



Dedicated to people-centred justice



FAMILY JUSTICE GUIDELINE

Imo State - Nigeria



Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the
Netherlands

Preface

Families are the foundation of every society. In Imo State, as in many parts of Nigeria, the well-being of families is crucial to the peace, stability, and development of our communities. However, when disputes arise within families, whether over land, inheritance, domestic responsibilities, or relationships, the consequences can be deeply damaging. Poorly managed family conflicts often lead to violence, prolonged court battles, and social fragmentation, especially for women, children, and the elderly.

This Family Justice Guideline has been developed to support a more inclusive, responsive and people-centred approach to resolving family disputes in Imo State. It provides practical tools and recommendations for justice sector professionals, traditional leaders, community-based actors, and families themselves. The guideline is grounded in the principles of access to justice, equity, restorative dialogue, and collaboration between formal and informal justice systems.

These Guidelines are a product of extensive deliberation and collaboration, drawing upon the principles of fairness, equity and the pursuit of amicable resolution.

They are designed to provide clear direction to judicial officers, legal practitioners, social welfare agencies, community leaders, and all stakeholders involved in family justice delivery. We aim to foster a system that prioritises mediation, conciliation, and other non-adversarial approaches where appropriate, while also ensuring that formal legal processes are efficient, accessible and just when required.

Through extensive consultation with stakeholders including judges, customary leaders, women's rights advocates, lawyers, social workers and community members, this document reflects the realities faced by families in both urban and rural areas of Imo State. It also draws from national laws, customary practices, and international human rights principles.

We hope that this guideline will serve as a roadmap for more timely, fair, and compassionate responses to family conflicts. It aims to ensure that all individuals regardless of gender, status, or background can find safe, respectful and accessible paths to justice when family challenges arise.

We extend our appreciation to the expert group, community leaders, and institutions who contributed their time and knowledge to this critical work. Together, we are committed to building a justice system that protects families, upholds dignity, and strengthens social harmony in Imo State.

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Instructions on how to use this guideline

The Imo Family Disputes Guideline offers a basis for evidence-based care in family conflict resolution. Featuring seven themes and topics, 20 recommendations and 67 best practices, it aims to assist practitioners in their work with individuals by providing a clear framework for reaching solutions and practical advice for families seeking agreements. Local leaders, lawyers, paralegals, mediators, and other practitioners should apply the law and their professional judgment, as the generalized recommendations may not cover all specific circumstances. Developed using PICO/GRADE methods standard in medicine, this guideline integrates formal and informal insights with research on effective practices, distinguishing it from standard legal frameworks.

Recommendations are categorized into four groups:

Strongly Recommended 	The intervention is desirable and the quality of evidence is high. <i>Apply recommendation and advise parties accordingly.</i>
Recommended 	The intervention is desirable and the quality of evidence is moderate or low. <i>Apply recommendation and advise parties accordingly.</i>
Context-specific Recommendation 	The intervention is desirable in a specific context and the quality of evidence is high, moderate or low. <i>Apply recommendation only in the right circumstances and advise parties accordingly.</i>

Introduction to family conflicts in Imo State

Family conflict is a deeply rooted and complex issue in Imo State, reflecting both the evolving nature of family life and the pressures faced by households in a rapidly changing society. Disputes within families often revolve around land inheritance, marriage breakdowns, domestic responsibilities, child custody, financial obligations, and generational differences. These conflicts, if left unresolved, frequently lead to emotional harm, economic hardship, physical violence, and the breakdown of relationships that are essential to individual and community well-being.

In many communities across Imo State, customary norms, religious beliefs, and statutory laws intersect in resolving family matters. While these systems can complement each other, they also sometimes produce inconsistent outcomes, particularly in cases involving issues of gender equality, children's rights, and access to justice. Women and vulnerable family members are especially disadvantaged when disputes are resolved through informal systems that lack safeguards for fairness, or when they face social stigma for asserting their rights.

Land and property disputes remain among the most serious sources of family conflict in the state. Contentions over inheritance, boundary demarcations, and the exclusion of women from succession rights often escalate into long-term feuds or even violence.

Likewise, domestic violence including physical, emotional and economic abuse continues to be a significant concern, exacerbated by weak enforcement of protective laws and a lack of accessible support services for survivors.

Despite these challenges, Imo State is home to a range of formal and informal institutions with the capacity to address family conflicts constructively. Magistrate courts, family courts, alternative dispute resolution (ADR) centres, traditional councils, religious leaders, women's groups, and community-based organisations each play a role in helping families navigate disputes. However, a lack of coordination, limited capacity, and insufficient public awareness often prevent these systems from functioning effectively and equitably.

This guideline seeks to address these gaps by promoting a coordinated, participatory, and gender-sensitive approach to family justice in Imo State. By building on local practices while aligning with national laws and human rights standards, it aims to empower communities and justice actors to prevent, manage, and resolve family disputes in ways that are accessible, fair, and sustainable.



Awareness Of The Responsibility That Comes With Being A Member Of A Family

INTRODUCTION

- Families are the primary unit of society where individuals first learn values, identity and social responsibility. Being a member of a family is not only about belonging it also carries a shared obligation to contribute to the growth, well-being and harmony of the family unit. Every family member, regardless of age or status, plays a role in shaping the health and future of the family. In Imo State, as in many parts of Nigeria, family structures are deeply influenced by cultural, religious, and traditional expectations. However, while these expectations may define roles, they do not always translate into a balanced understanding of responsibility. Too often, family relationships are marked by unequal power dynamics, unmet duties, or lack of support, particularly affecting women, children, the elderly and persons with disabilities.
- Raising awareness about the responsibility that comes with family membership helps individuals recognize that family is not only a source of rights or protection, but also a space for mutual accountability, respect and contribution. These responsibilities include care giving, supporting one another emotionally and financially, resolving conflicts peacefully, and promoting a safe and inclusive home environment.



- This section aims to emphasise the importance of fostering a shared sense of responsibility within families. It encourages parents, children, spouses, and extended family members to understand and fulfil their roles in creating a stable, respectful, and supportive family environment. When every member of a family is aware of their responsibilities, families are less likely to experience conflict, neglect, or breakdown, and more likely to thrive as strong, resilient units that contribute to the broader well-being of the community.



