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AGGRESSIVE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN IN THE FAMILY ENVIRONMENT

ABSTRACT

Children's individual experience gained within families may lead to the development of both prosocial and aggressive behaviours. The aim of the paper is to analyse the phenomenon of aggression in the family environment. Extensive specialist literature indicates that there are often many co-occurring factors that determine child aggression. Children live in a dysfunctional family, in conditions of poverty and parental pathology, experience parental hostility and violence, are neglected, their vital biological and psychological needs are not met, they undergo inadequate upbringing training. They also experience aggression in sibling relations. Thus, the family provides them with comprehensive aggressive education for years.

An important issue is to prevent and control aggression in the family. It is not easy and requires actions at three levels: social, individual and family. The article also presents an interesting intervention model in a sibling aggression situation.

Key words:

aggression, violence, family, parents, children, siblings, prevention, intervention

1. Introduction

Family is the most important place where child development and socialization take place. It is among its members that the child undergoes a kind of training, learns social norms, assimilates a system of values in life and builds his or her attitude towards the world. Children's individual experience gained within families may lead to the development of both prosocial and aggressive behaviours.

Undoubtedly, aggression is one of the many possible forms of behaviour observed and personally experienced by children in their families. Research confirms that aggressive children often have aggressive and rejecting parents¹. In the modelling process they learn from their parents, as key figures, that aggression is a way to cope with various problems. Although children are mostly affected by the identification mechanism in childhood, it leaves a permanent and visible mark on their functioning throughout lives. The process of modelling aggressive behaviours by parents involves a wide array of adults' behaviours. First and foremost, it is parents' attitude towards each other. If it is predominated by conflicts, quarrels or hurling of insults, similar behaviours will develop in children. If children observe parents' contemptuous, aggressive attitude towards others, e.g. neighbours, colleagues, people in the street, they will learn that those are proper reactions to people. As important in modelling are aggressive behaviours towards the child himself or herself, i.e. corporal punishment. A boy frequently beaten by his father will first introduce the same behaviour into relations with peers and then, as an adult, towards his own children. Siblings play an instrumental role in that process too. It is among siblings that the child learns when, whom and how to beat². Therefore, researchers working in the discussed field agree that it is in the family setting that the dangerous and multifaceted process of children's aggressive education takes place³. It has many sources, which accounts for serious difficulty in controlling and

¹ D. Olweus, *Familial and Temperamental Determinants of Aggressive Behavior in Adolescent Boy: A Causal Analysis*, "Developmental Psychology" 1980, Vol. 16, pp. 644–660; G.R. Patterson, *Performance Models for Antisocial Boy*, "American Psychologist" 1986, Vol. 41, pp. 432–444; V. Viemero, *Factors Affecting Development of Asocial and Criminal Behaviours of Adolescents* [in:] *Socialization and Aggression*, A. Frączek, H. Zumkley (eds.), Warsaw 1993, pp. 191–205.

² G.R. Patterson, op.cit.

³ J. Ranschburg, *Anxiety, Anger, Aggression*, Warsaw 1980; P. Brzozowski, *Parental Upbringing Attitudes and Children's Aggressiveness* [in:] *A Review of Research on Parental Attitudes*, K. Pospiszyl (ed.), Lublin 1988; M.A. Straus, R.J. Gelles, *How Violent are American Families? Estimates from the National Family Violence Resurvey and Other Studies* [in:] *Physical Violence in American Families: Risk Factors and Adaptations to Violence in 8,145 Families*, M. Straus, R. Gelles (eds.), New Brunswick 1990; A. Frączek, L. Kirwil, *Family Life and Aggression in Children: Research into Some Socialization Conditions Contributing to the Development of Aggression* [in:] *Socialization and Aggression*,

reducing it. All the more so because children from dysfunctional families neither complain nor seek help and, through their silence, give adult and juvenile family aggressors the sense of impunity.

Another grave family problem is violence. Those are behaviours connected with an intention to inflict pain or injuries on family members. They usually repeat regularly and last permanently for years causing harm not only to their victims⁴, as they place a burden on the entire family, leading to disintegration, pathology, breakdown, and asocial and antisocial behaviours in children⁵.

The aim of the paper is to analyse the phenomenon of children's aggressive education taking into account: the phenomenon of aggression modelling that includes observation of parental aggressive behaviours towards each other and people around as well as aggression experienced in relations with parents and siblings. Without a doubt, it does not exhaust the issue but certainly raises the awareness of its wide range.

