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The role of future teachers of elementary education in recognizing and counteracting violence against children in the family

STRESZCZENIE

Rola przyszłych nauczycieli edukacji elementarnej w diagnozowaniu i przeciwdziałaniu przemocy wobec dzieci w rodzinie

Artykuł ma na celu ukazanie roli edukowania studentów kierunków pedagogicznych w zakresie rozpoznawania symptomów stosowania przemocy wobec dzieci w rodzinie. Autorka wskazuje także na istotność ukazania przyszłym nauczycielom procedury postępowania w przypadku informacji lub podejrzenia, że podopieczny doświadcza przemocy. Wczesna interwencja ze strony środowiska przedszkolnego bądź szkolnego daje duże szanse na pomniejszenie skali zjawiska oraz jego konsekwencji.

Słowa kluczowe: przemoc wobec dzieci w rodzinie, rozpoznawanie symptomów przemocy wobec dzieci, wiedza studentów o przemocy wobec dzieci, przyszły nauczyciel, edukacja elementarna.

Introduction

According to World Health Organization (WHO) violence towards a child is defined as ‘each intentional and unintentional activity of an adult, society or state, which negatively affects the health as well as physical, psychological and social development of a child’.¹ It is a phenomenon that is observed on a big scale in most countries in the world, regardless of the culture and religion. Most often noted cases relate to physical and sexual violence, however it is not possible to specifically determine the scale of those crimes. Attempts to diagnose the range of emotional violence are even a harder task².

¹ J. Brągiel, *Zrozumieć dziecko skrzywdzone*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Opolskiego, Opole 1996, s. 14.

² K. Kruszko, *Pedagogiczne aspekty bezpieczeństwa dzieci w wieku wczesnoszkolnym*, Wyd. Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin 2010, s. 89.

The review of research into the phenomenon of family violence towards children

The attempts to assess the scale of the phenomenon of family violence towards children are undertaken also on our country's territory. Additional objectives of diagnostic actions come down to the recognition of the socially perceived scale of the occurrence of doing harm to children, identification of social attitudes and reactions to this kind of violence, recognition of prevailing stereotypes as well as diagnosis of: direct and indirect contacts with situations of violence towards children, circumstances that accompany them and identification of victims and perpetrators.

As can be observed in studies conducted by TNS OBOP in 2008 on the directive of Ministry of Labour and Social Politics among the random sample of 3000 Polish residents at the age of 18 and older, as many as 44% of respondents know or heard of at least one family in which there are cases of violence towards children. Moreover, nearly one third, namely 31% of respondents knows at least one family which is said to resort to mental violence towards children. The same percentage of respondents (31%) claims that they know of at least one family which practices physical violence. 17% of Poles heard of a family which applies economic violence and 5% is able to indicate a family in their surroundings in which children are sexually abused³. Additionally, one can notice a certain relationship, namely, the worse material conditions are, the more often there are cases of violence, especially physical one⁴. Similar conclusions were also reached by the authors of foreign studies devoted to the phenomenon of violence⁵.

When asked whether they have happened to apply particular forms of violence towards members of their household, one fifth (19%) of respondents admits to having applied violence (at least one of its forms, that is emotional, economical, physical or sexual) towards members of their family. More detailed data demonstrate that 12% of Poles admitted to practicing mental violence, among whom 27% of people experienced this kind of violence in childhood and one fifth (21%) experienced any form of violence in childhood. Furthermore, 11% of Poles own up to applying physical violence within a family. It is predominantly practiced by people who fell victim to this kind of violence in their childhood (30%) and one quarter (24%) of them suffered any form of violence in their minority years⁶.

There is also some alarming data concerning applying violence towards one's own child. Fifteen per cent of Poles having a child below 18 years old, owned up to practicing some form of violence towards their offspring at least once, and 12% of Poles admits to resorting

³ *Badanie dotyczące zjawiska przemocy w rodzinie wobec dzieci. Opinie ofiar, sprawców i świadków o występowaniu i okolicznościach występowania przemocy w rodzinie wobec dzieci. Raport z badania TNS OBOP dla Ministerstwa Pracy i Polityki Społecznej, Warszawa 2008, s. 7–8.*

⁴ J. Maćkiewicz, *Przemoc wobec dziecka w rodzinie*, „Problemy Opiekuńczo-Wychowawcze” 2004, nr 5, s. 34–38.

