



TEENAGE LIFE EXPERIENCE IN MODERN AFRICAN SETTINGS

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National Representative
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Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank you for the privilege to give this talk on **Teenage Life Experiences in Modern African Setting**

When I was asked to talk about teenagers, I was pleased. I assumed that I would be called to talk about my experiences and observations as a mother and then round it up with words of wisdom until I was given the title of the topic: Teenage Life Experiences in Modern African. I was stumped and I wasn't sure in what direction to approach it so I turned to the internet.

The first article I read was written by Steve Howard (Oxford Bibliographies.com) who stated that there was a paucity of reference and textbook material on African children and the strongest data found to describe the circumstances of children in Africa tended to be found on anthropological and related studies where children are encountered in interviews or observations in the course of the study and very few of these studies are focused specifically on the children but rather in the context of African families, communities and the wider society.



Does this mean that there are very few studies carried out specifically on African children or more specifically on African teenagers? So while we have studies on teenage pregnancy, we have scanty information on the issues affecting the African teenager. There are a few studies on drug abuse and alcohol abuse but it appears to be limited to a few African countries.

Steve Howard further states that this available literature is an extension of the growing interest in African women and the girl child. Yet Africa is the second largest population globally and made up of 54 countries and nine territories. So I should have been overwhelmed on articles on the African teenager. I wasn't.

But I wasn't daunted and changed my search criteria to specific African countries. While some countries had quite a bit of information on different issues concerning teenagers, many African countries did not.

This is a very sorry state of affairs and quite in contrast to the studies and research carried out on the European child in all circumstances and every conceivable factor that may or not affect their healthy and safe development into adulthood.

Does this mean we love our children less than European mothers? Or do we show less interest in our children? No. It appears to show that our primary focus is no longer on our children but on other issues which we deem to be more important and as a result, the emotional and mental health of the teenager is neglected.

So what is a teenager?

The word teenager was derived from numbers ending in 'teen'. Though the **World Health Organisation** defines a teenager as any person aged between 10 years and 19 years old. While the **Community Dictionary** defines a teenager as an adolescent; someone between the ages of 13 and 19 years old; and as someone who is neither a child or an adult. **Britannica.com** defines teenagers as "adolescence in a transitional phase of growth and development.". My personal definition of a teenager is an "adult in training".



Teenage years is the period within the beginning of puberty causing a "cycle of physical change" and a rapid mental change, culminating in reproductive maturity" (Britannica .com), and this brings with it myriad of emotional, psychological and social changes which can lead to a disconnect between the teenager and the adults (parents and teachers) in their lives.

John D. MacDonald in the book the **Dreadful Lemon Sky** says about teenagers "They are on the edge of life and think they are in the midst of it."

Doctors are trained before they are let loose on patients, Engineers are taught how to build bridges, Lawyers are taught how to prepare cases and argue them in court. Even a driver must learn how to drive a car and House help must learn how to clean and cook. But fewer and fewer teenagers are being trained to be fully functional adults by their parents. Instead, both parents tend to leave the training of the *adult in training*, to the schools.

We forget that a school is not for the training of our teenagers to be responsible adults but to teach our children to be literate and to learn the basic foundations of a trade, be it Medicine, Teaching, Law etc. So the 'adult in training' leaves secondary education as a fledgling adult trying to spread his / her wings equipped only with knowledge imparted from school and in many cases, little or no training from home.

We as African parents try to bring our children up the way we were brought up in our various cultures, but we tend to pick and choose that which we wish to observe. Meanwhile, we denigrate the European and American cultures. We say that our culture is the best, is superior, yet these children are sent to schools that propagate the cultures that we sneer at. We expose our children to these cultures by giving unfettered access through television and the internet on their mobile phones and yet we expect them to behave the way we did when we were teenagers. When we were teenagers our parents lamented these children of today. We as parents in turn lament these children of today.

They are young adults in training yet we continue to treat them as little children. We fail to take into consideration the pressures that they face. (Because we did not face many of them and those that we did, not in the same way.)

So what are our African teenagers experiencing? I have divided the issues African teenagers face in a modern world today into 3 broad categories:

EMOTIONAL ISSUES: As a teenager becomes older, the role and influence of the parent in their lives becomes less important and the emotional dependency that a teenager has on parental opinion reduces. This separation is actually necessary for the teenager's transition to adulthood and self sufficiency.