2. Aggression and violence in marital dyad

Although statistics available on violence against the spouse seem to be decidedly understated and most cases remain undisclosed, it is a fairly common problem occurring in all cultures. Information about the scale of the phenomenon comes from various sources. For instance, World Health Organization studies indicate that domestic violence may affect from 15% to 71% of the population⁶. In turn, OBOP reports published in 1996 stated that there are about 750 thousand wives battered in families in Poland. Alarmingly, at the same time, a vast majority of cases of harassment in the family or child battering is never brought before the court. Interesting results of the 2010 OBOP study showed that it is a serious problem as

A. Frączek, H. Zumkley (eds.), Warsaw 1993; J. Grochulska, *Aggression in Children*, Warsaw 1993; G. Poraj, *Biological, Psychological and Social Origin vs. Control and Prevention of Aggressive Behaviours* [in:] *Disturbances in Children's and Adolescents' Behaviour in the Context of Difficult School and Extraschool Situations*, D. Borecka-Biernat (ed.), Cracow 2011, pp. 169–191.

⁴ H.H. Krauss, B.J. Krauss, *Domestic Violence and Its Prevention* [in:] *Violence and the Prevention of Violence*, L.L. Adler, F.L. Denark (eds.), Waestport 1995, p. 142.

⁵ A. Woźniak-Krakowian, *Violence towards Family. An Attempt at a Psychosocial Portrayal of the Domestic Violence Perpetrator* [in:] *Threats to Family Life*, G. Poraj, J. Rostowski (eds.), Łódź 2003, pp. 201–212.

⁶ C. Garcia-Moreno, H.A. Jansennn, M. Ellsberg, L. Heine, C.H. Watts, *Prevalence of Intimate Partner Violence: Findings from the WHO Multi-country Study on Womens' Health and Domestic Violence*, "Lancet" 2006, Vol. 4, No. 368, pp. 1260–1269.

in a phone survey carried out on a group of 3,000 respondents as many as 60% confirmed that they knew a family where violence between spouses occurred.

Police statistics comparing the scale of the phenomenon in recent years reveal a steady decrease in the number of domestic violence victims. As shown in Table 1, the recorded number of domestic violence victims was 156.79 thousand in 2005 and 113.55 thousand, hence significantly fewer, in 2011. Main victims of violence are wives (from 58% to 61%); few are husbands (from 6% to 10%). A significant number of domestic violence victims in every analysed yearbook include also children and the elderly. The comparison of percentage rates of victims indicates an interesting regularity. The rate regarding the number of wives and husbands as victims of violence runs steady (or even slightly rises) over the compared years. Thus, the drop concerns solely the other victims (from 36% in 2005 to 28% in 2011). The steady rates are alarming and prove that we are still unable to reduce the phenomenon of domestic violence, especially against wives.

Table 1. Police statistics on domestic violence from 2005 to 2011 according to the “Blue Card” procedure in thousands

	2005	2007	2009	2011
Total number of domestic violence victims	156.79 (100%)	130.68 (100%)	132.80 (100%)	113.55 (100%)
including: wives	91.37 (58%)	76.16 (58%)	79.811 (60%)	70.73 (61%)
including: husbands	10.39 (6%)	8.56 (7%)	11.73 (9%)	10.72 (10%)
other victims	55.03 (36%)	45.96 (35%)	41.26 (31%)	32.10 (28%)

Source: http://www.statystyka.policja.pl/portal/st/944/50863/Przemoc_w_rodzynie.html

In turn, Table 2 presents detailed figures describing the phenomenon of domestic violence registered by the police in 2012. As can be seen, violence victims are mostly women (65% of the total number of victims in families); the figure is higher than in the preceding years analysed above. The victims live in families where relations are based on control and power. They constantly feel anxiety, fear or anger. The rate of victimised husbands runs at the level of 10%. Along with the numbers of violence victims among women and men, the table also shows suspected perpetrators, both women and men.

Table 2. Police statistics on domestic violence against the spouse according to the “Blue Card” procedure for 2012

Total number of violence victims	76.993	100%
Number of victims – women	50.241	65%
Number of victims – men	7.580	10%
Total number of individuals suspected of violence	51.531	100%
Number of suspected perpetrators – women	3.522	7%
Number of suspected perpetrators – men	47.728	93%

Source: http://www.statystyka.policja.pl/portal/st/944/50863/Przemoc_w_rodzine.html

As expected, men account for as many as 93% of suspected perpetrators of violence in families. Only 7% of individuals suspected of violence against the spouse are women.

Extensive research has been conducted into the causes of aggression and violence against the spouse. Barentt and Wiehe point to three main groups of risks of harming the intimate partner. They include demographic factors, personality traits and variables concerning relations in a couple⁷. Demographic factors are gender and low socioeconomic status of violence perpetrators. Serious acts of physical aggression are committed mainly by lower social class men. On the other hand, women most commonly perform acts of revenge, which means that the acts are usually preceded by harassment by husbands. The analysis of individual traits of violence perpetrators reveals that the most important among risk factors are: antisocial personality, low self-esteem, pathological jealousy, childhood experience of violence, and observing violence in the family of origin. Relation variables involve the lack of partners' commitment to the relationship, lack of communication skills and division of roles in the couple with the clear dominance of the man. It is certainly quite an overwhelming dominance including physical, financial and decision-making aspects⁸.

