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THE IMPACT OF SUNDAY SCHOOL UNIT ON THE UPBRINGING OF CHILDREN IN NIGERIAN CHURCES

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of the Sunday school unit on the upbringing of children in Nigerian Churches. It focuses on the structure, curriculum, teaching methods, and moral and spiritual formation of children. This paper did an extensive discussion on the impact of the Sunday school unit on the upbringing of children. It clarifies key concepts such as Sunday school, child upbringing, moral development, and spiritual formation within the Christian context, how Sunday school influences children's moral behaviour, spiritual growth, biblical knowledge, discipline, obedience, and social relationships. From the discussion, the paper made the following suggestions based on the importance of Sunday school in Nigerian churches: Church authorities should strengthen the structure of the Sunday school unit by ensuring the consistent use of standardized curricula, lesson guides, and ageappropriate teaching materials; sunday school lessons should purposefully integrate more practical, scenario-based learning where children discuss and role-play real-life ethical dilemmas, reinforcing the connection between biblical teachings and daily decision-making; teachers and parents should be encouraged to establish a consistent feedback mechanism where positive behavioural changes observed at home or school, attributed to Sunday school teachings, are acknowledged and celebrated within the class to motivate the children; the Sunday school unit should organize quarterly inter-group social activities such as prayer convention, fasting, picnics, talent shows, or community service projects (e.g., visiting orphanages) involving all children's classes; the churches should mandate and sponsor at least one annual training/retreat for all Sunday school teachers, focusing on child psychology, creative teaching methods, and classroom management; parents-Sunday School Partnership" forum should be formally created; and that the provision of learning materials, teaching aids, and supportive learning environments should also be sustained to enhance the overall effectiveness of the Sunday school unit in child upbringing.

Key words: Sunday school and Child Upbringing

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The Sunday school unit is saddled with the responsibility of developing the upbringing of children in churches. This paper examines its impact on child upbringing as well as identifying areas that require improvement in Nigerian Churches.

The upbringing of a child is influenced by multiple agents of socialization such as the family, school, peer group, and religious institutions. Merriam-Webster defines upbringing as "the way a child is raised: the care and teaching given to a child by parents or other people". The upbringing of children in the Christian faith has been a cornerstone of the Church's mission since its inception. Scriptures such as Proverbs 22:6 says, "Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old, he will not depart from it" and Deuteronomy 6:7 says, "And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up", underscores the divine imperative for religious instruction across generations.

Historically, the idea of Sunday school began in the late 18th century in Gloucester, England when newspaper publisher Robert Raikes started classes for children to teach them to read, write, and learn about the Bible and has since become a fundamental unit in most Christian denominations. Robert Raikes (1780s) and other early founders in Hannah Ball said it is "A lay movement to teach young people to read and write in the homes of volunteer teachers on the young people's only day off from work".

The primary goal of the Sunday school unit for the children is to teach biblical principles, it is designed to instill values, shape character, and provide a spiritual foundation that guides behaviour and decision-making throughout life. Its mandate is to provide systematic religious, moral and ethical instructions to children. In view of its mandate and goal, the Sunday school

unit for the children therefore has a breakdown of children into classes, teaching materials and a good number of children teachers almost in all churches in Nigeria.

In most Churches today, the Sunday school unit remains a vital component of the church's ministry to children. It provides biblical instruction, shapes character, and lays a moral and spiritual foundation for children. The role of the Sunday school unit is to provide a stable moral compass for the younger generation. The children's ministry is therefore seen as an investment in the future of the Church and the society at large. The curriculum, teaching methodologies, and overall environment of the Sunday school unit are therefore crucial in shaping children's perceptions of faith, morality and their role in the society. This paper, therefore, seeks to investigate the impact of Sunday school unit on the upbringing of children in Nigeria.

