

Child abuse and its perception by students, parents and teachers (Analysis of research results)¹

Abstract

The article concentrates on the problem of child abuse in the family, which is most usually manifested by physical and psychic violence.

Despite the fact that when abusing the child parents usually do not intend to harm them but rather want to make them act in the desired manner, causing pain or distress and exerting physical or psychic violence may have many negative consequences on the child, both direct and distant in time.

Based on the conducted empirical research, the article presents the scale of the problem and its consequences, as well as the parents' opinions included in the study on violence during child growth and its effects on parents' behaviour in situations related to child upbringing. It also demonstrates the relationship between child abuse and the manifestation of negative behaviours, directly resulting from violence. From among many forms of negative behaviours which may be related to physical or psychic violence, the study concentrated, among others, on aggression, using dependence agents (alcohol, narcotics, cigarettes, steroids and drugs) and escapes from home. The conducted statistical analyses indicate a very close relationship between the two.

Keywords: *child abuse, perception of violence*

¹ Research results conducted for doctoral dissertation written under the supervision of professor M.J. Szymański. The doctor's degree was taken at the Institute for Educational Research of the Ministry of National Education in Warsaw, 2004. Chosen research passages were presented at the Summer School for Young Pedagogues in 2006 and at the International Conference "What People Are Afraid Of" organized by Warsaw University in 2004.

Introduction

In recent years in Poland, the issue of child abuse has aroused interest among a variety of specialists and become a topic of discussions, yet the real scope of the issue remains hard to grasp. Child abuse can be categorized as: disclosed violence – when cases of child abuse are noted in police reports and examined by independent courts; and undisclosed violence, which may take place at home even every day, and in case of which the real number of victims is never to be known.

Therefore, the scope of the issue is shown only by sparse research, and data obtained from the Public Opinion Research Centre's polls regarding corporal punishment used in upbringing.

Violence towards a child is defined depending on the adopted aspect, for example: a kind of behaviour, the perpetrator's intentions or effects of violence. Also an approach concerning violence may be different depending on a given country or culture.

Theoretical framework

The literature on the subject lists four kinds of violence: physical, mental, sexual and negligence. I will refer to specific violent behaviour that is part of a given kind of abuse (e.g. hitting with a hand or an object) as a "form of violence". In my paper I have used the following definitions of violence:

Physical violence refers to active behaviour, from beating and wounding to killing (Pospiszyl 1994, Brągiel 1996). According to Susan Forward, physical violence covers "all behaviour causing a child pain, regardless if it leaves a mark or not" (1994, p. 89).

Mental violence, also called emotional harm, is understood as insulting words, derogatory remarks, and various kinds of verbal degrading. A subject of verbal assault can be "a child's appearance, their intelligence, skills, as well as their worth as a human being" (Forward 1994, p. 73). It is then violence that consists of destruction by means of words.

Sexual violence, also called sexual abuse or incest, is, according to Elżbieta Czyż, using a child by adults to obtain sexual pleasure (1992, pp. 96–99), therefore, it can be types of behaviour that do not necessarily involve physical contact with a child's body.

Negligence is defined as not satisfying a child's needs (necessary for his or her proper development) connected with, among others, nutrition, clothing, hygiene, medical care, and a child's psyche (Szymańczak 1995, p. 14).

Irena Obuchowska defined the term **violence in upbringing**. According to her, it is using physical or mental force to make a child succumb to a guardian's will (1989). Straus and Donneley (1993), by analogy, define corporal punishment as using violence in order to change or control the child's behaviour. Therefore, it is not harming a child, causing pain or distress that is parents' intention, but forcing a desired behaviour.

Methodological premises

The main goal of my research was to find out the scope of the issue of (undisclosed) child abuse, and opinions of students, parents and teachers on violence in upbringing. In order to do that, it was necessary to recognize the influence of family and environmental factors on the occurrence of violence, as well as define the influence of violence on its effects and behaviour in instructive situations, and establish connections and statistical relationships between the factors mentioned.

The practical goal is the ability to use the research results covering the diagnosis of the phenomena in planning necessary preventive actions for the youth, both relating to secondary and primary prevention. Next, learning opinions of students, their parents and teachers on violence in upbringing may be useful in creating and organizing educational operations for teachers, education campaigns for parents and their children.

Recognizing abuse, and particularly its size, I analyzed the occurrence of its four above-mentioned kinds. Then, analyzing the conditions and results of violence, I took into consideration physical and mental violence, because these are the ways that violence in upbringing manifests itself in.

Researching into the perception of violence by students, parents and teachers, I assumed that it would consist of judgments and beliefs of the study participants about the issue in upbringing. Questions asked concerning this specific problem included those about permissible use of violence in instructive situations, e.g. disobedience (when a child does not want to comply with parents' will, demands or orders), whether violence is an effective educational method, and whether in the participants' opinion it might yield harmful results.