Recommendations & Best Practices

In this section, you can find internationally recognized recommended interventions that practitioners can apply. Any judge, arbitrator, cultural leader, religious leader, lawyer, mediator, therapist, advisor and other relevant professional is encouraged to use the following recommendations. More background information about these interventions can be found and the best practices are informed by real-life experiences, cultural values, and what has worked well in similar settings. They serve as practical examples that others can learn from and adapt, especially when dealing with sensitive family issues such as separation, violence, or parenting disputes. Best practices are not one-size-fits-all solutions, but tested ways of working that improve outcomes for individuals, families and communities.



RECOMMENDATIONS



- a). Practitioners should inform parents that they are both responsible for caring for their children, even after they have separated.**

Taking care of children requires financial support for essentials such as school fees, clothing, food and shelter. After separation, people's economic situation changes. They might struggle to generate enough income. It is therefore recommended that both sides generate income by starting a small side business or seeking better employment opportunities. The goal is to create a stable environment for the entire family.

Strongly Recommended ★★ ★

- b). Practitioners should help raise awareness about doctrinal and religious disparities in cases where both parties adhere to different religions and cultural or ideological convictions.**

Religion and tradition play a significant role in the occurrence of violence in Imo State. Practitioners should advise couples that differences in religion may increase the risk of misunderstanding. When couples base their marital expectations on their chosen faith, it may lead to a situation whereby, for example, the definitions of 'discipline' and 'violence' to children have two different meanings for each parent. Practitioners are advised to reroute the couples to understand the difference between violent acts and acceptable correction from a neutral point of view, to avoid conflicts of convictions.

Recommended ★ ★





BEST PRACTICES



During mediation or dialogue sessions, engage fathers in a respectful and culturally grounded conversation. Emphasize that a true father continues to be present and supportive in his child's life, regardless of the relationship with the mother. Use familiar values like dignity, legacy, and honour to affirm the father's role as a lifelong guide, protector, and care giver to his children.

In Accordance with Literature



The non-custodial parent (often the father) remains actively engaged through visits, school involvement, financial support, and communication with the child.

In Accordance with Literature



When engaging with separating or separated parents, practitioners should communicate that both parents share equal responsibility for the upbringing and care of their children. Each parent should be supported to maintain a positive, consistent, and safe presence in the child's life, in line with the best interests of the child. Parents should be encouraged to develop cooperative parenting arrangements that prioritize the child's stability, access to both parents, and continued emotional support.

In Accordance with Literature



The child has consistent access to both parents and benefits from emotional and material stability.

In Accordance with Literature



Both parents acknowledge and accept their shared responsibility for the child, even if living separately.

Other Practice**



Verbal or written agreements reached during mediation are respected and adhered to, thereby reducing the need for repeated interventions. Shared parental responsibility is acknowledged by both parents, regardless of their living situation.

In Accordance with Literature



Preventing and Containing Serious Conflicts / Violence

INTRODUCTION

- Family violence and harassment must be addressed promptly and effectively. Raising public awareness and closely monitoring incidents of violence can play a critical role in preventing such behaviour. In cases where immediate danger exists, it may be necessary to detain abusive partners and provide safe housing and rehabilitation support for survivors and their children. These actions are essential for restoring individuals' sense of safety and reinforcing their confidence that past violence will not be repeated. In addition, proactive monitoring can help identify early warning signs of potential violence or antisocial behaviour, allowing for timely intervention before harm occurs.
- Parties to spiralling conflicts or disputes are responding with de-escalation techniques rather than inflammatory language or violence. De-escalation techniques include conciliatory gestures, reframing and empathising. Ideally, parties are also making early commitments to "cut their losses" and set limits on how far they will allow their disagreement to escalate.



- Mediators and facilitators are using preventive diplomacy to prevent conflicts and disputes from escalating. This includes looking for early warning signs in the parties' behaviour, such as the build-up of stress and tension. It may also involve intervening to enforce limits the parties have set for themselves.
- Police and probation officers are taking appropriate measures to maintain public safety. This involves identifying and supervising individuals who may pose a threat and connecting them to proper psychosocial support.
- Judges are ensuring that physical containment measures, such as detention or relocating at-risk individuals to safe housing, are available based on the specific needs and circumstances of the parties involved.
- Fact-finding is vital because, without the possibility of invoking an extensive fact-finding process, one party may be exposed to manipulation on the part of the other, against which they have no recourse.
- Restoring is necessary to address the harm caused by crime or conflict and prevent it from happening again. It begins with one or more parties taking responsibility for what happened and agreeing to meet with those they hurt. Unlike more passive measures of accountability, such as incarceration, restoring requires perpetrators to take active accountability for their actions by taking responsibility and engaging with those they have harmed.
- Mediators and facilitators can create safe spaces for restorative conversations or meetings to take place. They are taking all necessary steps to ensure that both parties are prepared to engage with one another. They are ensuring that during the conversation or meeting, all voices are heard and a restorative agreement is reached.

- Police and probation officers are making parties to crime aware of the possibility of participating in a restorative justice process. They are making timely referrals to mediators and facilitators, and in some cases, participating in the process themselves. They are also following up with parties to ensure that the outcomes of a restorative process are complied with.



Recommendations & Best Practices

In this section, you can find internationally recognized recommended interventions that practitioners can apply. Any judge, arbitrator, cultural leader, religious leader, lawyer, mediator, therapist, advisor and other relevant professional is encouraged to use the following recommendations. More background information about these interventions can be found and the best practices are informed by real-life experiences, cultural values, and what has worked well in similar settings. They serve as practical examples that others can learn from and adapt, especially when dealing with sensitive family issues such as separation, violence, or parenting disputes. Best practices are not one-size-fits-all solutions, but tested ways of working that improve outcomes for individuals, families and communities.





RECOMMENDATIONS



a). Apply the Duluth Model in community support settings to prevent victimization.

The priority in this intervention is rebuilding the strength, both mental and emotional, of victims and reducing the risk of further victimization. Practitioners working under the Duluth Model are victim-focused with particular attention paid on women. Such practitioners under this model are to work with the local community to both demonstrate displeasure at the presence of violence within their community and also to consult community heads and victims to create a personalized mode of practice. The use of community support groups is particularly beneficial to the victims as they face a reduced risk of being stigmatized and shunned by their local community. Such an intervention that emphasizes the input of the community indirectly helps to induce social change and raise awareness on domestic violence issues. The Duluth Model also advocates for inter-agency cooperation; consequently, the practitioner is expected to work with other safeguarding agencies such as the police, other counselors, community heads and other stakeholders.