⁵ *Child Disciplinary Practices at Home: Evidence from a Range of Low – and Middle-Income Countries*, New York 2010; A. P. Guerrero, E. S. Hishinuma, N. N. Andrade, S. T. Nishimura, V. L. Cunanan, *Correlations among socioeconomic and family factors and academic, behavioral, and emotional difficulties in Filipino adolescents in Hawai'i*, „Int. J. Soc. Psychiatry” 2006, nr 52(4), s. 343–359.

⁶ *Badanie dotyczące zjawiska przemocy...*, s. 23–24.

to at least one of four forms of violence more than once. Only 1% of respondents confesses they have used any of the four types of violence on multiple occasions⁷.

Another research, whose aim was to determine which type of violence is most frequently practiced by parents towards their own children, based on anonymous questionnaires examined the sample group of 60 children aged 10–18. On the basis of the analysis of the survey results it was reported that most frequent acts of violence committed by parents towards their children are: jerking (31% of answers), hitting (28.3%) and insults (28.3%) which are the symptoms of physical and emotional violence. Violence affects boys more often than girls and is applied by both mothers and fathers. The majority of surveyed children do not report being victims of home violence to anyone (38.3%). As few as 5% notified the other parent, and what is significant in the context of this article, only 3.3% informed the teacher or tutor⁸.

It is worth comparing the above analysis with the up-to-date data from 2015 report titled ‘Violence in child-rearing. Between legal prohibition and social acceptance’, in which a thousand of adult Poles were surveyed.

Taking into consideration the reaction of the respondents to violence towards children in their place of residence, it can be observed that the most preferred pattern of behavior turned out to be ‘popping in and inquiring what is going on and possibly offering help’, an answer chosen by 37% of respondents. Another answer selected by every fifth respondent (18%) was ‘knocking on the door or on the wall’, in order to signal their being a witness of such behaviour and another 16% would decide to inform some institution about the ensuing situation. Therefore, such an attitude of the respondents can be defined as a cautious reaction. In comparison, only 12% of the respondents would decide to intervene by reprimanding parent of the harmed child⁹.

Unfortunately, violence as an element of child upbringing is frequently present in child-rearing practice among Polish families. Nearly half of Polish families uses hitting a child (spanking) and less frequently parents resort to giving a thrashing to their child (17%). At the same time, it can be noticed that intensity of violence in child-rearing decreases. Older generations of parents own up to violent practices towards their children twice as often as younger parents having children younger than 18 years old. More often than contemporary parents, they reveal that they used to hit a child and gave them a thrashing. In the earlier decades violence was noticeable in upbringing even more frequently¹⁰.

On account of this, it can be concluded that the situation in Polish families is improving, nevertheless the phenomenon of violence towards children is still present, which requires further actions propagating reactions towards violence, especially from educational role models which teachers should be examples of.

⁷ Ibidem, s. 25.

⁸ W. Waksmańska, T. Grzywina, R. Łukasik, *Analiza zjawiska przemocy w rodzinie na podstawie badania ankietowego przeprowadzonego wśród uczniów*, „Problemy Pielęgniarstwa” 2007, t. 15, z. 4, s. 236–237.

⁹ E. Jarosz, *Przemoc w wychowaniu. Między prawnym zakazem a społeczną akceptacją. Monitoring Rzecznika Praw Dziecka*, Biuro Rzecznika Praw Dziecka, Warszawa 2015, s. 114.

¹⁰ Ibidem, s. 145.