According to A. Woźniak-Krakowian, the violence perpetrator is most often a man between thirty and fifty years of age⁹. He lives in a conurbation as it ensures him anonymity. He may also live in the country where the strong patriarchal tradition and need to gain control over family members still persist. He demonstrates

⁷ B. Krahe, *Aggression*, Gdańsk 2005, pp. 157–161.

⁸ L.W. Bennet, O.J. Williams, *Men Who Batter* [in:] *Family Violence*, R.L. Hampton (ed.), Thousand Oaks 1999, pp. 227–259.

⁹ A. Woźniak-Krakowian, op.cit.

violence towards his wife, sometimes also towards other members of the family, due to his upbringing. Aggression and violence are a norm to him in communicating his needs and serve to meet goals and force others into obedience. He may use psychological, physical or sexual violence. The psychological profile of the perpetrator proposed by Woźniak-Krakowian shows that he is unable to perform the role of the husband and father. He often displays jealousy of children, envy of the wife's success, her professional position or education. He exhibits asocial and antisocial behaviours. He is ruthless, can punish his victims for real and imaginary faults. Regrettably, he has the sense of impunity as people around do nothing to stop his behaviour. He often feels lost and confused in the socio-political reality, and thus often uses alcohol which boosts his self-confidence. Regrettably, he happens to be a repeat offender in respect of offences against the family.

As proved by D. Rode, intramarital violence has multifactorial aetiology¹⁰. The author analysed 180 court files of perpetrators of violence against wives. The mean age of aggressors was 41.2 years and of their wives – 32.4 years but no significant relationships were revealed between violence and the perpetrator's age. They had been married from 2 to 47 years but also that factor was not associated with violence against the wife. Spouses, however, differed in their levels of education. Males usually had vocational education, whereas their wives had secondary one. The conducted analysis indicated that the leading cause of harming wives was alcohol abuse – in 72% of perpetrators. Such a study result is not rare as researchers analysing the issue unanimously agree that alcohol makes perpetrators feel absolved of responsibility for their own behaviour.

Other violence determinants indicated by Rode are serious economic problems of the family (13.3%), including poor financial and living conditions, low income, poverty, unemployment. They trigger strong negative emotions which perpetrators can release in the only way they know. The author pointed to yet another factor generating violence against wives, namely personality disorders in perpetrators (9.5%). They were characterized by the lack of higher-order feelings and lowered self-criticism, increased combativeness, lack of empathy, inability to build lasting emotional relationships and predict results of their own behaviour, succumbing to addictions, and self-destructive tendencies.

As the harming of children, harming of the spouse shows certain continuity. It manifests itself in frequent outbursts of anger and solving of all marital and family problems with the use of aggression or violence. Families affected by such experi-

¹⁰ D. Rode, *Intramarital Violence – Manifestations and Psychosocial Determinants* [in:] *Threats to Family Life*, G. Poraj, J. Rostowski (eds.), Łódź 2003, pp. 180–192.

ence are burdened with a lasting aggressive pattern of interparental interactions. That causes the posttraumatic stress disorder in victims. According to B. Krahe, women harmed by their husbands very often experience a very dangerous phenomenon of being trapped in the relationship¹¹. That entails the mechanism of blaming oneself, denial and adaptation to violence, which results in not seeking help, becoming resigned to one's fate and staying in the dysfunctional relationship for years.

Aggression and violence between spouses also affect their parental roles and children's behaviour. The issue aroused the interest of J. McCord who analysed causes of aggressive behaviour in 174 boys¹². The research revealed grave problems between parents. Their relationships were characterized by the lack of acceptance of each other and marked by emotional coldness and high combativeness, often aggression against each other. The studied parents admitted taking improper care of their children. Mothers exhibited insufficient or excessive parental control, whereas fathers displayed a rejecting attitude towards sons, often punished them, frequently used aggression and physical violence since early childhood. Boys got aggressive education by observing aggression and experiencing it in their family homes, which resulted, among others, in socially unacceptable behaviours in the school setting and conflicts with peers and adults.

Undoubtedly, for the child, observing violence in the family is as strong a psychological trauma as being its victim. It is indicated, however, that consequences of such experience for children's development vary considerably. In some they lead to difficulty in internalization, while in others they result in difficulty in externalization. Therefore, there are children in whom observing violence between parents causes aggression and serious conflicts associated with aggression in the extrafamilial setting. Research into the transmission of aggression and violence in the family proved that parental aggression allows to predict aggressive behaviours in the future relationship¹³. Some children react to couple violence by inhibition, anxiety and subordination. They find it very difficult to adapt to the extrafamilial social environment¹⁴. It seems, however, of lesser importance how exactly children

¹¹ B. Krahe, op.cit.