Based on the conducted research, I am going to establish a diagnosis of the issue, conditions of the occurrence of violence, results of violence and perception of violence by students, parents and teachers.

The research was conducted using a diagnostic poll method, utilizing quantitative and qualitative techniques, and statistical techniques. The research covered

nearly 400 9th graders, their parents and teachers. The examined students came from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. The research was conducted in a rural and urban environment in the Malopolska province in 2002 and 2003.

All the pupils attending classes were examined. The conditions in which they filled in questionnaires assured anonymity. The scale of the hurt child was also used as diagnostic and verifying instrument which contributed to comparing the obtained data. The results obtained with the use of both instruments approximated each other, and in some scopes were identical. Moreover, the pupils wrote an essay about their experiences concerning being badly treated by parents.

The students' parents (during parents school meetings) not only filled in anonymous questionnaires on kinds of punishment and other coercive methods performed towards their children but also expressed their views on the legitimacy of using violence in raising a child. Teachers were given questionnaires too and class tutors, school counselors and school nurses were interviewed and asked about already revealed cases of child abuse.

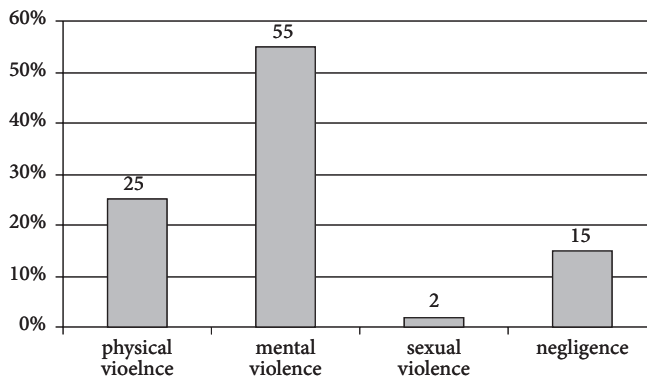
The research results have shown what percent of the examined students experience physical, psychic and sexual violence from their parents, and what consequences of such violence there are. The conditions of using violence by parents were defined and the examined students', parents and teachers' views on violence in upbringing were disclosed.

Analysis of research results

1) Diagnosis of the issue (Fig. 1.)

Based on the research pertaining to diagnosing the issue, it appears that 1 in 4 participating students have experienced physical violence, mental violence is used by over half of the parents, 2% of the participants have experienced sexual violence, and 15% of the examined youth have experience negligence of some sort.

The most commonly used forms of violence were: hitting with a hand, hitting with an object, yelling, scaring, and humiliating treatment that involved insulting and ridiculing. In case of sexual violence, the most common form was touching the child's intimate body parts. In case of negligence, the following were mentioned: unsatisfied security needs (nearly 10%), unsatisfied basic material needs (e.g. lack of school supplies – 30%). Some students experienced a lack of help in difficult situations (10%). According to the research on violence conducted among children in the UK, parents use different forms of disciplining: hitting with a hand, shouting, and threatening. However, most of the examined claim that punishment which hurts the child's dignity cannot be justified. (Child Maltreatment in the UK, 2000)

Fig. 1: Using violence toward children (%)

2) Conditions of violence occurrence

It was determined that the following factors were closely connected with the occurrence of violence:

- **Family's financial situation**
The worse the financial situation of the family, the more often physical violence occurs ($\alpha < 0.01$)
- **Mother's education**
The lower the mother's education level, the more often she uses physical violence ($\alpha < 0.01$), violence also occurs less often with the father's higher education level, but those relations are not essential.
- **The child's sex**
Parents are more likely to use violence towards their sons than daughters. There is an important relation ($\alpha < 0.05$) between using physical and mental violence by the father towards a child and the child's sex. Mothers also use violence towards their sons more often.
- **Alcoholism in the family**
Parents overusing alcohol more often than others use physical and mental violence towards children – there are important statistical relations in this case ($\alpha < 0.05$).

The research did not confirm a connection between the environment in which the respondents live and using violence (figures are similar).

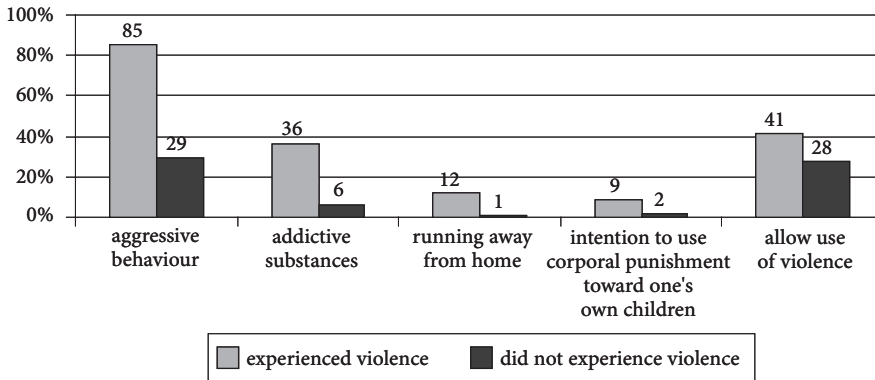
3) Effects of violence (Fig. 2.)