Future teachers' self-evaluation of the knowledge in the range of violence towards children – a study report

Adults, especially parents or guardians, occupy a very important position in the life of each child. It is them who create an atmosphere of security, trust and warm-hearted relationships within a family. It is them who make up a role model which will decide what social role a child will adopt in adult life. Unfortunately, it is not always the case that role models observed in a family home are proper, especially if close family members are the perpetrators of various forms of violence. We can learn that the phenomenon of child violence exists in our, sometimes even very close, neighborhood on the basis of analysis of the above study results.

In the context of this article, the role of the educator in preventing the phenomenon of family violence towards children should be given some thought. It is also worth pointing out what viewpoints, opinions and convictions about the necessity of undertaking intervention as well as prevention steps are presented by people who in near future will have an opportunity to directly interfere in the life of children and their families. Moreover, it is worth finding out whether future teachers of elementary education have sufficient knowledge on the issue of recognizing the symptoms of family violence towards a child, in order to commence the proceedings upon gaining information or suspicion that a pupil may be a victim of violence.

In order to find a response to those queries, a diagnostic survey has been conducted among 48 students of a full-time study course, and 30 part-time students of the second year of Pedagogy with Early-school and Kindergarten Education specialization at the Department of Pedagogy and Psychology of Silesian University.

The first question of the survey referred to evaluation of the study course curriculum in the light of content related to violence towards children. The responses received are presented in diagram 1.

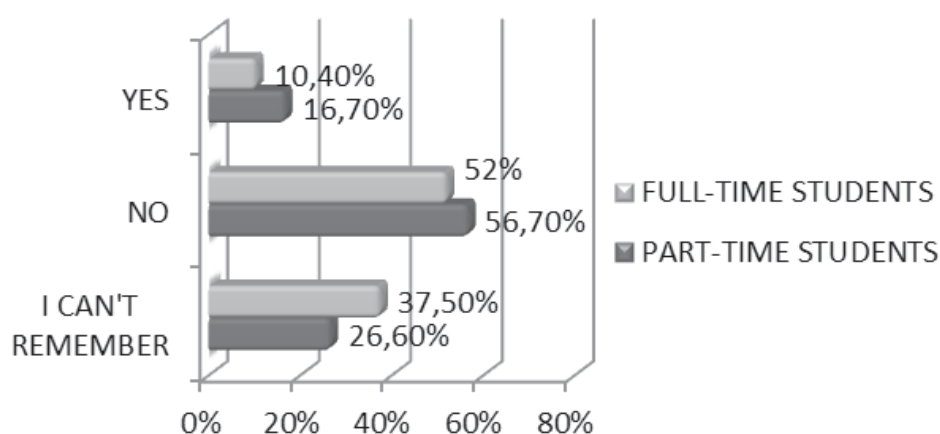


Diagram 1. Is there any content related to violence towards children in the course syllabus?

Source: author's own research.

While analysing the data collated above, it can be noticed that over a half of students of both full-time (25 people – 52.1%) and part-time (17 people – 56.7%) studies admit that there is no content related to violence towards children in their curriculum. Only few students

have indicated specific modules containing certain elements of this thematic range. Table 1 contains a collation of modules indicated by the students.

Table 1. Modules in study program which, according to students, contain violence – related content

Modules – students’ responses	Full-time students	Part-time students
	N	N
Social pedagogy	2	1
Family pedagogy	1	0
Theory of education	1	0
General psychology	1	0
Topic of presentation on computer science classes	0	1
General information – various modules	0	1
Occasional information – various modules	1	2

Source: author’s own research.

On the basis of table 1 it can be concluded that the number of indicated modules is scarce. Furthermore, students’ choices are varied, which can signify that the content related to violence towards children constitute just a small part of all intended educational aims. At this point, it is worth noticing that the kindergarten institution is frequently the first milieu that a child encounters after leaving home environment. Thus, teaching the skills of how to recognize the symptoms of child’s physical harm should be a priority in education of future teachers.