¹² M.D. Kahn, G. Monks, *Sibling Relational Problems* [in:] *DSM-IV Sourcebook*, T.A. Widiger, A.J. Frances, H.A. Pincus, R. Ross, M.B. First, W.Davis (eds.), pp. 693–712.

¹³ P.A. Timmons Fritz, A.M. Smith Slep, K.D. O'Leary, *Couple-Level Analysis of the Relation Between Family-of-Origin Aggression and Intimate Partner Violence*, "Psychology of Violence" 2012, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 139–153.

¹⁴ E.M. Cummings, C. Zahn-Waxler, *Emotions and Socialization of Aggression: Adults' Angry Behaviour and Excitation and Aggression in Children* [in:] *Socialization and Aggression*, A. Frączek, H. Zumkley (eds.), Warsaw 1993, p. 83.

react to violence observed in their closest familial circle as all the above-mentioned consequences disturb the proper psychophysical development of the child and his or her socialization process. They leave their mark for the entire life.

3. Aggression modelling and harming of children in the family environment

It has been empirically proved that people learn aggressive behaviours by observing others' behaviours as well as observing consequences of such behaviours¹⁵. In an already historical experiment, Bandura, Ross and Ross recorded reactions of children who had earlier observed aggressive and non-aggressive behaviours of adults¹⁶. The analysis of the reactions indicated that children who had earlier observed aggressive behaviours displayed tendencies to imitate them. In turn, children who had observed non-aggressive behaviours did not exhibit tendencies towards undesirable behaviours. It was also noted that gender played an important role in imitating the behaviours: girls more often imitated women, boys – men. That is the phenomenon of modelling whose essence was very accurately defined by J. Ranschburg: “if only the child's abilities allow, he or she irreversibly and always learns the behaviour of the model, irrespective of whether the model's behaviour brings success or failure, punishment or reward”¹⁷. Certainly, the most effective aggression models for children are the closest significant figures, i.e. parents.

Research by Straus and Gelles produced surprising results¹⁸. They revealed that almost 100% of small children's parents confirmed that they had hit their child at least once over the preceding year. Many of them claimed that it is often necessary to discipline the child by spanking him or her. The researchers decided that such punishment should be distinguished from harming violence having such damaging consequences for children. As many as 23 out of 1000 studied parents admitted that they had used the latter in the preceding 12 months. In turn, other researchers came to a conclusion that observing and experiencing violence in the

¹⁵ J. Grochulska, op.cit.; I. Pospiszyl, *Aggression in the Family*, Warsaw 1994; B. Wojcieszke, *Interpersonal Relations* [in:] *Psychology. An Academic Textbook*, J. Strelau (ed.), Gdańsk 2000, pp. 147–164; G. Poraj, *Family and Child Aggressive Behaviour – Developmental Perspective* [in:] *Family Life Quality. Selected Issues*, T. Rostowska (ed.), Łódź 2006, pp. 199–216.

¹⁶ A. Bandura, D. Ross, S.A. Ross, *Imitation of Film-Mediated Aggressive Models*, “Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology” 1963, Vol. 66, pp. 3–11.

¹⁷ J. Ranschburg, op.cit., p. 108.

¹⁸ M.A. Straus, R.J. Gelles, op.cit.

family is rarely an isolated case but rather a series of repeated events, a cycle that may even last for years. It regularly introduces pathological behaviours into the child's life and teaches him or her that aggressive behaviours are an effective way of coping in his or her life¹⁹.

Due to their low status in the hierarchy of power, children are especially vulnerable to experiencing violence inflicted by their parents or other adults in the family environment²⁰. The scale of the phenomenon can be observed in Poland thanks to police statistics. Although they do not give the complete picture of the range of the problem, they offer some hints as to its incidence. Table 3 below shows the numbers of children – domestic violence victims from 2005 to 2011, while Table 4 presents data for 2012.

Figures shown in Table 3 are relatively high, although a downward trend can be observed. That decrease does not seem to instil optimism. As can be seen, younger children fall victim to violence in the family twice as often as older ones. Maybe

Table 3. Police statistics on domestic violence against children according to the “Blue Card” procedure

	2005	2007	2009	2011
Total number of domestic violence victims	156,788 (100%)	130,682 (100%)	132,796 (100%)	113,546 (100%)
children up to 13 years	37,227 (24%)	31,001 (24%)	27,502 (21%)	21,394 (18%)
minors aged 13 to 18 years	17,800 (11%)	14,963 (11%)	13,755 (10%)	10,704 (10%)

Source: http://www.statystyka.policja.pl/portal/st/944/50863/Przemoc_w_rodzinie.html

Table 4. Police statistics on domestic violence against children according to the “Blue Card” procedure for 2012

Total number of violence victims	76,993	100%
Number of victims – women	50,241	65%
Number of victims – men	7,580	10%
Number of victims – children and minors	19,172	25%

Source: http://www.statystyka.policja.pl/portal/st/944/50863/Przemoc_w_rodzinie.html

¹⁹ H.H. Krauss, B.J. Krauss, *Domestic Violence and Its Prevention* [in:] *Violence and the Prevention of Violence*, L.L. Adler, F.L. Denark (eds.), Waestport 1995, pp. 129–144.