Context-Specific Recommendation ★



b). Apply Group Therapy in programmes of violence prevention

This intervention addresses the perpetrator's behaviour in context, allowing the offender to focus on individual problematic patterns, negative personal traits, and triggers. Practitioners using this communal form of intervention offer both emotional and psychological rehabilitation, which helps participants understand their risky behaviours and accept responsibility for their acts of violence. Strategies should be provided for conflict de-escalation, positive communication approaches in the face of disagreement, and alternative ways to express displeasure.

Context-Specific Recommendation ★

c). Apply the One Stop Centre (OSC) model.

Domestic violence victims usually have multiple needs that a single service provider cannot adequately meet. Accessing the different service providers may sometimes be difficult for a victim whose movement is restricted by a controlling and abusive partner. Therefore, having a one-stop centre where all relevant services are located can provide high-quality, accessible, acceptable multisectoral care for victims of domestic violence. Services in an OSC include counselling, legal aid, medical care, police, prosecutors, psychosocial support, economic empowerment, social workers and shelter. An OSC may be established within a police station, a health centre or may be a stand alone facility.

Strongly Recommended ★★★



d). Apply elements of Restoration Justice

Restorative justice in family disputes emphasizes healing and reconciliation within the family unit. This approach draws on community influence and collective disapproval of harmful behavior to discourage repeat offenses and safeguard the rights and well-being of victims. Central to this process is family-centered mediation, which involves working with the offending party to acknowledge the harm caused and take meaningful steps toward behavioral change.

Rather than relying solely on formal legal actors, restorative justice encourages the involvement of trusted community figures such as religious leaders, elders, respected family members, and even close friends of the couple who can guide the process in culturally relevant and compassionate ways.

A key element of this method is creating space for open dialogue, where everyone affected by the conflict can speak honestly about their experiences, ask questions and express their needs for healing and justice. The goal is for the person who caused harm to understand the full impact of their actions and take responsibility for making amends. By exploring the family's underlying dynamics, this process also helps identify root causes of conflict, which is critical to preventing future harm.

Context-Specific Recommendation ★





BEST PRACTICES



On processes for families to reach understanding How do you clarify questions and needs of the client?



By engaging in deliberate conversations to encourage people to speak out.

In Accordance With Literature



Allocate enough time for each individual to share their experiences and concerns without being rushed or interrupted.

Other Practice



Allocate enough time for each individual to share their experiences and concerns without being rushed or interrupted.

Other Practice



Ensure that discussions, whether joint or separate, are supported by the presence of a respected elder, a trusted community member, or a supportive relative to promote fairness and emotional safety.

Other Practice



How do you make sure people come to the practitioners at the right time?



If direct communication between parties is strained or unsafe, they should be interviewed or heard separately to ensure a fair and impartial process.

In accordance with literature



By engaging in deliberate conversations to encourage people to speak out.

In accordance with literature



The Imo State Community Justice Centre, located in the city centre, exemplifies an effective one-stop model for addressing family-related disputes. It integrates mediation, advisory services, and early intervention efforts under one roof, making justice more accessible and community-oriented.



Key Features of the Community Justice Centre:

- *Central Location: Easily accessible to the public, especially women and vulnerable populations seeking non-adversarial resolution of disputes.*
- *Multi-Disciplinary Staff: The Centre is staffed by trained professionals including mediators, social workers, legal officers and community representatives who are equipped to handle a wide range of family justice matters.*
- *Clinic Days: The Centre operates designated “clinic days” where experts are on-site to engage directly with families experiencing conflict. These sessions provide space for listening, assessment, and structured mediation.*
- *Preventive and Restorative Focus: Beyond dispute resolution, the Centre works to prevent recurring conflict by offering early intervention, community education and restorative dialogue practices.*



Communication Principles

INTRODUCTION

■ Navigating family disagreements and mending strained relationships hinges critically on how we communicate. Within the sphere of family justice, the manner in which individuals interact often carries as much weight as the substance of their words. When communication falters whether through accusations, an absence of dialogue, or aggressive exchanges conflicts can intensify and misunderstandings deepen. Conversely, an approach marked by respect, clarity and empathy can illuminate the underlying issues in a dispute, pave the way for reconciliation and build shared understanding.

In the emotionally charged atmosphere of family conflict, adopting principles of safe, inclusive and constructive communication provides the bedrock for productive dialogue.

These guiding tenets empower mediators, justice professionals, and the families themselves to cultivate an environment where every voice is heard without apprehension or condemnation.



- Applied in formal mediation settings or during informal family discussions, these principles prove indispensable for reaching resolutions that rebuild trust, affirm accountability, and foster tranquility.
- This section delves into foundational communication principles designed to uphold dignity, avert further harm, and facilitate genuine resolution throughout family justice proceedings.



Recommendations & Best Practices

In this section, you can find internationally recognized recommended interventions that practitioners can apply. Any judge, arbitrator, cultural leader, religious leader, lawyer, mediator, therapist, advisor and other relevant professional is encouraged to use the following recommendations. More background information about these interventions can be found, and the best practices are informed by real-life experiences, cultural values, and what has worked well in similar settings. They serve as practical examples that others can learn from and adapt, especially when dealing with sensitive family issues such as separation, violence, or parenting disputes. Best practices are not one-size-fits-all solutions, but tested ways of working that improve outcomes for individuals, families, and communities.



RECOMMENDATIONS



a). Apply Mutual Constructive Communication Techniques.

Mutual constructive communication is an interactive process that involves constructive problem-solving and focuses on avoiding conflict. Both parties engage in a mutual adaptive discussion. They should interact, communicate and cooperate. Communication is essential for transforming and adapting to new situations.

Parents should decide together on how often they interact or communicate about their children's needs. Parents can discuss child-related issues in person at arranged times.

Strongly Recommended ★★ ★

b). Ensure that Children are not exposed to their Parents' Marital Conflicts.