1.2 Conceptual Analysis

The Following concepts are reviewed in line with topic:

1.2 1 Concept of the Sunday school Unit

The Sunday school movement began in the late 18th century with Robert Raikes in England, initially to provide literacy and basic education to poor children. It has since evolved globally into a primary vehicle for Christian religious education (CRE) within churches. The Sunday school unit is a formal religious education structure established within the church to provide systematic Christian instruction for children. It serves as a means through which biblical teachings, Christian doctrines, and moral values are communicated to children in an organized and age-appropriate manner. According to Richards (2024), Sunday school is an institution designed to nurture faith, shape character, and prepare children for responsible Christian living through regular religious instruction.

Sunday school is often regarded as the backbone of children's ministry in the church because it introduces children to foundational Christian beliefs at an early stage. As noted by Adeyemi (2025), Sunday school provides a platform for transmitting Christian faith from one generation to another, ensuring continuity of religious values within the church. Through activities such as Bible storytelling, memory verses, prayer sessions, songs, and dramatization, children are guided toward understanding Christian teachings in practical ways.

In Nigeria, the Sunday school unit plays a vital role in shaping children's attitudes, beliefs, and behavior. Omofuma (2025) asserts that Churches that maintain structured Sunday school programs are more effective in nurturing morally upright and spiritually conscious children. Thus, the Sunday school unit is not only an instructional body but also a formative institution that contributes significantly to child upbringing.

1.2.2 Concept of Child Upbringing

Child upbringing refers to the holistic process of nurturing, training, disciplining, and guiding a child toward becoming a responsible and productive member of society. It involves the combined efforts of parents, religious institutions, schools, and the wider community. According to Hurlock (2024), upbringing encompasses physical care, moral guidance, emotional support, and social training necessary for balanced development.

From a Christian perspective, upbringing emphasizes moral discipline, spiritual growth, obedience to God, and respect for authority. Aremu (2026) describes child upbringing as a continuous process of value transmission in which children are taught acceptable norms and behaviours that align with societal and religious expectations. In this regard, the Church complements the role of the family by reinforcing moral and spiritual values through religious education.

The Nigerian Churches, through the Sunday school unit, contribute to child upbringing by providing structured guidance that supports parental efforts. Momoh (2026) observes that when religious institutions actively participate in child upbringing, children are more likely to develop positive character traits and moral stability. In evangelical theology, upbringing is not merely parental but a communal church responsibility (Proverbs 22:6). It encompasses:

i. Spiritual Formation: Development of faith, prayer life, and understanding of salvation.
ii. Character/Moral Development: Internalization of virtues like honesty, kindness, and righteousness.
iii. Social Development: Learning to interact within a faith-based community.
iv. Cognitive Development: Gaining biblical knowledge and critical thinking in line with faith.

1.2.3 Spiritual Development of Children

Spiritual development refers to the growth of a child's faith, understanding of God, and commitment to religious beliefs and practices. It involves cultivating spiritual habits such as prayer, Bible study, worship, and obedience to God's commandments. According to Fowler (2025), spiritual development begins in childhood and significantly influences moral judgments, behaviour, and identity formation throughout life. The Sunday school unit plays a crucial role in fostering children's spiritual development by exposing them to biblical teachings from an early age. Richards and Bredfeldt (2025) note that children who receive consistent religious instruction are likely to develop strong faith God, and this guide their decisions and behaviour. Bible stories and teachings help children understand God's love, justice, forgiveness, and expectations for righteous living.

In Nigeria, spiritual development is emphasized through regular Bible lessons, prayer sessions, and worship activities. Nyarko (2024) asserts that early spiritual formation strengthens children's moral consciousness and provides inner stability that helps them resist negative social influences. And these are the core principles guiding the development of Sunday school unit in churches.

1.2.4 Moral Development of Children

Moral development involves the process by which children learn to distinguish between right and wrong and develop ethical standards that guide their behaviour. According to Kohlberg (2026), moral development progresses through stages and is influenced by social interaction, instruction, and example. Religious education plays a significant role in shaping moral reasoning and behaviour.