²⁰ B. Krahe, op.cit., p. 143.

that is so because they are defenceless, which gives perpetrators the sense of impunity. Those data, however, do not reflect the full scale of the phenomenon. That kind of violence occurs in a specific closed circle of the family group and is very easy to hide from the world. All the more so because children unwillingly share their traumatic family life experience with others. They often suffer harm from people closest to them for years and no-one ever knows about it. The latest data for 2012 show that the police recorded as many as 25% of harmed children among all victims of violence in the family. Those are disclosed cases; hence, entailing legal consequences for perpetrators.

Does the use of corporal punishment by parents in the process of upbringing contribute to the development of aggressive behaviours in children? An answer to that question can be found, among others, in results of a longitudinal study described by Straus et al²¹. They indicated a clear correlation between corporal punishment in the family home and improper behaviours in the school setting in 9-year-old children. They manifested themselves in behaviour issues, deceiving adults and aggression in peer relations. Those behaviours were of the lasting nature or even increased in intensity over the subsequent two years of the study.

Gershoff, the author of an interesting meta-analysis of 88 studies into the consequences of corporal punishment, looked for information about whether they vary depending on punishment being experienced by children or adults. The consequences are undoubtedly always negative but it is worth examining whether adults are more resistant to them and cope better with such situations. Some significant differences were identified. In children, high negative correlations between corporal punishment and mental health were revealed. Such a relationship occurred in adults too – the correlation was also negative but moderate. The revealed consequence of corporal punishment by parents experienced in childhood is a tendency towards asocial, antisocial or even criminal behaviours in adulthood. Therefore, the author of the described meta-analysis comes to a conclusion that children harmed in the family environment exhibit internalization disorders, whereas adults burdened with childhood experience of harm display externalization disorders²².

Certain regularity can be seen in many studies quoted in this paper: numerous factors determining children's aggression very often co-occur. Children live in

²¹ M. Dominiak-Kochanek, A. Frączek, K. Konopka, *Upbringing Style in the Family and Approval of Aggression in Social Life by Young Adults*, "Psychologia Wychowawcza" 2013, No. 1–2, pp. 66–86.

²² E. Gershoff, *Corporal Punishment by Parents and Associated Child Behaviors and Experience: A Meta-Analytic and Theoretical Review*, "Psychological Bulletin" 2002, Vol. 128, pp. 539–578.

a dysfunctional family, in conditions of poverty and parental pathology, experience parental hostility and violence, are neglected, their vital biological and psychological needs are not met, they undergo inadequate upbringing training. Hence, the family provides them with comprehensive aggressive education, which will be difficult to leave behind. Therefore, it is highly likely that harmed children will become harming parents in the future. Is it, however, unavoidable? Although harm experienced in childhood is a significant risk factor of aggression, that relationship does not seem deterministic. Not all children harmed in childhood treat their own children in the same way. What is important is the intensity of harm, its forms and parents' individual traits. Simultaneously, it was found that adverse effects of harm can be reduced or alleviated by two factors: the first is the high intellectual level of the child, the other – the presence of at least one supportive person in the family²³. The problem, however, is not clear-cut and requires further research.

A.M. Smith Slep and S.G. O'Leary attempted to create a model of determinants of mothers' and fathers' aggression towards small children²⁴. The study covered 453 families with children aged 3 to 7 years. Mothers and fathers participated in a detailed questionnaire survey concerning, among others, their demographic characteristics, families of origin and aggression experienced in childhood, individual traits, child upbringing manner, attitudes towards aggression, experienced stress, and mental condition. The authors clearly showed the complex operation of many factors in forming parental aggression, which they used as an argument as to why interventions in dysfunctional families that seek help had so far proved to be insufficiently effective. They revealed, among others, that although many risk factors identified in different studies, such as the age and education of parents, family income, parental alcohol problems and unrealistic expectations towards children, correlated with aggression, they were not significant enough to the analysed problem. Both similarities and differences between predictors of maternal and paternal aggression proved to be interesting – their models were similar but not identical in the context of revealed factors. The most significant factor in both mothers and fathers appeared to be the attitude of acceptance of aggression towards children which derived from aggression experienced in the family of origin. In mothers, the acceptance of parental aggression was accompanied by attributing responsibility for their own behaviours to children, aggression experienced in childhood, expression of anger, strict discipline, and, to a lesser but significant

²³ B. Krahe, op.cit., p. 148.

