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SCEPTRE AND PRIMA

THE CHILD BEHIND THE CASE:

The Need for Anonymization of
Children's Names in Legal Citations

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“...how do we preserve the value of precedent without sacrificing the child’s right to privacy?”



SCEPTRE AND PRIMA

In every justice system, reported cases do more than preserve legal history. They guide courts, shape legal reasoning, promote consistency, and make rights enforceable in practice. In children’s cases, however, reporting raises a delicate but urgent question: how do we preserve the value of precedent without sacrificing the child’s right to privacy?

That question sits at the heart of an important gap in Nigeria’s child justice system. Too often, cases involving children are either poorly reported, inconsistently cited, or published in ways that expose the identities of the very children the law is meant to protect. This weakens both adjudication and rights realization. It deprives the legal system of a strong body of child-focused jurisprudence, while also undermining the confidentiality standards that should govern all child-related proceedings.

WHY PRECEDENT IN CHILDREN’S CASES MATTERS

The need for reported decisions in children’s cases cannot be overstated. Statutes such as the Child Rights Act provide the legal framework, but case law gives those rights practical meaning. Precedents show how courts interpret and apply child rights in real disputes. They help judges, lawyers, researchers, and policymakers understand what the “best interest of the child” requires in actual cases—not only in theory.

A well-developed body of precedent on children’s matters is important for several reasons.

First, it promotes consistency in adjudication. Where courts have access to earlier decisions on children’s rights, custody, protection, diversion, privacy, or juvenile justice, they are better able to decide similar cases in a principled and predictable way.

Without precedent, outcomes may depend too heavily on the individual judge or the specific court before which a child appears.

Second, precedent strengthens rights realization. Rights are better protected when there is a judicial record showing how those rights have been recognized and enforced. Reported child rights decisions become tools for advocacy, litigation, reform, and accountability. They help ensure that the protections in the Child Rights Act do not remain abstract promises.

Third, case reporting supports legal development. Children's cases often raise complex questions about rehabilitation, vulnerability, consent, family responsibility, state protection, and the balance between welfare and justice. If such decisions are not properly preserved and cited, the law cannot grow in a coherent way.

Fourth, reported decisions promote transparency and institutional learning. They help the bench and bar build expertise in child justice, while also making it possible to evaluate whether courts and related institutions are truly upholding child rights standards.

In this sense, the answer is not to avoid documenting children's cases. The answer is to document them responsibly.

THE PROBLEM IS NOT REPORTING—IT IS EXPOSURE

The real concern is not that children's cases are reported. It is that many are reported without adequate anonymization and confidentiality safeguards.

In Nigeria, the continued publication of children's names and identifying details in judgments, law reports, media stories, and online legal databases undermines the protective purpose of child justice. Whether the child is an offender, victim, witness, or subject of care and protection proceedings, disclosure of identity can have lasting consequences. A case record may outlive childhood and become a permanent source of stigma, discrimination, trauma, or social exclusion.

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This is especially troubling because the law is clear.

Section 8 of the Child Rights Act 2003 guarantees every child the right to privacy, family life, home, correspondence, telephone conversation, and telegraphic communication.

Section 205(1) further provides that the privacy of the child must be respected at every stage of child justice administration.

Section 205(2) states that no information that may lead to the identification of a child offender shall be published.

Section 205(3) adds that all records of child offenders shall be kept strictly confidential and made inaccessible to third parties, except those directly concerned with the case.

Taken together, these provisions make the legal position unmistakable: children involved in legal processes are entitled to privacy, and the publication of identifying information is prohibited. Yet in practice, this protection is too often ignored.

WHY CONFIDENTIALITY IS ESSENTIAL TO CHILD JUSTICE

Confidentiality in children's cases is not a technicality. It is central to the philosophy of child justice itself.

A child justice system is meant to protect, rehabilitate, and reintegrate—not merely to punish or expose. Where a child's identity is publicly attached to a criminal charge, family dispute, abuse allegation, or protection matter, the effects can follow that child into adulthood. Public exposure may affect education, employment, relationships, mental health, and community acceptance. It may also discourage families and children from seeking justice in the first place.

This is why anonymization must be seen not as an obstacle to legal reporting, but as a condition for ethical and rights-compliant reporting.



Proper anonymization ensures that courts, lawyers, journalists, and law report services can preserve the legal significance of a case while shielding the child from avoidable harm. It allows the justice system to learn from child-related decisions without turning the child into a permanent public record.

BETTER REPORTING REQUIRES BETTER CITATION PRACTICES

If precedents in children's cases are to serve their purpose, then the legal community must adopt citation and record-keeping practices that preserve both accessibility and confidentiality.

This means moving away from reporting formats that reveal full names, family details, specific addresses, schools, or other identifiers. Instead, courts and reporting services should use initials, pseudonyms, or neutral descriptors such as X (A Child), A.B. v State, or Minor C. They should also remove geographic or familial details that could indirectly expose identity.

At the same time, anonymized reporting should remain legally useful. Cases can still be properly cited by including the court, case number, date of judgment, and neutral citation.

This makes the case traceable for research, advocacy, and adjudication, while respecting the child's right to privacy.

A uniform standard is urgently needed. Courts, law reporting services, online legal databases, journalists, and editors should adopt clear anonymization protocols for all child-related matters. Without standardization, confidentiality becomes inconsistent, and the protection of children depends on chance rather than principle.

A BETTER WAY FORWARD

Nigeria does not need to choose between precedent and privacy. It needs a reporting culture that respects both.

Children's cases should be preserved, reported, and cited because they are crucial to building a strong and responsive body of child rights jurisprudence. They help courts adjudicate better, promote consistency, strengthen advocacy, and move rights from paper to practice.

But those same cases must be handled with far greater care. The child behind the case must not disappear behind legal doctrine, nor be sacrificed in the name of public record.



A justice system committed to the best interest of the child must ensure that while decisions are visible, the child remains protected.

The real challenge, then, is not whether to report children's cases.

It is whether we can build a legal culture that records them in a way that develops the law without damaging the child.

That is the standard child justice demands. And that is the standard legal reporting should meet.

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