Children's exposure to marital conflicts can make them uncomfortable as mediators. When parental disclosures produce role changes or make them feel caught between their parents, it may result in psychological and behavioural problems for adolescents. When children adopt these interaction habits, they are at a greater risk of developing relationship problems as adults.

Strongly Recommended ★★ ★





BEST PRACTICES



How do practitioners ensure that parents are communicating constructively?



Parents should be made to understand that non-cooperation has a negative impact on their children. Moreover, when there is a breakdown in positive communication, it becomes harder to address issues constructively and significantly delays the possibility of reaching a meaningful compromise.

In accordance with literature



In situations where dissolution of the relationship becomes unavoidable, the court should prioritize the best interests of the children. Judges are encouraged to categorize such cases with a strong emphasis on safeguarding the emotional and psychological well-being of the children. How parents treat each other during and after separation should not cause further emotional distress or instability for the children involved.

Other Practice



Encourage and guide parties to engage in respectful, purposeful communication aimed at resolving disputes and maintaining functional relationships—especially where ongoing parenting or cohabitation is involved.

In accordance with literature



Ensure that discussions, whether joint or separate, are supported by the presence of a respected elder, a trusteeTo ensure that each party in a family dispute is heard in a safe, neutral setting and to use that understanding to create a communication plan that supports respectful and constructive dialogue going forward.

In accordance with literature



Parents should be strongly advised to shield their children from conflict. This includes removing children from the scene of any argument or confrontation, and as much as possible, avoiding altercations in their presence altogether. Children who are exposed to conflict between their care givers may suffer emotional and psychological harm, even if they are not directly involved. Maintaining a calm and respectful environment around children is essential to their well-being and development.

In accordance with literature



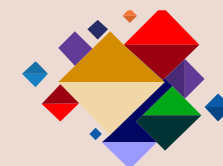
How do practitioners help parents communicate with their children?

“ Advising them on building more approachable relationships with their children. In Nigerian culture, it is common to find children who are afraid to communicate openly with their parents. Parents are advised to meet their children at their communication channel to build a relationship of trust and non-judgment.
In accordance with literature ”

“ Teach and inform parents that the emotional well-being of children is dependent on the parents' mindfulness. Such mindfulness includes how parents speak to their children.
In accordance with literature ”

“ State that the law prohibits domestic violence and abuse of children. Also, remind them that they are role models to their children and should set a good example.
Other Practice ”

“ Persuade them that the children's existence means that both parents need to maintain an open communication.
In accordance with literature ”





Property and Housing Arrangements

INTRODUCTION

- The allocation of property and housing arrangements frequently emerges as one of the most sensitive and intricate aspects when resolving family disputes. In situations involving separation, divorce, or family breakdown, determining who maintains access to the family home, land, or jointly acquired assets can significantly heighten tensions. This complexity is particularly pronounced when factors such as the welfare of children, deeply rooted inheritance rights, or the influence of customary laws are considered.
- In Imo State, where the legal landscape often sees an interplay between customary practices and statutory laws, it becomes imperative that property and housing matters are addressed with unwavering fairness and absolute transparency.

Raising awareness about the responsibility that comes with family membership helps individuals recognize that family is not only a source of rights or protection, but also a space for mutual accountability, respect and contribution. These responsibilities include care giving, supporting one another emotionally and financially, resolving conflicts peacefully and promoting a safe and inclusive home environment.



- This section offers essential guidance on the appropriate approach to property and housing issues within family justice settings. Its objective is to ensure that all arrangements ultimately reached are not only just and legally sound but also culturally sensitive and genuinely responsive to the lived realities of families throughout Imo State.



Recommendations & Best Practices

In this section, you can find internationally recognized recommended interventions that practitioners can apply. Any judge, arbitrator, cultural leader, religious leader, lawyer, mediator, therapist, advisor and other relevant professional is encouraged to use the following recommendations. More background information about these interventions can be found, and the best practices are informed by real-life experiences, cultural values, and what has worked well in similar settings. They serve as practical examples that others can learn from and adapt, especially when dealing with sensitive family issues such as separation, violence, or parenting disputes. Best practices are not one-size-fits-all solutions, but tested ways of working that improve outcomes for individuals, families, and communities.



RECOMMENDATIONS



a). Agree on proper housing arrangements for children, taking into account their age and development stage.

Infants and toddlers (0-4 years old): For children, it is crucial to be able to stay at both their parents' houses. This enhances the emotional involvement of parents with their children, which benefits the parent-child relationship. Strong, close family relationships are essential to the overall well-being of the entire family.

Young children (5-9 years old): Both parents should support and have contact with their children during the school week (Monday to Friday). This is beneficial to children's academic achievements and well-being.

Adolescents (10-18 years old): Children should have a home with both of their parents. International research suggests that adolescents who share a residence are better off academically, emotionally and psychologically compared to those who live in a single residence.

Strongly Recommended ★★★

It must be ensured that there is no indication or history of violence. If there is a risk of violence or abuse, this intervention is not recommended.

b). Use extended household arrangements where necessary.

The composition of an 'extended household' includes both the 'nuclear family' and people outside the nuclear family. In case of any change in the family structure, one or both parents are likely to move out of the matrimonial home. Parents may experience economic insecurity and conflicts about property and housing. The primary objective is to ensure safe housing for both parents and children. To provide this, parents can temporarily move into their relatives' households for example, their parents' house, siblings', or other extended family members'. The extended family can provide support until both parents are able to stand on their own feet again.

Recommended ★★



BEST PRACTICES



How do practitioners ensure that parents cooperate on housing arrangements?



Parents should be allowed to make independent decisions that they are comfortable with, especially concerning their children.

Other Practice



Ask spouse to contribute or pay for a suitable accommodation for the partner who will have primary custody of the children.

Other Practice



Ensure that housing options provide a safe, stable and nurturing setting.

In accordance with literature



Evaluate proximity to school, extended family support, health care and community connections.

Other Practice



What are the ways to divide housing property in a case of separation / divorce?



Limit the number of transitions between homes, particularly for younger children, to reduce emotional stress and behavioral instability.

In accordance with literature



Ensuring that properties are appropriately registered or purchased in the names of the relevant parties. Ask if there is a legally binding agreement in place.

Other Practice



Make use of court orders.

Other Practice



Use litigation as a last resort.

