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Integrating Sports and Spirituality in the Early years for Healthy Living.

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ABSTRACT

Many a times sports and the Christian principles for healthy living are treated differently. The truth however is that healthy living stem largely from the within. Thus a healthy mind will necessarily beget a healthy body all things being equal. The Christian faith canvasses for healthy living based on these principles: purity of thoughts, words and actions; demonstrating grace and candour; dignity; integrity; resilience; sound mind; agility; tolerance; cheerfulness; amity; decency; modesty, and discipline amongst other desirable qualities for healthy living. It is against this background that this paper examined the Christian perspective to sports alongside these questions that were raised: Is there any relationship between sports and healthy living? Are there Biblical principles that address healthy living? If so, can these Biblical principles be employed to raise children who are healthy? The research method employed involved a robust review of relevant and related literatures. This study revealed that healthy living can be fostered through sports employing biblical principles as more than enough evidence abound. Thus, this paper contends that since the early years provides ample opportunity for massive learning, it is therefore the recommended period to inculcate the right values that can help children grow well, stay healthy now and later in life as adults.

Keywords: sports, biblical principles/spirituality, early years, healthy living

INTRODUCTION

The role of sports in healthy living is incontrovertible. Different schools of thought have over time advanced reasons why sports cannot be neglected. As a matter of fact, they contend that sports should be integrated into the daily life routine of individuals if healthy living is to be enjoyed. More often than not health care personnel contend that most diseases and ailments occur as a result of a lack of healthy living which to a very large extent could be averted or corrected employing sporting activities. In fact a cursory look at some of the later challenges regarding life's processes like behaviour, attitude, health, values and so on may be due to a defect in the early years. This stance is furthered re-emphasized by Olagunju (2021) who cited Lydia Sigourney. "In the early Childhood years, you may lay the foundation of poverty or riches, industry or idleness, good or evil by the habits to which you train your children. Teach them the right habits then and their future is safe. This endorses the fact that whatever happens in the early years are of very great importance to life's later journey, through adulthood and even old age. Also, to a very considerable measure the early years provide ample opportunity for incredible growth in every facet of life. This view is buttressed with this altruistic saying of St. Ignatius of Loyola "give me a child until he is seven and I will show you a man" This is consistent with Brierley's (1994) assertion that scientific research has confirmed that age 0-7 are crucial in the child's formation of personality and behaviour. Moreover, if education is to be considered total then it must cater for the important domains of the cognitive, the affective and the Psychomotor. Thus, an individual is adjudged healthy if these three domains are operating at the optimal level. One cannot function effectively without the other. Similarly, Biblical principles lend credence to wholesome living stemming from a healthy physical body. Thus, Christian spirituality recognises that man is comprised of the spirit, soul and the body. Assumedly it suggests that this three must work well for the total being of man. Based on this premise the following were examined:

- Are there biblical principles guiding healthy living?
- If there are, how can these principles be employed for healthy living?-
- Can sports and spirituality be blended to facilitate healthy living in the early years?
- If so, what effective means can be employed to do this?

PERSPECTIVES TO SPORTS AND SPIRITUALITY IN THE CHRISTIAN CONTEXT.

Drawing from biblical examples, sports emerged even before Christianity and we find several passages in the Bible making reference to the sports. Sometimes direct and sometimes as allegories used to teach life lessons on certain values, as in 1Corinthians 9: 24-27, 'Do you not know that all the runners run, but one gets the prize? And also in 2 Timothy 2: 5 "similarly if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes to the rules" All these make it evident that sports is an active life activity.

Defining Sports, Vasyl Sutula (2018) said, it is an activity involving physical exertion in which an individual or team competes against another or others for entertainment. On the other hand spirituality is viewed as a way in which biblical principles are interpreted. Though used interchangeably with religiosity they are not the same. As a matter of fact, defining spirituality in the early years is a no mean task. Jennifer Mata (2014) opined that that even though spirituality is a controversial topic in the classroom it should not be neglected as it a place that can provide ample opportunity to nurture a child's spirituality. This view is consistent with the opinion of Yan lin (2014), that Spirituality is an essential characteristic of humanness which helps connect individuals to themselves, others and to the transcendent. It is an aspect that is fundamental to the holistic formation of the child. This explains why the philosophies of Montessori and Steiner (Weinberg, 2009; Ulrich, 1994) and Pestalozzi and Froebel identified with this part of the child. Advancing this further, Sokanovic and Muller (1999) defined Spirituality as an intangible almost incommunicable part of our experience concerned with content rather form. They maintain that spirituality in the early years brings about interactions of values, emotions and beliefs which elicit responses like enthusiasm, creativity, imagination, individuality, uniqueness and curiosity. Udermann 2009 reiterates that there is an association between spirituality and health. This view is consistent with the way Spirituality is employed in this paper which is employing biblical principles to raise wholesome and stable children who are mentally, emotionally, socially and physically fit. As a matter of fact, in spite of the chequered past sports has suffered in history of the church, sports and spirituality though not evenly matched can still complement each other.

BENEFITS OF SPORTS IN THE EARLY YEARS THROUGH INTEGRATION OF SPIRITUALITY

The importance of early exposure to sports to the general wellbeing of the child aptly lends credence to this popular cliché 'sports inherently builds character.' This was further buttressed at the launch of the 2016 conference on "sports at the service of humanity'. At this conference Pope Francis noted that the virtues of Joy, Compassion, Respect, Love, Balance and Enlightenment can be taught through sports. Additionally the National Association for Sports and Physical development noted that physical education helps the cognitive, affective and psychomotor development of children. In the same vein, Megan Colborne noted that sport is a veritable avenue to keep children healthy and busy. Suffice is to say therefore that, Sports can be a veritable channel for the following:

- Teach maturity and the ability to win and lose gracefully
- Build emotional intelligence and stability
- Helps build children's self esteem
- Help children to learn to play by the rules
- Children can relieve stress and anxiety
- Direct children towards good things.
- Help children improve their academic performance.
- Help in their character development.
- Teach them to be selfless, diligent and hardworking.
- Encourage discipline.
- Help children develop their motor skill and performance.
- Help to build team spirit and fairplay.
- Enable their cognitive, affective and psychomotor development.

Several instances abound in the Bible that emphasise and serve as guide towards the positive role sports can play in the life of the child for their holistic formation. In Colossians 3: 23, the biblical value of diligence is extolled "whatever you do, work at with your whole heart as working for the Lord' Buttressing this further, Lainna Callentine draws a parallel from the lessons and values in these Bible passages(Hebrew 12:2, Corinthians 9:24-2. Proverbs 22: 6. Also, in consonance with this view Pennington also opined that Christian values can be used to maximise the

benefits of sports in the life of the child in the early years. As a matter of fact establishing self discipline in exercise can help teach principles that help one become more self disciplined in prayer and bible study and even in other areas of life.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION:

Sport is a veritable avenue to raise wholesome children employing biblical principles. Examples abound in the Bible as evident from the foregoing. These can be done through the following:

Organising wholesome sports activities like interclass sports, interhouse sports, debates and quiz competitions. Schools can teach sports alongside the inherent examples and the lessons therein. This way the values of good sportsmanship, camaraderie, resilience, tolerance and cultivation of the right attitude towards winning and losing are learnt. When this is done, healthy, well rounded, emotionally stable and balanced children are raised.

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