In the African setting this is less obvious due to the cultural practices and demands on the teenager. But nonetheless, the emotional wellbeing of our teenagers and mental health has been ignored for too long with detrimental effects on society today.

DEATH: Our teenagers face many situations which are potentially damaging to their mental health. They are exposed to unnatural deaths. They have friends who been victims of armed robbers, terrorism, even from the same security forces paid to secure their lives. Teenagers have ended up dead just because they went out to visit friends or to a bar or to a party.

Studies have shown that our African teenage sons are more likely to be stopped and harassed by police officers no matter where in the world they are. And these 'stop and searches' more likely end in fatal confrontations.

Peer pressure and pressure from home to be perfect has led to some teenagers succumbing or ending up either in crime, drug abuse or taking their lives. There are no statistics on teenage suicides in Africa that I have been able to find. But this happens.

SEXUAL PREDATORS: Our teenagers, due to Western influences enjoy less societal supervision than before and more freedoms, leaving them more exposed to sexual predators coming in the guise of teachers, church workers, neighbours, relations, domestic help and even classmates. We don't teach them how to protect and defend themselves.

RESTRICTED MOVEMENT: Teenagers spend 80% of their time doing activities they do not wish to do. Outside school hours, there is a lack of appropriate places and activities for them. African teenagers especially boys prefer physical activities such as sports or practical school classes as opposed to sitting down behind a desk being talked to on subjects that may have little bearing on their future employment. This has led teenagers to drop out of school leading to drug and alcohol abuse.



SOCIAL ISSUES: This category has the greatest impact on teenagers in a modern Africa due to the advent of technology and globalisation - the world has become one big global village. African teenagers are exposed to a deluge of information through social media we did not face as children..

Social Media: Social media is teaching our teenagers that they have a right to opinions contrary to that of their parents. They have a right to live a different life style from their parents, to choose a non-standard course in life. African teenagers are more sophisticated in their fashion and in what they desire and through social media they can acquire it very easily

Technology: Technology has led to new ways of delivering effective and efficient learning and engaging these young minds. Acquiring any information is quick and easy. There are new ideas, healthy and unhealthy ideas and ideas that go against our cultural norms. Much of technology has positive influences, encouraging teenagers to take ownership of their future in ways that we do not understand. Technology is also teaching our teenagers a different way to interact with one another and network across geographic areas

Technology has also unfortunately contributed to many teenagers being introduced in crime. In **The Impact of Social Networking Sites on Teenagers in Nigeria, Ajike and Nkiru, (August 2016)** stated that social networking sites have caused a great deal of moral decadence amongst teenage students. They further stated that it has caused a shifting from studies to other vices resulting in a paucity of academic quality. But due to the length of uncontrolled access to technology, some teenagers are now exhibiting sociopathic or addictive behaviours. Technology can cause distractions and difficulty in comprehension in class.

Social Interactions: At this stage in their lives, it is more important for teenagers to be socially accepted by their peers than to follow societal norms and practices as taught to them by their parents. Our teenagers face peer pressure to be attractive to the opposite sex, to know and wear the latest fashion and shoes, to have the latest hair trends. To know all the latest songs and the latest people in vogue. They face the pressure of having the latest phones. When in our time the latest toy was a football and a skipping rope. In our time it was only our fathers who had use of the only phone in the house, we were only allowed an hour or two of the single television in the house and not every one owned one. Now there is DSTV, Netflix, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat to name but a few of social apps. available to them

Our African culture is being replaced by American films, our African way of dressing is being replaced by Western fashion except perhaps in the political arena and at weddings. Being African is being interpreted as being backward, illiterate, unsophisticated. Our teenagers are turning their noses up at Africa. It is a rare teenager who doesn't want to leave his country for any of the Western countries as soon as there is an opportunity to try with or without parental support.

ECONOMIC ISSUES: Due to access to social media, African teenagers are showing a dynamism that has been lacking in previous generations. They are developing games, apps, animations and trading platforms. Today's teenagers are focused on how to make money. They are turning away from traditional careers and embracing non traditional careers such as sports, fashion, modelling, acting, presenting and many other endeavours. Many are making a lot of money as influencers on social media, some as writers and musicians. Our teenagers want to be dancers, shoe manufacturers, fashion designers, traders selling items online.

Our teenagers are aware of the environment around them and they want to make an impact. They do not follow societal expectations. They are full of zeal. They are bold. Therefore it is time for us to show them that their futures lie not in the West as economic immigrants but in Africa. Where they can be and should be proudly African.

Thank you for your attention.

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