identifying negative thoughts that the parents are going through and help them develop a process that could modify such negative feeling, thoughts or behaviours. Matson, Mahan & Lovullo, (2009), stated that this therapy focuses mainly on the parents' current problem with the child as a result of the child's condition or behaviours. The parents are made to think critically and logically to be able to adjust themselves to the child's condition. This way, they will be able to remove their “negative thinking” that is troublesome to the present and future successes of the child with the disability.

In talk therapy, the counselor focuses on teaching parents' self-control through self-monitoring strategy. He helps the parents to provide the child with self-reminder's statements to increase awareness and control of the undesirable behaviour. Self-instructional strategy according to Echevarria (2002), helps the parents to learn to follow set of instructions to be given to the child. The parents are trained on how to give reinforcement to the child using different therapies such as; praises, positive rewards on exhibition of desirable behaviour while the counselor monitored and gives encouragement.

**Direct Counseling:** This is an individual or group counseling that is offered to parents of children with learning disabilities to help them with the issues of self-esteem and self-control. Most parents often have low self-worth as a result of having a child with disability or having repeated negative feedback about the child's undesirable behavior or inability. The services that can be offered as direct counseling to parents are; games or activities that focus on reducing the child's undesirable behaviours such as; wash the plates before you watch the cartoons on television, Finish your assignment well before you follow us to the zoo. George (2017), expressed that to help parents pay attention to condition and undesirable behaviour of the child, parents should use structured, time-limited sessions and directive approaches regularly with the child.

**Support Groups:** Parents of children with disabilities can benefit from support groups that target stress, guilt, and co-dependency issues. Parents find comfort



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when they realize that they are not alone in their negative feelings. The support group meetings include provision of lectures, demonstrations, question and-answer sessions or discussions. Counselors help parents to locate a recognized support group where they will be interacting. Counselor can also create, organize or facilitate a support group for the parents locally. Support groups are organized around specific topics that are based on the child's disabilities and how, parents can help the child with a specific problem, such as anger control. A session on anger control might involve teaching parents to role-model appropriate anger for their child, encourage child to self-monitor anger and provide rewards for appropriate expression of a desirable anger. George (2017), stated that parents can manage their children with behavior problem through behavioural contracts, negotiated with the child and on exhibition of the desirable behaviour earn social activities or rewards that the child values.

**Skill Training:** In skill training, the focus of the professionals is on giving instructions to parents and siblings on physical and behavioural management of the child with the disability. The professional assesses the problems and needs of the parents and other family members and together designs individualized education programmes of support for the child.

**Parents' Education:** Many parents of children with learning disabilities are illiterate about the condition and services needed for such children. Such parents are given factual information about the causes of disability, characteristics, skill development, resources available for use by the child to learn. The parents are also taught how to assist the child to master basic skills (listen, expression, think etc). This can also be encouraged at Parents Teacher Association (PTA) meetings or at social functions.

### **Consultation Services for Families of Children with Learning Disabilities**

There are different consultation services that can be given to parents of children with learning disabilities. Some of these services include; mental health consultation, behavioural consultation, human rights consultation, parental rights and advocacy, parents' support services and consultation through counseling.

**Mental Health Consultation:** This type of consultation originated in the 1960s from the work of Gerald Caplan, a psychiatrist who expressed that consultation service is a relationship between two professionals in which responsibility for individual with the problem rests on the consultant. Milaham and Milaham (2021), stated that to be successful in working with persons with disabilities, the parents must understand the cognitive or neurological problem of the child, knowledge about the physical condition of the child and to have self-confidence and objectively tackle the problem

**Behavioural Consultation:** This is used to improve the performance of both parents and the child. Behavioural consultation is characterized by clear, explicit problem solving procedures. It is based on social learning theory, where the parents' skills and knowledge is made to contribute more to the success of the child. This service



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is best given at home and in school. The consultant defines the problem, isolate environmental variables that support the problem and plan interventions to reduce the problem with the parents.

Human Rights Consultation Like advocacy, human right is an organizational type of consultation which is based on environmental influences that impact personal growth and productivity of the families. *Milaham and Lere (2016)*, expressed that as parents go through various emotional phases on discovering that their child is having learning disability, creation of a conducive environment that leads to constructive communication and information sharing are important because it provides them with accurate listening skills to be able to explore and understand the child and situation the child finds him/herself. It helps them understand the objective of the meeting so they can reach a common understanding of the problem and proffer solution and to have specific plan of action for the child. This service brings the negative into positive atmosphere as questions and doubts are responded to quickly with solutions before they become problematic. Each family member is involved in planning and evaluating the child's education, particularly in the areas of skill training, child's right and support services.