The obtained data pertain mostly to emotions and behaviour occurring as a result of violence and are based on comments of anonymous victims.

Types of behaviour likely to result from violence that were examined include:

aggression, using addictive substances, running away from home, as well as an intention to use corporal punishment in the upbringing of one's children, and acceptance of using violence in instructive situations.

Fig. 2: Effects of violence



The specified types of behaviour occurred much more often or many times more in the groups that had not experienced violence than in those that had. The conducted analyses show the existence of very important relations between experiencing violence and all the mentioned types of behaviour (effects).

The interdependence between experiencing violence and its negative effects is discussed by many researchers. Xu, Tung and Dunaway (2000) claim, according to their own research, that psychic anxiety, depression, low self-assessment, violence, disobedience towards adults and authoritarianism characterize children who experienced corporal punishment. Also Straus (1996) emphasizes the fact that children who regularly sustain punishment become full of hatred towards others, which leads to using violence towards their own children in the future. Experiencing violence, then, shapes young people's views in such a way that they treat violence itself as a norm in interpersonal relations and use it as a tool of reacting to behaviour they do not like.

4) Perception of violence

The research shows that over half of the parents, 35% of the participating students, and 1 in every 3 teachers accept using violence in upbringing (such results are alarming and show beliefs deeply rooted in social conscience, thus confirming research results conducted by the Nobody's Children Foundation that uncover little sensitivity to the problem among people working with children (Sajkowska 1994, Szabelska 1998, Grabowiec 2003). Also, the parents' beliefs in terms of rea-

sons to using violence towards children are largely based on stereotypes, as 1 in 3 parents believes that violence is only parent's reaction to their child's misbehaviour, or that using it will definitely help the child and will surely not harm them.

The research shows that 82% of parents are aware of the negative effects of using violence.

Does that awareness have any impact on using violence?

The analysis of the collected data shows the occurrence of a statistically very important relationship between parents' awareness of the negative effects of violence and allowing its use in instructive situations. Among the parents who believe that violence does not have negative effects, over 88% say that violence should be used in case of repeated misbehaviour, including nearly 15% that say they would use violence in every case.

This should make one realize the necessity of educational actions aimed mainly at those parents who, being aware of the harmfulness of violence, would stop using it towards their children.

It is a similar situation when the awareness of effects is compared with opinions about effectiveness of violence in upbringing. From among the surveyed parents who are aware of the harmful effects of violence on children, a vast majority (85.1%) say that violence is not an effective method. And almost 5 times as many parents who are not aware of the effects of the issue accept violence as an effective method.

The analysis of the research results confirms the existence of a connection between the perception of violence in upbringing by parents and its use,

- as effective, which is strongly connected with its permissible use (parents who believe violence is effective more often [95%–100%] allow the use of violence in upbringing);
- or perception as having negative effects, which in turn creates a negative attitude towards violence (parents much less often allow the use of violence and believe that it is not an effective method).

Taking into consideration that the literature on the subject that shows copying of violent behaviour in adult life as a result of mistreatment in childhood, another task is to establish a relation between parents' behaviour and their childhood experiences.

Based on the data collected, a vast majority of the parents who did not experience violence in their own childhood (93.5%) believe that violence is not an effective method, thus expressing a negative attitude towards violence in the upbringing of a child. On the other hand, the parents who experienced violence in their childhood (78.4%) are twice as likely to allow violence in upbringing than the parents who did not have such experiences (38.4%). According to social psy-

chologists (Zimbardo, Ruch 1997 and others), using harsh punishment in upbringing shows children negative patterns of aggressive behaviour in relationships with other people, thus leading to directing aggression towards others. Therefore, using violence toward a child or punishing them by means of violence influences the child and shapes their behaviour in such a way that the child is likely to use violence in the future towards others, including their own children.

It is then necessary to educate in such a way that adolescent students, who will become parents in a few years and will raise another generation, should be aware of their and other people's – a child's – rights, and that the awareness comes from their own experience. There is also a need for large-scale educational actions for parents, in order to make them realize the negative effects of child abuse, therefore increasing their parenting competence. It is also recommended to educate teachers in terms of violence towards children, creating negative attitudes towards violence in upbringing (as teachers are often the only ones in their environment to educate parents they interact with), and opportunities to influence parents' opinions. The influence should be directed at changing parents' beliefs and their actions towards children so that upbringing could take place without using violence (J. Maćkowicz, 2004, pp. 37–38).

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