Sunday school contributes to moral development by teaching Christian virtues such as honesty, obedience, love, humility, self-control, and respect for others. Aremu (2026) argues that moral values taught through religious education are more effective when reinforced through consistent instruction and practical demonstration. Biblical narratives often serve as moral exemplars, helping children understand the consequences of good and bad behaviour. Through regular participation in Sunday school, children gradually internalize moral values that influence their conduct both within and outside the church environment. Omofuma (2025) notes that children exposed to consistent moral instruction in church settings are less likely to engage in antisocial behaviors.

1.2.5 Social Development of Children

Social development refers to the ability of children to interact effectively with others, build healthy relationships, and function within a social group. It involves the development of communication skills, cooperation, empathy, leadership, and respect for social norms.

According to Woolfolk (2024), social interaction plays a critical role in cognitive and behavioural development.

The Sunday school unit provides a social environment where children learn acceptable social behaviour through interaction with peers and teachers. Group activities such as singing, dramatization, discussions, and teamwork promote cooperation and mutual respect. Craig, Donald, and Suzanne (2025) observe that structured group activities in religious settings enhance children's social competence and emotional regulation.

Within United Evangelical Churches, Sunday school encourages a sense of belonging and community among children. This social integration helps children develop interpersonal skills necessary for harmonious living in society.

1.2.6 Role of Sunday School Teachers in Child Upbringing

Sunday school teachers play a central role in shaping children's upbringing. They serve as instructors, mentors, and moral role models whose behaviour significantly influences children's learning outcomes. According to Santrock (2025), children learn values and behaviours through observation and imitation of significant adults. Momoh (2026) emphasizes that teachers' moral integrity, commitment, and teaching competence determine the effectiveness of Sunday school instruction. Teachers who demonstrate Christian virtues reinforce moral lessons through example, thereby strengthening children's character formation. Adeyemi (2025) further notes that proper training and spiritual maturity enable teachers to communicate biblical truths

effectively and address children's moral challenges. In Nigeria, teachers in the Sunday school unit are trained professionally or through ministerial training. Most teachers are committed, and they employ varied pedagogical approaches to communicate effectively with children.

1.2.7 Teaching Methods and Learning Materials in Sunday School

Teaching methods and learning materials play a significant role in determining the effectiveness of the Sunday school unit. Child-centred teaching methods such as storytelling, visual aids, dramatization, songs, and question-and-answer sessions enhance understanding and retention of lessons. According to Bruner (2024), learning is more effective when instruction is presented in forms that align with learners' cognitive development.

Also, Frank (2026) observes that the use of appropriate instructional materials makes biblical concepts more concrete and engaging for children. When teaching methods are poorly planned or materials are inadequate, children may lose interest, thereby reducing the impact of Sunday school on their upbringing. In teaching children in the Sunday school unit, different teaching methodologies are employed based on the lesson content and the developmental age of the children. The teaching methodology of music and storytelling is often used for children aged five and below, while storytelling, drama, memorization, and discussion are used for those aged six and above. Learning materials such as workbooks, visual aids, and interactive media support lesson delivery and engagement.

1.2.8 Parental Involvement and Church Environment

Parental involvement plays a vital role in reinforcing the impact of the Sunday school unit on child upbringing. Parents who encourage regular attendance, discuss lessons at home, and model Christian behavior strengthen children's moral and spiritual development. According to Astone and McLanahan (2025), collaboration between family and religious institutions

enhances children's consistency in value formation. The church environment also influences the effectiveness of Sunday school. A supportive, child-friendly, and spiritually focused church atmosphere promotes participation and learning. Craig et al. (2025) assert that when churches invest in children's ministry through adequate facilities and resources, children's upbringing outcomes improve significantly.