Other Practice



Children, Including Their Upbringing and Education

INTRODUCTION

- Children are at the heart of every family and community. Their growth, well-being and education reflect not only the strength of the family unit but also the values and future of society as a whole. From their early years, children rely on the guidance, care and stability provided by their parents and guardians to develop into responsible and capable individuals.
- In times of family conflict or separation, decisions affecting a child's upbringing and schooling must be handled with the utmost care. These are not just routine matters—they shape the child's sense of security, identity, and ability to thrive. Whether it involves day-to-day care, school choices, or moral and cultural upbringing, all decisions should be made in the child's best interests.
- This section highlights the shared responsibility of parents and care givers in nurturing and educating children and offers guidance for resolving disputes in ways that protect the child's rights, dignity and future.



Recommendations & Best Practices

In this section, you can find internationally recognized recommended interventions that practitioners can apply. Any judge, arbitrator, cultural leader, religious leader, lawyer, mediator, therapist, advisor and other relevant professional is encouraged to use the following recommendations. More background information about these interventions can be found, and the best practices are informed by real-life experiences, cultural values, and what has worked well in similar settings. They serve as practical examples that others can learn from and adapt, especially when dealing with sensitive family issues such as separation, violence, or parenting disputes. Best practices are not one-size-fits-all solutions, but tested ways of working that improve outcomes for individuals, families, and communities.



RECOMMENDATIONS



a). The information that Parents share with their Children should be appropriate and constructive.

Parents should be careful about what information they share in front of their children when they are in a conflict. The information that parents share with their children should be appropriate and constructive. Parents should not share negative information about the other parent, such as complaints about lack of child support. Parents should not share sensitive information, such as financial issues and personal concerns. Sharing such inappropriate information with children negatively affects their well-being.

Strongly Recommended ★★ ★

b). Parents should make agreements on child support.

Both parents are responsible for the costs of raising the child, such as school fees, food, clothing and other expenses. Research shows that providing formal and informal child support benefits the well-being of children. Formal child support includes mutually agreed upon arrangements on financial contributions towards the costs of children. Informal child support may consist of other things, such as providing food, shelter, clothing, emotional support etc.

Strongly Recommended ★★ ★

c). Parents should be advised to apply an Authoritative Parenting style.

Parents should have high levels of control and maturity demands over their children, combined with high levels of nurturance. This means that they show warmth, support, effective monitoring, control, discipline, positive discussion and responsiveness to their children's needs. Parents rely on positive sanctions to gain their child's compliance and encourage their child to express himself when he disagrees. This is referred to as 'authoritative parenting'. According to international research, authoritative parenting plays an essential role in children's academic performance.

3 types of parenting have been shown to have different effects on the well-being of children:

Authoritative Parenting:- *Where parents have high demands from their children but are also loving and nurturing their emotional needs. This is seen as the most effective type of parenting.*

Permissive Parenting:- *Where parents show love and care towards their children, but do not give enough direction and guidance.*

Authoritarian Parenting:- *Parents are strict and demanding but are not supportive enough of the children's emotional needs.*

Strongly Recommended ★★ ★



d). Apply elements of Restoration Justice

The Triple-P Parenting Programme, for example, is a multi-level system of support to prevent and treat social, emotional and behavioural problems in children by enhancing parent knowledge, skills and confidence. One of the primary objectives of the intervention is to enhance parents' confidence and competence in raising their children. Practitioners aim to reduce the mental strain, emotional and behavioural problems in children by equipping parents with the exact toolkit that they need to navigate the upbringing of their wards confidently. Practitioners particularly focus on at-risk parents who are sometimes identified by their income status, literacy level and/or history with violence and trauma. Practitioners take a holistic approach to working with parents, offering therapy to address issues that act as triggers and counselling to increase parental self-efficacy; ultimately, creating a 360-degree change in parenting and encouraging a more substantial bonding experience for the whole family. Some practitioners in the social sector apply preventive interventions, targeting the mother-child relationship quality of the mother child relationship. Practitioners also teach and intervene in concepts related to discipline, coping mechanisms for interparental conflict and therapeutic consultation on the father child relationship. Practitioners are responsible for guiding the mother and child through emotional stressors and teaching positive approaches to dealing with attitudes toward the father child contact, adjustment problems and the mental processing of the divorce.

Context-Specific Recommendation ★





BEST PRACTICES



How do practitioners make arrangements for children in case of the separation of parents?



There should be a joint decision-making process, regular communication, and a focus on the child's or children's best interests, as well as joint financial responsibility.

In accordance with literature



During mediation or intake sessions, assess whether one or both parents appear overwhelmed, emotionally distressed, or uncertain about parenting roles and responsibilities. Take note of indicators such as poor communication, frequent conflict, or avoidance of decision-making.

Other Practice



Refer the parent(s) to local professionals such as family therapists, parenting coaches, psychologists, or social welfare officers. Use a formal referral pathway through the Imo State Community Justice Centres.

Other Practice



Children living with grandparents is the preferred option when parents both have insufficient resources.

Other Practice



Advice on the intricacies of raising children and on the need for an established plan on raising enough finance to afford basic needs and amenities.

In accordance with literature



Specific advice on the needs of children amidst divorce proceedings, including emotional support and deliberate attention by both parents.

In accordance with literature



What advice do practitioners provide on the education of children?



Attention should be paid to the type of schools that the children attend.

In accordance with literature



The best interest of the child or children should be the priority if the court is the institution that grants custody for child welfare. It can at best only offer advice based on the children's age.

In accordance with literature





Maintenance and Income

INTRODUCTION

- When families experience separation or dispute, financial responsibilities often become a major source of tension. Yet, ensuring that children and dependent family members continue to receive adequate support is crucial for their well-being. Maintenance whether for a spouse, child, or other dependent extends beyond financial support; it reflects a commitment to shared responsibility and care, even after the breakdown of a relationship.
- In Imo State, where both formal and customary systems of law influence family life, the question of income contribution and maintenance must be approached with fairness, cultural sensitivity and an understanding of the realities families face. Disagreements over who provides what and how much, can deepen mistrust if not handled transparently and with a focus on long-term stability.
- This section provides guidance on addressing maintenance and income-related issues in a way that promotes cooperation, upholds legal and moral duties, and prioritises the needs of children and other vulnerable family members.