**Parental Rights and Advocacy:** Here, parents are made to understand that they are the owners of their children and apart from having their own rights, they also need to be protected legally against wrong notions about their children with disabilities. When the children attend school, these rights shall also be recognized by the school authority. *Milaham and Lere (2016)*, expressed that parents of children with disabilities shall be enlightened to fight for the existence of strong regulations and laws to protect them and their children within their locality.

Parents Support Services. The importance of Parent Support Services (PSS) is to help reduce high level of parental distress that usually affect the child's well-being. *Omede and Momoh (2016)*, listed the following PSS to include;

1. Networking families with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) which play vital roles in empowering depressed family members to cope with the problem of having a child with disability. Services provided include; provision of wheel chairs, hearing aids, braille machines and so forth.
2. Encouraging interactions within family members through sharing information about the appropriate services needed for their children with disabilities. This, according to *Milaham and Milaham (2021)*, could be achieved through transfer of knowledge and skills to meet the needs of the child.
3. Frequent Medical Checkups for both the child and the mother in a recognized hospital. This is because a major cause and challenge for most parents in Nigeria is lack of fund, access to medical facilities and poor medical checkups. Many pregnant women do not go for antenatal care for proper medical information and special care or attention for the child they are carrying.



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**Group Counselling Services:** This service can be given in group. Group counselling is organized for parents around specific topics suggested by the counselor or the parents themselves. Parents Teachers Fellowship (PTF) meetings can also give parents opportunities to interact with counselor face to face for possible support network. This service helps parents to develop and locate respite care service or day care programmes for their children with disabilities. Consultation through group counselling service arises out of the fact that most families of children with disabilities have many concerns about the present and future of the child. Some parents fear that something might have been responsible for the cause of the child's disability. Others are grieved, do not know where to go to for help, are stigmatized or rejected by other parents or people within the community. It is on the basis of these that counseling service is very necessary and an avoidable

### **Challenges Faced by Parents of Children with Learning Disabilities**

There is no disability that affects many children and yet received low public profile and low level of understanding like learning disabilities. This is because it is a neurological processing problem that is intrinsic and within an individual. Milaham (2018), noted that it is mostly noticed when children start schooling at age six. Learning disabilities is not only a challenge to parents, but the whole family members as the family often become confused about the exact problem of the child. Marshak and Prezant (2007), in a study found that parents of children with learning disabilities often experience more stress in parenting the child, especially when the child's problem is unknown and seems to defile understanding. Such parents according to Danino and Shechtman (2012), often exhibit feelings of helplessness, high risk of psychological disorders such as; anxiety and depression. Parents of children with learning disabilities also experience marital distress than other couples. The high degree of distress of the parents and negative attitude developed as a result of having the child are other challenges parents face.

In addition, most parents find it difficult to accept their children's disabilities, mostly as a result of ignorance, superstitious beliefs, pride, fear, misconception and misinformation. Many of such parents suffer from feeling of inadequacy especially, when the child's disability is not seen or understood because of its intrinsic nature. Raja (2006), stated that having a child with learning disability is a big challenge to the parents in terms of acquisition educational materials (braille machine, wheel chair, hearing aid), medical services (if the child has other health challenges) and social interaction where event centres are not constructed to also accommodate persons with disabilities.

Children with learning disabilities also exert serious challenge on their parents and siblings. Buchman (2006), stated that having a child with learning disability results in increased stress on parents, which could negatively affect relationship between the mother and father. Financial demands of the family are high in order to meet the needs of the child with the disability. Walking with the



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child around is time consuming, tiring and shameful to many parents and family members. There is also the stress of never-ending series of appointments with a traditional doctor or orthodox doctor for the purpose of remediating the problem. Ali (2012), identified some major challenges parents of children with learning disabilities face as follow:

**Social Challenge:** Societal attitude towards children with disabilities is a major problem to most families. Most societies look at a child with disability as a curse to the family. Some believed that the parents offended the gods of the land that is why they have such a child. This belief system is a serious challenge to parents and the entire family. To avoid stigmatization, George (2017), noted that some parents withdrawal their children from social life to avoid embarrassing comments from friends and neighbours. Societal stress often arises when relatives and neighbours become frightened by the child's disability. In some cases, neighbours and relatives sometimes ooze pity to the family of the child with the disability. This sometimes complicate the family's problem because they see themselves as "abnormal" and often question the will of God.

**Economic Challenge:** A child with disability often poses financial challenge to the family. Poor financial status of parents may result in change in eating habits and reduction in the amount of money spent on clothing, schooling and health of the child. Poor financial stand of parents put them under stress to find a better pay job, look for help and care for the child. Parents also face the challenge of coping with the high cost of medical bills, special equipment for the child such as prosthetic devices and high cost of enrolling the child in therapeutic special settings.