From the foregoing conceptual analysis, it is evident that the Sunday school unit plays a significant role in the upbringing of children through spiritual instruction, moral guidance, social interaction, and behavioural formation. However, the effectiveness of the Sunday school unit in achieving these goals depends on several supportive factors that must be deliberately strengthened by the church, parents, and the wider Christian community.

One major factor that can enhance the contribution of the Sunday school unit to child upbringing is the availability of well-trained and committed Sunday school teachers. Teachers who possess adequate biblical knowledge, understanding of child development, and effective teaching skills are better equipped to communicate Christian values in meaningful ways. According to Adeyemi (2025), continuous training and spiritual development of teachers improve the quality of instruction and positively influence children's moral and spiritual growth.

Another important factor is the use of appropriate teaching methods and learning materials. Child-centred teaching approaches such as storytelling, dramatization, visual aids, and interactive activities help children understand and retain lessons more effectively. Bruner (2024) emphasizes that learning is enhanced when teaching methods align with children's cognitive and developmental stages. Adequate instructional materials therefore make Sunday school lessons engaging and impactful.

Parental involvement also plays a crucial role in supporting the Sunday school unit. When parents reinforce Sunday school teachings at home through family devotions, moral discussions, and positive role modelling, children are more likely to internalize the values taught. Astone and McLanahan (2025) note that cooperation between the home and religious institutions strengthen consistency in children's upbringing and behavioural outcomes.

Furthermore, a supportive church environment significantly contributes to the effectiveness of the Sunday school unit. Churches that prioritize children's ministry by providing adequate facilities, resources, and encouragement create an atmosphere that promotes learning and participation. Craig, Donald, and Suzanne (2025) assert that children's spiritual and social development is enhanced in environments that are safe, welcoming, and spiritually focused.

Regular evaluation and supervision of Sunday school activities also help improve their impact on child upbringing. Monitoring teaching quality, lesson content, and children's participation enables church leadership to identify challenges and implement necessary improvements. According to Omofuma (2025), continuous assessment ensures that Sunday school programs remain relevant and effective in addressing children's moral and spiritual needs. In conclusion, the Sunday school unit can significantly contribute to the upbringing of children in Nigeria, when supported by trained teachers, effective teaching methods, active parental involvement, and a conducive church environment. Strengthening these factors will enhance the unit's capacity to nurture spiritually sound, morally upright, and socially responsible children, thereby fulfilling its role as a vital agent of Christian child upbringing.

2.1 Discussion in the Context of Existing Literature

Comprehensive understanding of moral decadence requires first the meaning of morality. The term 'morality' is derived from the Latin plural word 'morale' meaning 'manner' or 'morals' which means generally accepted code of conduct in a society (Andy-philip and Zhiya2017 pp

10). In this regard, moral decadence can be understood as a decline or deterioration in the accepted standards of behaviour and values within a society. The educational system, which is expected to serve as an important avenue for moral formation, has also been affected by this development. Andy- Philip and Zhiya, (2017 pp 34) state that the educational system is losing its moral and social values. Our higher institutions of learning have been beclouded with indecent dressing most especially the female students.

The manifestation of moral decadence among young people can also be observed in behaviours that have serious social, educational and moral consequences. Yaksat, John and Zhiya (2017 pp 5) observed that drug abuse and alcoholism seem to have become a prominent social problem in Nigeria especially among our undergraduates. Similarly, teenage pregnancy constitutes another important concern associated with the moral and social challenges confronting young people. According to Umaru and Zhiya (2017 pp 21), it is often assumed that all teenage pregnancies are accidental but this is not always the case. Some teenagers actively plan to become pregnant or don't through contraception, knowing that pregnancy is a real possibility.