Recommendations & Best Practices

In this section, you can find internationally recognized recommended interventions that practitioners can apply. Any judge, arbitrator, cultural leader, religious leader, lawyer, mediator, therapist, advisor and other relevant professional is encouraged to use the following recommendations. More background information about these interventions can be found, and the best practices are informed by real-life experiences, cultural values, and what has worked well in similar settings. They serve as practical examples that others can learn from and adapt, especially when dealing with sensitive family issues such as separation, violence, or parenting disputes. Best practices are not one-size-fits-all solutions, but tested ways of working that improve outcomes for individuals, families, and communities.



RECOMMENDATIONS



a). Invest in people's 'Economic Marital Transition', for them to become self-sufficient.

Partners who are financially dependent and reliant struggle to overcome the risk of homelessness after a divorce. Practitioners work with couples at the start of divorce proceedings to teach self-efficacy and self-reliance, guiding each party on how to achieve economic independence and take steps to transition into a single-source income after divorce.

Recommended ★★

b). Both Parents are responsible for the cost of raising the child; therefore, agreements on alimony must be made after separation.

Parents need to agree on child support. Parents should also be willing to support their children outside these agreements. Occasionally, children might need more food, clothing or other items than expected. Formulas for alimony can be used to determine the amount of support.

Strongly Recommended ★★★

c). Agreements on Special Maintenance must be made after separation.

Spousal maintenance an agreements where one of the parties provide financial support. Agreements that provide financial support for la imited time until both sides can support themselves are recommended. This type of maintenance is known as non-permanent and it can help both parents to become more empowered. Permanent spousal maintenance is an agreement that continues to provide financial support indefinitely, which can lead to dependency. Becoming self-sufficient and financially independent of the former spouse is essential, as long as it does not negatively affect the children.

Strongly Recommended ★★ ★

BEST PRACTICES

What kind of arrangement can be made on spousal maintenance?

“

Integrate transitional economic support into family dispute resolution processes by helping individuals particularly those who were financially dependent in the marriage—gain the tools, knowledge, and opportunities needed to become self sufficient.

In accordance with literature

”

“

During mediation or family court proceedings, assess whether either party is at financial risk following separation or divorce. Pay special attention to women, young mothers, and persons who left employment or business to support the home.

In accordance with literature

”

“

Encourage periodic follow-up through the Imo community justice centres to ensure individuals are on track and to address emerging challenges.

Other Practice

”

“

Teach them the benefits of financial independence in order to motivate them.

In Accordance with literature

”

Separation Process

INTRODUCTION

- Separation is never an easy decision. It often comes after a long period of tension, conflict, or unresolved differences between partners. When couples choose to go their separate ways whether formally through divorce or informally by mutual agreement it marks a major shift not only in their relationship but also in the lives of their children, extended families, and communities.
- In Imo State, the process of separation may follow either statutory or customary routes, depending on the nature of the marriage and the practices of the community. Regardless of the path taken, separation should be handled with fairness, dignity, and concern for those most affected especially the children.



- This section outlines the steps, considerations, and support mechanisms that can guide families through separation. It encourages open communication, mutual respect, and responsible planning to ensure the well-being of all parties during this challenging transition.



Recommendations & Best Practices

In this section, you can find internationally recognized recommended interventions that practitioners can apply. Any judge, arbitrator, cultural leader, religious leader, lawyer, mediator, therapist, advisor and other relevant professional is encouraged to use the following recommendations. More background information about these interventions can be found, and the best practices are informed by real-life experiences, cultural values, and what has worked well in similar settings. They serve as practical examples that others can learn from and adapt, especially when dealing with sensitive family issues such as separation, violence, or parenting disputes. Best practices are not one-size-fits-all solutions, but tested ways of working that improve outcomes for individuals, families, and communities for each intervention.



RECOMMENDATIONS



a). Apply a problem solving approach in the separation process

In managing family disputes, particularly during separation or conflict, it is vital to shift focus from blame to solutions. The problem-solving approach encourages both parties to work together to identify the root of their disagreement and explore options that meet the genuine needs of everyone involved especially the children.

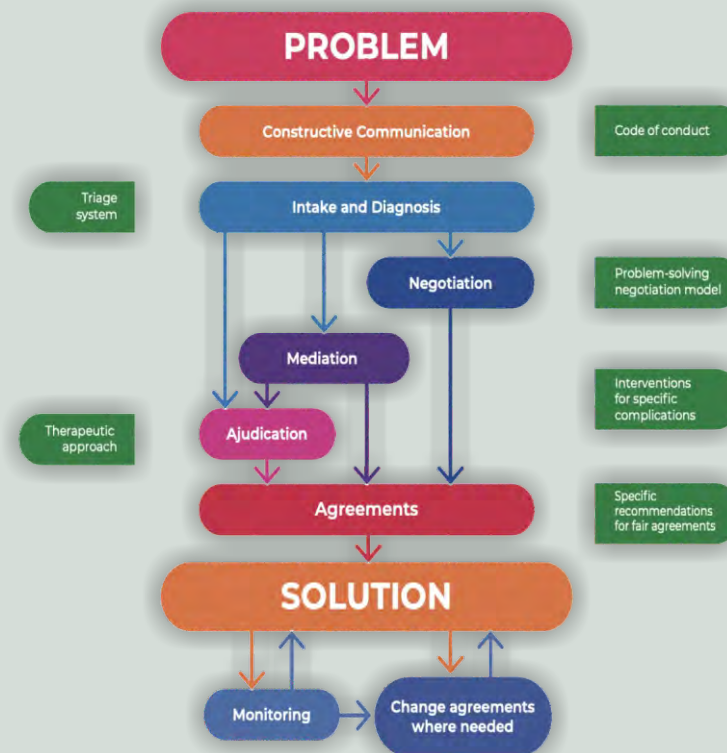
This method fosters open dialogue, mutual respect and cooperation. It allows families to move forward with agreements that are not only practical but also fair. When consensus cannot be reached independently, neutral criteria such as what is in the best interest of the child or what is economically realistic, can be used to guide decisions.

Problem-solving courts and justice models that apply this approach often involve the active participation of the judge or mediator.