²⁴ A.M. Smith Slep, S.G. O'Leary, *Multivariate Model of Mothers' and Fathers' Aggression Toward Their Children*, "Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology" 2007, Vol. 75, No. 5, pp. 739–751.

extent, the family size. Predictors of fathers' aggression towards small children also included the acceptance of parental aggression conditioned by aggression experienced in the family of origin, attributing responsibility to children, expression of anger, and strict discipline. Some predictors were found, however, which did not occur in mothers. Those were individual traits: impulsivity determined by aggression in the family of origin and correlated with feeling overwhelmed by the child's behaviour, as well as depressive symptoms along with low professional status. They were not significant to maternal aggression. One particular variable emerged from the research conclusions and analysis of the constructed models – parental satisfaction. According to the authors, it could become a potential target of therapeutic actions aimed at changing parental behaviour, even in the context of so many revealed determinants of aggression. At the same time, main directions of work with parents were set: coping with one's anger, working on attributions, disciplining and attitudes of acceptance of aggressive behaviour towards children.

4. Sibling Aggression

Although aggression and violence commonly occur in sibling relations, the issue has rather been ignored by both parents and researchers. J.V. Caffaro and A. Conn-Caffaro claim that that may be connected with a specific attitude towards the problem according to which harm inflicted by a child is not as painful as that caused by an adult²⁵. Siblings, however, not only more often perpetrate acts of violence against one other than members of a peer group, but also deliver more dangerous blows²⁶. Frequently, minor everyday conflicts between sisters and brothers may easily cross accepted boundaries, transforming into humiliation, harassment and dangerous physical violence.

Researchers of the University of New Hampshire carried out a nationwide project exploring the phenomenon of sibling aggression in children up to 9 years of age and adolescents aged 10 to 17 years. They used phone interviews with parents, children and adolescents. They studied the total of 3,599 individuals and received alarming results. Almost thirty per cent of subjects confirmed that they had experienced violence from their sisters or brothers over the preceding year. It was in that group of subjects that numerous cases of behavioural disorders, depression,

²⁵ J.V. Caffaro, A. Conn-Caffaro, *Treating Sibling Abuse Families*, "Aggression and Violent Behavior" 2005, Vol. 10, pp. 604–623.

²⁶ F.L. Ilg, L.B. Ames, S.M. Baker, *Child Mental Development from 0 to 10 Years. A Handbook for Parents, Psychologists and Physicians*, Gdańsk 1994, pp. 204–206.

emotional fragility, tendency to experience negative emotions – anxiety, fear, anger or annoyance – were observed²⁷.

Attention has been drawn by clinicians and therapists to dangerous consequences of experienced sibling aggression and violence. Harm inflicted by the brother or sister in childhood leaves a permanent mark in the form of serious emotional disorders in relations with people or adaptation problems in professional life. J.V. Caffaro and A. Conn-Caffaro proved that sibling aggression is the most common form of family violence in the United States²⁸. It is recorded five times as often as child battering by parents or harassment of the spouse. More than a half of American children experienced pulling, beating, biting, and kicking by siblings and about 15% experienced such violence regularly. They feel consequences in adulthood. They cannot cope with problems, feel anxiety and fear, do not believe in themselves, which makes them often use specialist help.

Referring to studies by various authors, S.D. Herzberger proved a clear relationship between sibling violence and children's gender and age²⁹. Much more problems occur in same-gender siblings. Violence significantly more often occurs in families between brothers rather than sisters as boys most commonly become both victims and perpetrators of violence. The study also indicated that the cause of sibling conflicts is, first and foremost, violence in marital relations, older children's domination of younger ones, and partiality of parents in upbringing. It was also proved that parental interventions into disputes between children often exacerbate violence against victims. Parents too late and most often improperly react to their children's undesirable behaviours and most commonly are unable to discipline the aggressive child³⁰.

Relatively new research concerning determinants of aggression, also among siblings, was described by the team of University of Michigan employees: L. Miller, A. Grabel, A. Thomas, E. Bermann and S. Graham-Bermann³¹. The authors reviewed studies into the issue to date and found that, although it is the most common type of violence in the family, few researchers had attempted to grapple with

²⁷ C. Jenkis Tucker, D. Finkelhor, H. Turner, A. Shattuck, *Association of Sibling Aggression with Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, "Pediatric" 2013, Vol. 1.

²⁸ J.V. Caffaro, A. Conn-Caffaro, *Sibling Abuse Trauma: Assessment and Intervention Strategies for Children, Families, and Adult*, New York 1998.