These challenges also have implications for the family, particularly the responsibilities of Christian parents in providing moral, spiritual and emotional guidance to their children. According to Zhiya (2023 pp 126), Christian mothers and child care is an interesting discussion that encompasses both religious beliefs and parenting practices. He therefore recommended that Christian women civil servants should prayerfully ask God for strength in carrying out their dual duties on daily basis. The responsibility of Christian families extends beyond childcare to demonstrating compassion, care and social responsibility towards vulnerable members of society. In the same vain, Zhiya (2015 pp 95) recommended that Pentecostal

Ministers should keep on educating their congregations on the Biblical teaching concerning the plight of widows and encourage them to care for widows.

The development of sound moral values also requires the cultivation of virtues such as peace, righteousness, selflessness and responsible use of material resources. *Shalom* and *Tsedeq* must be won; for the prizes for those who win the war against self, selflessness, self-centeredness, the war against hate, the war against passion and against envy (Andy-philip, 2018 105). Similarly, material prosperity should not be viewed merely in terms of personal accumulation but also in relation to responsible Christian stewardship. Wealth can be enjoyed and employed at the same time if our purpose is to honor God (Andy-philip and Okoronkwo, 2023 pp).

Christian morality also requires commitment, sacrifice and faithfulness to Christian convictions, particularly in challenging circumstances. Many of the early Christians knew they would likely die for their faith but chose to follow Christ at an cost (Andy-philip and Alamu pp 99). This demonstrates the importance of developing moral courage and commitment among Christians, especially in an environment where competing social values may influence young people.

Against this background, religious education has an important role to play in addressing contemporary moral challenges. In a religiously pluralistic African society, moral education should not merely transmit abstract religious principles but should engage learners with their cultural and religious contexts. To leverage syncretism and dialogue in shaping moral values, educators most adopt innovative, context-specific pedagogies that integrate CRE and ATR practices into religious education curricula (Zhiya, Attah and Jacob, 2025 pp15). This is why (Zhiya, Ohwriovbe and Jacob, 2025 pp 59) observed that the integration of storytelling from CRS and ATR in religious education offers a transformative approach to navigating religious pluralism in African context.

Taken together, these perspectives demonstrate that moral decadence is a multidimensional problem involving individual behaviour, family responsibilities, educational institutions, religious commitment and the wider social environment. Consequently, Christian Religious Education can contribute to moral transformation by connecting biblical teachings with learners' lived experiences, cultural contexts and contemporary social realities.

2.2 Suggestions

From the discussion, the paper made the following suggestions based on the importance of Sunday school in Nigerian churches:

1. Church authorities should strengthen the structure of the Sunday school unit by ensuring the consistent use of standardized curricula, lesson guides, and age-appropriate teaching materials. Teaching methodologies should be child-centred, interactive, and participatory, including storytelling, group discussions, visual aids, dramatization, and practical activities to enhance understanding and engagement.
2. Sunday school lessons should purposefully integrate more practical, scenario-based learning where children discuss and role-play real-life ethical dilemmas, reinforcing the connection between biblical teachings and daily decision-making.
3. Teachers and parents should be encouraged to establish a consistent feedback mechanism where positive behavioural changes observed at home or school, attributed to Sunday school teachings, are acknowledged and celebrated within the class to motivate the children.
4. The Sunday school unit should organize quarterly inter-group social activities such as prayer convention, fasting, picnics, talent shows, or community service projects (e.g., visiting orphanages) involving all children's classes. This will further strengthen peer friendships and foster a sense of social responsibility beyond the classroom.

5. Activities that involve controlled and respectful interaction with children from other denominations or faiths during church-organized community events can be introduced to broaden social understanding within a Christian ethical framework and will also improve children's social integration within the church and the wider community.
6. The churches should mandate and sponsor at least one annual training/retreat for all Sunday school teachers, focusing on child psychology, creative teaching methods, and classroom management.
7. Parents-Sunday School Partnership" forum should be formally created. This forum would hold quarterly meetings to align teachings with home training, keep parents informed of curricula, and mobilize parental support for events and resource provision.
8. The provision of learning materials, teaching aids, and supportive learning environments should also be sustained to enhance the overall effectiveness of the Sunday school unit in child upbringing.

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