**Ignorance:** Families of children with learning disabilities often suffer from stress and emotional trauma mostly because of lack of information about their child's problem and how the child could be helped to succeed in life. Many families are unfamiliar of or are ignorant about the cause, characteristics, education and prevention of learning disabilities. They do not know what services and where such services for their child could be found. Ozoji (2005), stated that ignorance leads parents to seek the services of quacks professionals or even go to native doctors or self-styled spiritual mediators for help.

**Psychological Challenge:** Family members often suffer from psychological problem as a result of having one of them with disability. Many of these families believe that an abnormal child is a curse to the family. In most cases some family members experience psychological breakdown.

### **Implications of Counseling and Consultation Services on Children with Learning Disabilities**

Counselling services for parents of children with disabilities cannot be over-emphasized. Lan (2012), stated that parental counseling and consultation services in special needs education helps children with disabilities to achieve their



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completeness, overcome psychic disabilities and other forms of challenges that they may be experiencing. Accessible to counseling services by children with disabilities helps to improve their self-worth, capabilities and daily life expectancies. Alao (2017), expressed that provision of counseling services help children to accept their disabilities and forge ahead with life. Acceptance of disability by parents helps help them to provide a friendly home environment for smooth transition of the child from home to school or work place. Elbaum & Vaughn (2001), stated that counseling service helps children with disabilities to have a positive self-worth and self-concept of themselves. It also helps them to get rid of their inferiority complex, poor self-esteem, poor socialization skill and emotional instability. Lindsay and Langevin (2017), stated that counseling and consultation services help children with disabilities to; understand and accept their disability condition, reduce anxieties stemming from apprehension about physical, psychological and educational needs. The children can also know that they are integral part of the community, can do what others are doing (in different way), can socialize with other children with support, understand that other children have similar problem and found solution to it.

Children with disabilities are strengthened because the parents are educated and enlightened about their conditions and services needed (Lerner & Kline, 2006). Knowledge of counseling and consultation services by parents help them to engage their children with disabilities in productive activities that enhance their independency and self-reliance. They are taught simplified home and school routines such as eating, sweeping, going to toilet, wearing cloth and engaging in vocational skills' acquisition, because their parents are able to match task to the child's level of functioning. Counseling and consultation services in special needs education help children with disabilities to come together with other peers to brainstorm on how best to handle given tasks not only at home but also outside the home environment.

Counseling and consultation services benefit children with learning disabilities immensely when parents are aware and accept these services. Counseling and consultation services help the children to be independent in solving their problems, organizing their works and completing tasks based on their functional level. In addition, counseling and consultation services help family members to have knowledge about the children's condition, understand strategies for coping with the child's condition without neglecting the needs of other siblings. George (2017), stated that counseling and consultation services help children with learning disabilities to envisage positive future for themselves, learn how to channel the child's residual ability and energies into productive activities to bring success in both academic, social and vocational life. Gargiulo and Metcalf (2013), stated that provision of educational, social and vocational services to children with learning disabilities through counseling and consultation services are provided based on individual child's specific disability condition, environmental settings, educational and career choice.



## **Conclusion**

All parents always dream of giving birth to a smartest, strongest, healthy-looking child. However, on discovering that the child is having a disability, their dream is shattered, which often makes them show sign of denial of the problem and resistance to seeking help. While some go through "hellish" period of blame, accusations, self-accusations and feelings of guilt, others push the blame to evil spirit. Counselling services such as play therapy, family therapy, family support services and mindfulness are needed to birth necessary adjustment in the families' behavior. Such adjustment will enable family members to effectively cope with the demand of the child with learning disability. Provision of these services also help parents to understand their roles, become aware of the parent-child relationship, overcome their feeling of guilt about the child. Parents are helped to do away with their negative attitude towards the child with the disabilities through the provision of counseling services. They are helped to assist the child acquire vocational, social, physical, emotional and cognitive skills necessary to successfully cope and live independently. Consultation services on the other hand can be given through mental health consultation, behavioural consultation, advocacy consultation and human right consultation. Provision of these helps both the child and parents to have accurate listening skills to be able to explore and understand themselves better and particularly the situation the child finds him/herself. Consultative services also help both the child and parents to stay on task to achieve the objective set for the child. It benefits all parties involved, because negative atmosphere is brought into positive atmosphere as questions and doubts are responded to quickly with solutions before they become problematic.

## **Suggestions**

1. Aggressive information dissemination campaign on counseling and consultation services should be given to parents of children with learning disabilities to help them have an outlet to release their emotions and manage tantrums or mood swings to help in the new normal of parenting the child.
2. Professional associations like National Association of Exceptional Children (NAEC) and National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASSET) must work closely with parents of children with disabilities to help them understand the child's developmental, social, emotional, educational and vocational needs that needs to be given actions as well as where and how the child will best be served
3. Government should carry out awareness campaign for parents about preventive measures of learning disabilities through mass media, in health centres, market squares, churches and mosques to ameliorate family crisis of having a child with disability.

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