The issue of violence towards children is very widely discussed within the university curriculum at the faculty of guardianship, educational and re-socializing pedagogy, because of the uniqueness of the institutions and people with whom the future educators are going to cooperate. However, since one of the roles of kindergarten and school is diagnosis, this issue cannot be neglected also in reference to future teachers of elementary education. It is their intervention on which the health or sometimes even life of a child may depend. Therefore, behavior and interactions between a parent and a child, including child’s attachment to a parent and also the assessment of the quality of parental roles should undergo thorough observation. A teacher must be aware which situations, behavioral patterns of children and their parents are inappropriate and where he should report them having noticed undesirable symptoms.

Consequently, it seemed justified to ask the respondents to carry out self-evaluation related to their knowledge about violence towards children. The collected data is presented in diagram 2 below.

Analysis of collected research data suggests that most of full-time students (35 people – 72.9%) and also part-time students (20 people – 66.7%) assess their knowledge related to child’s exposure to violence as average. Only isolated cases among full-time students assessed their knowledge highly (only 2 responses – 4.2%), whereas there were also students who admitted that their awareness of those issues is low (full-time students: 11 people – 22.9% and part-time students: 10 people – 33.3%). Such a state of affairs is highly worrying because only an educated and mindful teacher will be able to undertake intervening steps but first and foremost, will be able to diagnose those children who are exposed to various types of violence.

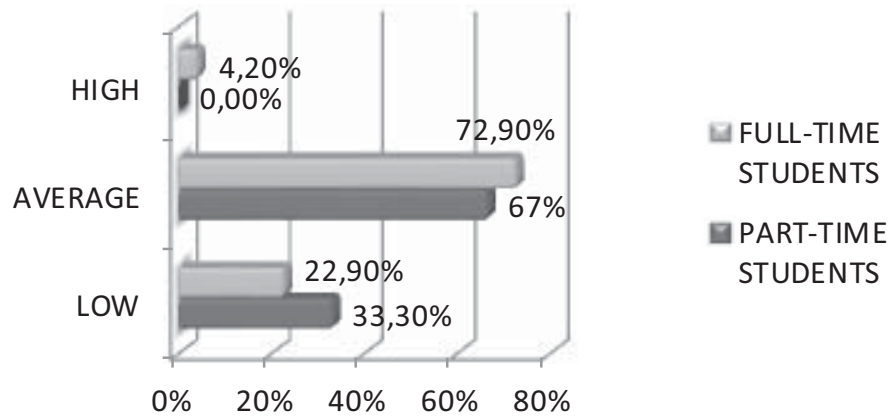


Diagram 2. How do you evaluate your knowledge in the range of violence towards children?

Source: author's own research.

The above analysis suggests a further question, namely the one concerning students' awareness of institutions that can be approached when one is a witness to violent behaviour. This data was presented in diagram 3.

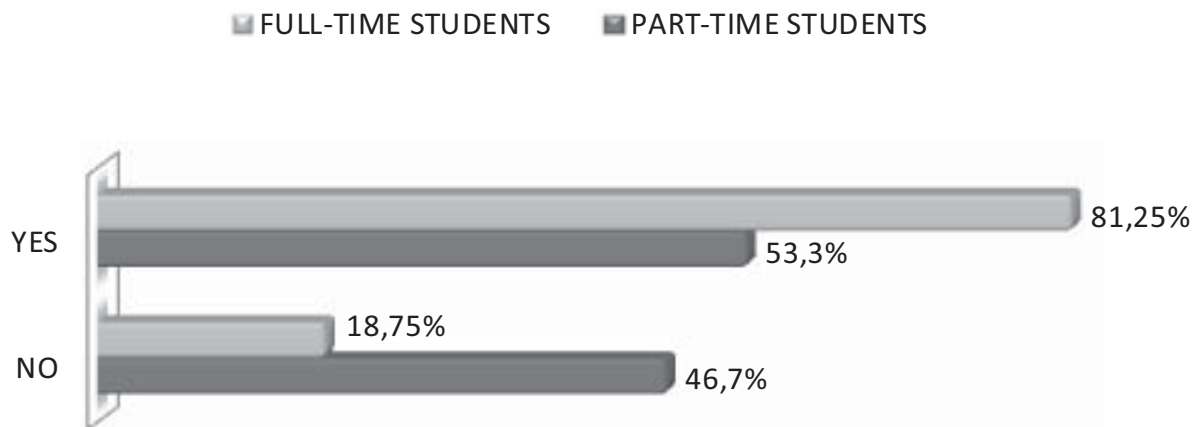


Diagram 3. Do you know where to report being a witness of violence towards a child?