These officials not only facilitate the process but also encourage individuals to engage with available services such as counselling, mediation and social support. Ongoing monitoring ensures that parties follow through

with agreed-upon actions and that the outcomes contribute positively to the well-being of the entire family unit. This approach places healing, stability and accountability at the centre of justice.

The steps of the problem-solving approach:



Strongly Recommended ★★

b). Apply the therapeutic approach to decision making.

The goal of the therapeutic approach is to maximize the positive effects of legal interventions on the social, emotional and psychological functioning of individual families. The therapeutic judge is a critical actor in this endeavour. Rather than solving discrete legal issues, the problem-solving judge attempts to understand and address the underlying problem and emotional issues and helps participants to deal with the situation effectively. The therapeutic judge motivates individuals to accept needed services. All legal actors involved in the therapeutic approach to separation are considered therapeutic agents, focusing on the mental health and psychological well-being of the individuals they encounter within the legal setting. Such a therapeutic approach to adjudication ensures a more comprehensive solution tailored to the legal, personal, emotional and social needs of the family members.

Strongly Recommended ★★



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1. Establish a Committee of Experts



The guideline development process starts by gathering a diverse group of local practitioners and justice experts. This group is referred to as the Guideline Committee of Experts (CoE). The CoE co-creates the guideline, performs quality control, and helps establish local ownership.

2. Learn From The Experiences of Local Justice Providers (collect practice based evidence)



Learn from the experiences of local justice providers (collect practice-based evidence)

An essential element of the methodology is to identify what the local justice providers from the informal and formal sectors consider best practices for resolving their most pressing justice problems. We organise workshops and invite government, local, civil society leaders and practitioners to share their experiences on what works. The workshops are conducted in mixed groups of approximately 15 participants from the formal and informal sectors of justice, including providers from a specific area. It is recommended that at least three separate workshops occur in 3 different locations, collecting information from around 50 practitioners. Each workshop is facilitated as a half-day session, and ample time is allocated not only to collect suggested best practices on specific interventions but also to understand how they relate to one another.

To ensure that workshops are representative of the national population, HiiL conducts several workshops throughout the country for which the guidelines are being developed. Geographical coverage depends on the resources available and is determined in partnership with the Committee of Experts.

3. Collect Evidence From The Literature and Propose Recommendations (evidence based practice)

Collect evidence from the literature and propose recommendations (evidence-based practice)

There are several steps involved in resolving a justice issue. Each problem is broken down into a broad range of topics (such as mediation, adjudication, arrangements for raising children, etc.). For each of these topics, several potential interventions can be identified to help prevent or resolve the issue. Internationally available literature contains evidence that supports or invalidates interventions to justice issues. We test these interventions, assess the quality of evidence underlying them, and formulate actionable recommendations.



The following steps explain this process:

i. First Literature Search: Identifying The Most Common Interventions

HiiL conducts a first literature search to identify all possible interventions for each topic. This is done following the search strategy (explained in step three). For each topic, the team selects the two or three most effective interventions. Two interventions are then compared with each other in PICO format and, if applicable, similarly compared to a third intervention.

ii. Defining the PICO question¹

To assess the effectiveness of interventions, HiiL compares selected interventions using PICO questions. The PICO approach is used in the medical sector to help define the efficacy of an intervention. PICO stands for:

Population
Intervention
Comparison
Outcome

These four elements should always be present in the PICO questions. The standard structure of a PICO question is: For [population/person], is [intervention 1] more effective than [compared intervention 2] for [outcome/goal]?

iii. Search Strategy² and Literature Selection³

After identifying the PICO question, HiiL reviews and selects the literature. HiiL first defines which keywords are used for the literature search.

The literature search is conducted hierarchically. HiiL starts by investigating existing evidence-based guidelines, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses. If this results in insufficient evidence, the search extends to randomized controlled trials. If this is not available, the team searches for observational studies and empirical research. Lastly, if needed, HiiL gathers relevant opinions from international experts.

Steps taken in the process of selecting literature are (in this order):

- How to phrase a PICO question is explained in: Schunemann, Brozek, Guyatt and Oxman, GRADE Handbook, Chapter 2, accessible via: <http://gdt.guidelinedevelopment.org/app/handbook/hand>
- The search strategy is similar to the strategy used in developing guidelines for family doctors in The Netherlands, accessible via: https://www.nhg.org/sites/default/files/content/nhg_org/uploads/handleiding_ontwikkelen_nhg-behandelrichtlijnen_0.pdf
- The literature selection-process is similar to the selection-process used in developing guidelines for family doctors in The Netherlands, accessible via: https://www.nhg.org/sites/default/files/content/nhg_org/uploads/handleiding_ontwikkelen_nhg-behandelrichtlijnen_0.pdf book.html#h.1yd7iwhn8pxp

Screening of titles and abstracts: A first selection is made where non-relevant titles are excluded.

Selection based on methodology, using titles and abstracts: The researcher selects sources based on their methods, using titles and abstracts.

Selection on substance: A substantive and definitive selection based on the title, abstract and the substance.

Rating of selected literature: The quality and quantity of the literature are assessed. If not sufficient, the search strategy and criteria are altered.

HiiL consults several (legal and psychology-related) databases accessible through Google Scholar. The most relevant databases are defined on a topic-by-topic basis.

iv. Assessing and Grading The Evidence⁴

The literature contains evidence. Following the selection of literature, the quality of the evidence is evaluated. HiiL grades the quality of evidence for each PICO question, based on the GRADE (Grading of Recommendations Assessment, Development and Evaluation) system.

The GRADE manual (accessible on www.guidelinedevelopment.org/handbook) provides an elaborate description of this method.

GRADE is used extensively by the medical sector for developing guidelines. The GRADE system defines the quality of evidence. The quality of evidence reflects the level of confidence in the effect of the intervention on people's well-being. The evidence is graded according to a three-step process.