²⁹ S.D. Herzberger, *Domestic Violence. The Perspective of Social Psychology*, Warsaw 2002.

³⁰ G.R. Patterson, op.cit.

³¹ L. Miller, A. Grabel, A. Thomas, E. Bermann, S. Graham-Bermann, *The Associations Between Community Violence, Television Violence, Intimate Partner Violence, Parent-Child Aggression, and Aggression in Sibling Relationships of a Sample of Preschoolers*, "Psychology of Violence" 2012, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 165–178.

it. The scale of the problem appeared to be large. For instance, the already cited M.A. Straus and R.J. Gelles demonstrated that 80% of children aged 3 to 17 years experienced sibling violence at least once³². In turn, during 3-hour observations carried out in families, Martin and Ross noted from 7 to 12 severe aggressive sibling events³³.

A significant predictor of aggression involving conflicts among siblings was the age of children. As many as 53% of subjects admitted experiencing regular physical violence perpetrated by older siblings. In another study into the relationship between children's age and aggression Furman and Buhrmister noted that a significantly higher number of conflicts occurs in siblings of a small age difference than in siblings where age difference between brothers or sisters is big³⁴. The already described regularity was confirmed, since, as children grow, they less often resort to sibling aggression and violence as a way to cope with various problems. Thus, it seems that the advancing socialization process increases their social competences and effectiveness in solving conflicts.

A crucial variable is also children's gender. In a broad study on adolescents and young adults, boys admitted that they had often exhibited aggression towards their siblings, whereas girls confirmed that they had usually fallen prey to such aggression³⁵. It was also established that sibling conflict resolution by force was typical of boys. Girls, in turn, most often took an ignoring attitude in such conflict situations. It was also observed that in the group of 360 five- and six-year-old subjects, first-born children more often displayed aggression towards younger siblings of the male gender, more seldom – towards sisters. Boys born as second children more often came into conflict with older sisters than older brothers. However, aggression more commonly occurred in children's behaviour in relations with same-gender siblings rather than with opposite-gender siblings³⁶. Moreover, in another interesting study boys admitted higher acceptance of aggression towards siblings than girls³⁷.

In the case of the discussed problem, the stability of symptoms of sibling aggression still remains a crucial and open issue. Interesting results of a longitudinal

³² M.A. Straus, R.J. Gelles, op.cit.

³³ J.L. Martin, H.S. Ross, *Sibling Aggression: Sex Differences and Parents' Reactions*, "International Journal of Behavioral Development" 2005, Vol. 29, pp. 129–138.

³⁴ M.D. Kahn, G. Monks, op.cit., pp. 693–712.

³⁵ D.M. Button, R. Gealt, *High Risk Behaviors among Victims of Sibling Violence*, "Journal of Family Violence" 2010, Vol. 25, pp. 131–140.

³⁶ M.D. Kahn, G. Monks, op.cit.

³⁷ L.E. Miller et al., op.cit., p. 166.

study into that problem were described by Stillwell and Dunn³⁸. They had been observing children's behaviour towards younger siblings for six years. First observations were carried out shortly after younger siblings' birth, the next – after 14 months and after six years. Results of the observations revealed a significant positive correlation between the initial and final aggressive behaviours of fist-born children towards siblings. The researchers came to a conclusion that aggression towards siblings may most likely be a more powerful predictor in respect of exhibiting aggression in extrafamilial relations than any other conflict interaction in the family.

Miller et al. point to limitations of the research to date³⁹. A majority of that was conducted on adolescents and adults and focused on one selected type of aggression or violence. That did not ensure a comprehensive picture of the problem. They also decided that an important step in preventing sibling aggression and violence is to determine their sources. They based their opinion on the results of earlier research by Button and Gealt who had proved that violence towards siblings was provoked by intramarital conflicts and violence, violence experienced by children from parents as well as peer aggression and violence⁴⁰. That indicated the presence of many determinants of the phenomenon which should be comprehensively analysed. By using a questionnaire survey, they tried to identify factors that might trigger aggression and violence against brothers and sisters. They studied 213 families in an intervention programme – mother-child dyads, to be precise – exposed to various kinds of violence: street violence, interparental violence, violence in the media. Mothers were aged 18 to 43 years; most of them worked and had secondary education. In a multi-ethnic group of children, there were 108 girls and 105 boys aged 3 to 5.5 years. Conclusions drawn from the study do not come as a surprise. It can be clearly seen that American children live surrounded by aggression nowadays: they observe it at home, in the street, and in the media. The latter have a huge impact on children and often model violence, also towards siblings. It turned out, however, that the strongest predictor of sibling aggression and violence is an aggressive father. That certainly concerns his acts of violence against both the wife and the children. Therefore, children's contact with aggression should be reduced in various aspects, especially in the closest environment of the child – the family.