Source: author's own research.

Analyzing the above juxtaposition it may be concluded that vast majority of full-time students (39 people – 81.25% of respondents) declares being aware of an organization or institution which offer support in case of witnessing the acts of domestic violence towards a child. The situation looks different when we analyze part-time students' responses, where percentage breakdown of answers provided to this question is nearly equal. So, nearly half of the respondents among part-time students openly admit to their ignorance.

Later, respondents who gave affirmative answers were asked to indicate specific institutions specializing in offering assistance in cases of domestic violence.

Collected data is presented in table 2.

Table 2. Respondents' answers about the institutions offering assistance to people who witnessed domestic violence to a child

Institutions offering support	Full-time students	Part-time students
	N	N
Police	37	14
School (tutor)	2	1
Social services (MOPS, OPS)	4	2
Family support centre	4	1
Parent, guardian	3	2
Children rights ombudsman	1	0
Aid helpline	1	0
Psychologist, counsellor	2	0
Counselling – psychological centre	1	0
Role model	1	0
Organisation (no name provided)	2	0

Source: author's own research.

Respondents' answers which are presented in the table above do not instill optimism in us. Nearly all surveyed full-time and part-time students who claimed to have knowledge in this range, indicated police as the institution to be contacted in case of being a witness to acts of violence towards a child. Obviously, it is in all respects a correct answer, however, we would expect more responsibility from people who will in future be in charge of young generation's safety. Only a few students (mainly those full-time ones) indicated Municipal Social Services Centre (MOPS) or Family Support Centre. What is interesting, only two full-time students and one part-time student responded that school (including a tutor) should be informed of such an occurrence. This fact signifies lack of awareness of the kind of responsibility the teachers have when it comes to taking care of and providing aid and support to a physically abused child and its family.

At this point, we can refer to the research among teachers of three junior high schools conducted by J. Maćkiewicz in years 2002–2003. It concerned parental use of physical and mental violence in their child-rearing. The author proved that in their career, teachers come across pupils who experienced exposure to domestic violence. Symptoms which led to this conclusion included: traces of spanking, neglected appearance, child's exhaustion, aggressive behavior, neurosis. However, there is also another problem, which the author of the article tries to emphasize. This is teacher's ignorance as to which institutional body should be contacted by a child affected by domestic violence¹¹, which only confirms the fact that teachers themselves do not feel obliged to take over the responsibility for the later fate of a child who experiences violence and are not aware of the proceedings appropriate in such cases.

Since elementary education teachers-to-be knowledge in the field of child's protection

¹¹ J. Maćkiewicz, *Nauczyciele wobec problemu dziecka krzywdzonego w rodzinie*, „Nowa Szkoła” 2005, nr 8, s. 10–13.

against violence is not sufficient, the question to the respondents which had to follow was about their educational expectations towards the university, which is displayed in diagram 4.