● **RATE THE ENTIRE STUDY DESIGN**

Rating the quality of evidence starts with the study design. The evidence is categorised by the type of study, using the four GRADE classifications:

High	Existing evidence-based guidelines, meta-analyses, and systematic reviews
Moderate	Random Controlled Trials (RCTs), medium-sized/large empirical research (including observational studies and experimental studies)
Low	Small empirical studies (including observational studies and experimental studies)
Very Low	Opinions of international experts

● **TAKE INTO ACCOUNT FACTORS FOR DOWNGRADING AND UPGRADING**

Next, HiiL seeks factors that undermine the quality of evidence. These are:

Risk of bias of the publication, such as: - Use of evidence by the author to support one favoured. <i>intervention (for example, the author is clearly in favour of mediation or supporting completely equal roles of men and women in family life as a matter of principle)</i> - Reporting of outcomes is selective. - Samples used in the study to back up arguments are not representative.	1 or 2 levels down
Risk of actual reported being different in other cultures / locations - For example, the Nigerian city population may not experience the same effects of an intervention as the Texas rural sample in the study.	1 level down
Inconsistent results from different studies, such as those based on: - Geographical area (different studies report different outcomes for different geographical regions). - Interventions (different studies report different interpretations of the same intervention). - Outcomes (different studies report different effects of the same intervention).	1 or 2 levels down
Studies only present indirect evidence, such as: - Different results in different geographical areas in one study - A difference in how the intervention is applied in one study - A difference in the effects of the intervention in one study	1 or 2 levels down
Imprecision - Uncertainty about the study results	1 or 2 levels down

HiiL also looks at factors that increase the quality of evidence:

A large magnitude of the effect of the intervention: - The effects are consistent across different samples - Consistency in the studies on the magnitude of the effect	1 or 2 levels up
Unanimous endorsement of the Committee of Experts	0 or 1 level up
All suggested best practice are in line with the recommendation	0 or 1 level up

Studies may report different outcomes. All outcomes of the studies that are essential to a recommendation are graded separately.

Until now, the upgrading and downgrading process has not been evaluated individually. In future iterations of the guideline, HiiL will provide reasons for upgrading or downgrading a recommendation and explain the rationale behind these decisions.

RATE THE QUALITY OF EVIDENCE OF THE ENTIRE RECOMMENDATION BASED ON STEPS A & B

After taking into account the rating of the study design and the factors for downgrading or upgrading the quality of evidence, HiiL determines the overall quality of evidence. HiiL provides a single grade of quality of evidence for every recommendation. The quality of evidence can be classified into the following four categories of the GRADE model:

High	There is much confidence that the actual effects of the tested intervention are close to the estimations of the effects
Moderate	The actual effects of the intervention are likely to be close to the estimated impact. There is a possibility that it is different
Low	The confidence in the estimates of the effects is limited. The actual effects can be substantially different from the estimates
Very Low	There is very little confidence in the estimates of the effects

Because the GRADE approach rates the quality of evidence separately for each important outcome of the studies, quality might differ across outcomes. When determining the overall quality of evidence across outcomes, only the outcomes that are assessed as being most important are considered. These critical outcomes have been identified for each recommendation in the guideline. If the quality of evidence is the same for all critical outcomes, then this becomes the overall quality of the evidence supporting the answer to the question. Suppose the quality of evidence differs across vital outcomes. In that case, the overall confidence in effect estimates cannot be higher than the lowest confidence in effect estimates for any outcome that is critical for a decision. Therefore, the lowest quality of evidence for any of the critical outcomes determines the overall quality of evidence.

Studies may report different outcomes. All outcomes of the studies that are essential to a recommendation are graded separately.

Until now, the upgrading and downgrading process has not been evaluated individually. In future iterations of the guideline, HiiL will provide reasons for upgrading or downgrading a recommendation and explain the rationale behind these decisions.

● **DEFINE THE RESEARCH GAP**

After grading the evidence, it is essential to clarify where further research is needed to enhance the quality of the recommendation. There may be a lack of high-quality study designs, or insufficient research. A research gap can support universities and research institutions in identifying impactful fields of research for the future.

v. Propose Recommendations⁵

The recommendations can be established by following the answer to the PICO question and assessing the quality of evidence using the GRADE approach.

The strength of the recommendation depends on whether the desirable effects of an intervention outweigh the undesirable effects, and on the strength of evidence.

Recommendations are categorised into four groups:

Strongly Recommended	Precise balance towards desirable outcomes of the intervention and a high/moderate quality of evidence. <i>Apply the recommendation and advise parties accordingly</i>
Recommended	Precise balance towards desirable outcomes of the intervention and a low/very low quality of evidence. <i>Apply the recommendation and advise parties accordingly</i>
Context-specific Recommendation	Unclear balance towards desirable outcomes of the intervention (where desirable effects do not apply to all situations) and a high/moderate level of evidence. <i>Apply the recommendation only in the right circumstances and advise parties accordingly</i>
Not Recommended	Clear balance towards undesirable outcomes of the intervention and a high/moderate level of evidence. <i>Beware of non-recommended practice</i>

Key factors that influence the direction and strength of a recommendation are:

Domain	Comment
The balance between desirable and undesirable outcomes (trade-offs), taking into account: - <i>Best estimates of the magnitude of effects on desirable and undesirable outcomes.</i> - <i>Importance of outcomes (estimated typical values and preferences).</i>	The larger the differences between the desirable and undesirable consequences, the more likely a strong recommendation is warranted. The smaller the net benefit and the lower the certainty for that benefit, the more likely a weak recommendation is warranted.
Confidence in the magnitude of estimates of the effect of the interventions on essential outcomes (overall quality of evidence for outcomes).	The higher the quality of evidence, the more likely a strong recommendation is warranted .
Confidence in values and preferences and their variability	The greater the variability in values and preferences, or uncertainty about typical values and preferences, the more likely a weak recommendation is warranted.
Resource use	The higher the costs of an intervention (the more resources consumed), the less likely a strong recommendation is warranted.

4. Experts Review The First Draft of The Guideline



HiiL submits the guideline to the Committee of Experts for review. The Committee determines whether the recommendations are acceptable within the local or national context. They report their findings within three months of submission. If the Committee of Experts determines that a recommendation is incompatible with local practice, the Committee and HiiL collectively review the recommendation and decide whether or not it should remain the same, be modified, or be removed from the guideline entirely.



Committee of Experts

The Committee of Experts has played a crucial role in developing this guideline. They have facilitated the collection and evaluation of best practices and evidence that inform these guidelines. Furthermore, they have been instrumental in ensuring that the local context is taken into account in all recommendations and best practices. This achievement would not have been possible without their contributions:

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