³⁸ M.D. Kahn, G. Monks, *op.cit.*, pp. 693–712.

³⁹ L.E. Miller et al., *op.cit.*, p. 182.

⁴⁰ D.M. Button, R. Gealt, *op.cit.*, pp. 131–140.

It was also proved that sibling aggression significantly increases the likelihood of asocial and antisocial behaviour in the future⁴¹.

As already discussed, when looking for causes of sibling aggression, researchers list various dysfunctions of the family environment. For instance, McCord et al. analysed family situations of 174 aggressive boys⁴². They found: serious problems between parents and the lack of acceptance of their parental roles; the lack of proper care provided by parents; inappropriate upbringing actions (deviating from commonly accepted norms); strict disciplining in the upbringing process (frequent threats and punishments), as well as excessive or insufficient parental control. Other studies revealed the following significant elements of family life: parental aggression towards children and consent to sibling aggression⁴³. The multitude of causes certainly makes the designing of preventive actions and interventions more difficult.

5. Prevention and Control of Aggression in the Family

Consequences of aggression experienced in the family are very damaging and far-reaching for all victims, both children and adults. Thus, their prevention and reduction strategies are proposed to be considered at three levels:

at the social level through the formation of a common attitude of zero-tolerance for domestic violence, supported by legal regulations to facilitate disclosure and unconditional punishment of such behaviours. An important social task is to develop and promote a network of institutions for the protection of domestic violence victims.

at the family level in the form of interventions made in families threatened with or already experiencing the problem of violence. That is done by teaching parents upbringing skills and developing their skills of appropriate coping with their own negative emotions. That model of intervention contributes to the process of creating a non-violent family environment. It is extremely difficult to implement because it requires the involvement of parents. It is sometimes also impossible to apply due to poor prognostications for cooperation and changes in the family. In such a case violence should be stopped by changing victims' environment.

⁴¹ Ibidem.

⁴² M.D. Kahn, G. Monks, op.cit., pp. 693–712.

⁴³ M.D. Kahn, G. Monks, op.cit., p. 698.

at the individual level psychological therapy is offered to victims and perpetrators. Victims should be supported and helped in becoming psychologically independent and coping with life. Perpetrators are taught to control their anger; their habitual aggressive behaviour patterns are altered; they are taught desirable behaviours, empathy in relations with others. The task seems very difficult but there are reports of its possible success⁴⁴.

Experience shows that parents cannot cope with sibling aggression, which does not come as a surprise as it is a very complex problem. What is more, proposals of interventions designed for them are scarce. Parents often do not allow children to express negative emotions, nip them in the bud, but also do not help children solve their problems and often ignore those. They sometimes easily punish one of the children to whom they attribute blame for the conflict. Those are ineffective methods. What may help is constant care taken of strong emotional ties in the family and reduction of children's rivalry for parental love to the minimum. Parents have to learn to divide their time equally among children as none of them should feel neglected. It is crucial to set and enforce boundaries to ensure appropriate space in the family for each child as each child needs privacy. Children should be treated individually but also taught how to reach an agreement with one another. Children badly need help in looking for ways to express anger without causing damage and solving conflicts without using aggression.

A model of intervention in a sibling aggression situation was constructed by J. Caspi⁴⁵. He described the process of creating the model which he himself successfully verified many a time in therapeutic practice. He distinguished two fundamental areas within the model:

- *knowledge of factors contributing to sibling aggression* (considering family as a functioning system, family constellations, individual traits of children);
- *practical approach according to task-oriented systemic therapy* (intervention guidance and tasks for siblings and parents aimed at improving their relations).

In three thoroughly discussed cases the author presented central interventions adapted to the sibling aggression problem. In the first case it was changing the sequence of behaviours in dividing toys and parents' time between daughters: a six- and nine-year-old. In the second family the central intervention aimed to remove favouring by parents and change the son's belief that they had forgotten

⁴⁴ B. Krahe, op.cit., pp. 211–214.

⁴⁵ J. Caspi, *Building a Sibling Aggression Treatment Model: Design and Development Research in Action*, "Health & Social Work" 2013, Vol. 1, No. 38, pp. 53–57.

about him. The third case was adjusting the caretaker's role of the oldest brother. The central intervention consisted in convincing the aggressive thirteen-year-old son that the mother understood his frustration connected with taking care of younger siblings and supported him in that role when he did not manage to discipline his younger sisters. The model is very interesting and shows an interesting method of working with siblings. The author declares further intense tests with monitored effectiveness.

The aggressive education of children and adolescents is not limited solely to the family environment. It also marks the school environment, the second educational environment crucial to the development of the child's personality and his or her socialization. Regrettably, strong aggression modelling is also associated with the contemporary media. In that context, the effective control of children's and adolescents' aggressive education seems to be an enormous challenge.

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