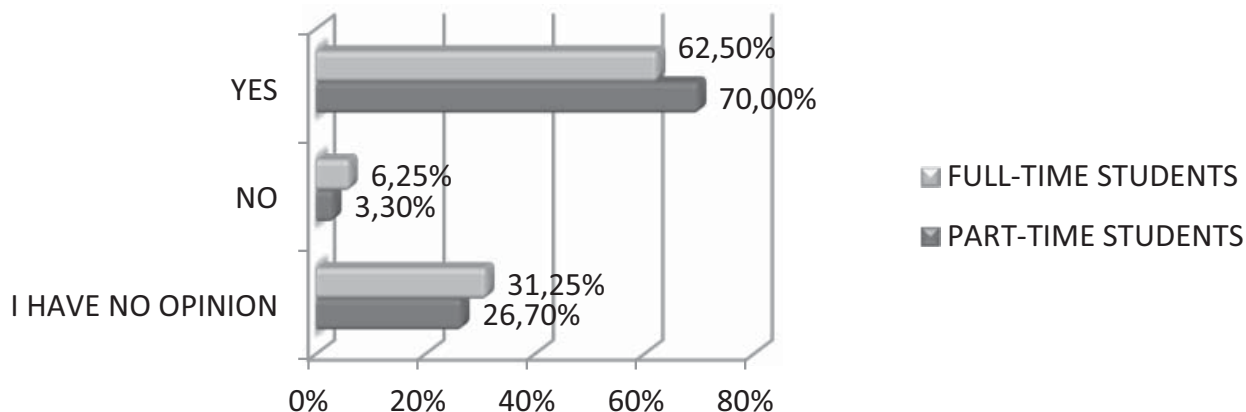


Diagram 4. Do you expect support from your University in this area?

Source: author's own research.

The gathered data allows for conclusion that most of the respondents – 62.5% of full time students (30 people) and 70% of part-time students (21 people) recognize the need to expand their knowledge from the field of child protection against violence using the support from their university. Such a state of affairs is satisfactory because a lot depends on the attitude of future teachers and their commitment to activities aimed at improvement of children's safety. For a child, a teacher should be a person who compels trust, to whom a pupil may turn to in problematic situations, also those connected with experienced violence. Therefore, he should feel responsible for child's protection, also outside educational institution, and thereby increase his knowledge in this field.

Unfortunately, in the group undergoing the survey there were also people, who do not see such necessity or have no opinion on that matter. It is a result of student's fear of additional material they would have to assimilate. Approaching an issue of preventing violence in family from the angle of amount of material to be studied is not the attitude that becomes a teacher-to-be. It leaves us hopeful that those respondents, perhaps influenced by university activities propagating reaction to the violence against a child, will eventually recognize a need of education and self-imposed development in themselves.

In the last question, students who gave a positive answer, were asked to indicate a form of support on the side of university in the scope of child protection against violence, which would fill the gap of expertise from that field which, they find, is currently missing. Corresponding data is collected in table 3.

Conducting the analysis of table 3 it can be noticed that most of the respondents – 23 full-time students (out of 30 people who gave affirmative answers) and all part-time students (21 people) chose optional activities as the support element in range of child protection against violence. Also, a popular choice among full-time students was an additional module in the form of extra university classes (8 responses) and among part-time students, 8 responses referred to fieldwork activities which could take place in organizations and institutions specializing in preventing family violence against children. In reference to this group of students, the indication of the classes outside the university premises is not surprising since studying in the Saturday–Sunday mode does not encourage organizing this type of classes.

Table 3. University activities related to increasing students' expertise in the phenomenon of violence against children – respondents' suggestions

Respondents' suggestions	Full-time students	Part-time students
	N	N
Non-compulsory classes	23	21
Additional module as university lecture	3	1
Additional module as university class	8	0
Additional topic within an existing module	5	0
Fieldwork activities (in institutions, organizations, etc)	3	6
Workshops / trainings	3	2
Meetings with representatives of security services, organizations, and the like.	2	1
Debate	0	1

Source: author's own research.

Therefore, it may be worth casting a closer look at the suggestions offered by students and in response to their demand, to create optional activities or additional module in the form of classes devoted to prevention of violence among children in kindergarten and school. As an element of such classes the following content should be covered:

1. Forms of violence towards children: physical, mental (emotional), sexual, economic, electronic (cyber-violence).
2. Diagnosis of the factors and identification of symptoms of hurting children.
3. The role of educational institution in the situation of violence towards children.
4. Legal responsibility of educational institution workers.
5. 'Blue card' procedure – duties of educational institution
6. Safety of children on the Internet
7. Foundations, projects and educational programmes supporting educational institutions in realization of the children's safety from aggression and violence policy.

Those activities would ideally be based not only on theory, but also would allow for realization of educational effects beyond university premises. In order to do so, it is necessary to establish a wider collaboration with organizations and institutions specializing in protection of children from violence, which would significantly affect the increase of willingness of future teachers to undertake steps in situations when they encounter violence towards children and would raise the awareness about the legal in Polish law forbidding corporal punishment in child-rearing.

Summary

Many people still live in conviction that violence towards children is a thing of the past, known only from the media. Some people claim that this problem does not affect them as they aren't familiar with any perpetrators among their neighbours or acquaintances and most definitely not among their family members. "Domestic violence towards children as a common problem in Poland is recognized by 5% of respondents whereas in nearby countries it is recognizable by just 1% of respondents. Domestic violence towards children is perceived as frequent in Poland

by 28% respondents and frequent in their vicinity by only 6%, whereas it is perceived as phenomenon affecting more or less half of families in Poland – by 21%, and in their neighborhood – by 7% respondents¹².

It is worth realizing that families shown in mass media are always somebody's neighbours, acquaintances and even family members, who are often assessed by environment as "decent", 'normal', 'religious'. Often, even after a case has been revealed, the public opinion cannot believe that such dreadful situations took place literally 'behind their wall'. The way in which the problem of domestic violence is perceived is hugely affected by experiences and patterns learnt at home, however in case of a teaching profession it is definitely too little when it comes to a necessity of diagnosing the problem and undertaking a specific supportive action. Therefore, already at the university stage classes devoted to those issues should be introduced, even more so, considering that presence of content related to violence towards children in respondents' curriculum is little, same as their knowledge in that field.

Another priority, from the perspective of the teacher-to-be, is the skill to diagnose the symptoms of the child exposed to violence, that is a child experiencing various types violence. Support in that domain is given via campaigns offered by organizations and foundations, among others: 'We give children the Power Foundation' (formerly: Nobody's Child Foundation) which organize conferences devoted to the issues of domestic violence, open trainings or e-learning courses for teachers. Furthermore, activities of such foundations include conducting social campaigns and professional educational platforms concerning protection of children and youth from violence, where ready-made lesson scenarios and other educational materials can be found.

Future teachers should be made aware that the ability to recognize the symptoms of violence against children is necessary in order to protect them from being hurt and neglected. Naturally, not every person must get directly involved in solving child's difficult situation. Nevertheless, noticing that something unsettling is happening and reacting to it, guarantees that a child will receive help. Apart from the need to react to violence, prevention is also very important, which is practiced by bringing up a young generation so as to prepare them to take on future social roles and getting involved in undertakings aimed at raising educational culture of parents.

When a child does not receive love or loses it, simultaneously being a victim of domestic violence, despite being more prone to disorders than people who have not suffered such stress, all is not yet lost. Other close relationships may compensate for earlier negative experiences¹³. Children in stressful conditions which undoubtedly include experiences of being exposed to violence, have fewer problems if they have a sibling, devoted grandparents or received support in school or kindergarten environment. For sure, in tough moments, teacher's approach and peer group's attitude are essential for a child. If a child meets with understanding and acceptance in atmosphere which provides sense of security, then in such favourable conditions, educational institution may be a source of support, which will confirm a child in conviction that they are not guilty of the whole situation.

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¹² *Badanie dotyczące zjawiska przemocy...*, s. 7.

¹³ K. Oatley, J. M. Jenkins, *Zrozumieć emocje*, PWN, Warszawa 2003, s. 237.

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SUMMARY

Hewilia Hetmańczyk

The role of future teachers of elementary education in recognizing and counteracting violence against children in the family

This article aims at presenting the role of educating the students of pedagogical departments in recognizing the symptoms of violence towards children within the family. The author also stresses the significance of familiarising them with the procedures of adequate conduct in cases of obtaining information or having suspicions that a pupil is affected by violence. Early intervention on the side of the kindergarten or school staff is likely to reduce the scale of the phenomenon and its consequences.

Key words: violence towards children in the family, recognizing symptoms of violence towards children, students' knowledge about violence towards children, teacher-to-be, elementary education.

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