

VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

TÜNDE PETER

PhD candidate, "Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu

Abstract: *At global level, more than 40 million children under the age of 15 are the victims of domestic violence every year. The emotional environment of the family is decisive in the process of developing self-esteem, necessary for identity construction.*

Keywords: *children, violence, family environment*

Rezumat: *La nivel global peste 40 de milioane de copii sub 15 ani cad victime violenței în fiecare an. Mediul emoțional al familiei este decisiv în procesul dezvoltării stimei de sine necesar construcției identitare.*

Cuvinte cheie: *copii, violență, mediu familial*

INTRODUCTION

"... Both the roots and fruits of the family tree feed and transmit themselves from generation to generation, and if they are bitter, the taste of life gets tainted from predecessors to descendants. Thus, for many people, instead of being a chance of development and accomplishment of their potential, life becomes a mere obstacle race that they are afraid of or which they perceive as insurmountable. The baneful consequences can be often determined by both psychic and somatic health condition as well as by one's social and educational achievements." Iolanda Mitrofan

"The United Nations' Study on Violence against Children", released in October 11th 2006 in New York, shows that worldwide over 40 million children under 15 years fall victims to violence every year and, yet, 97% of them do not benefit from the same legal protection against violence as adults do. Thus, millions of children worldwide become, in most cases, victims of physical and psychological abuses of those who should actually be responsible for their care.

Despite these statistics and the conclusions of the research conducted by experts concerning the consequences of violence, only 17 countries worldwide have so far legally prohibited any form of physical punishment or humiliating treatment against children. This means that most children are both theoretically and practically unprotected, representing a target for any potential aggressor who will not be afraid of being charged for his deeds.

In 106 countries, physical punishment has not been yet abolished in schools, but even in the countries where it has, the procedures of implementing and

monitoring law enforcement are frequently inefficient. Moreover, in 147 countries, physical punishments are not restricted within alternative care institutions. Consequently, it can be concluded that physical punishments and humiliating treatments against children are practiced in almost all societies.

The same UN report shows in addition that:

- Around 20% to 65% preschool children are physically or verbally abused. The physical form of punishment (cuffing or cudgelling) is a current practice within schools in a large number of countries and accounts to a large extent for school abandon.
- 126 million children worldwide work in hazardous conditions, frequently face beatings and humiliations and sexual aggressions from their employers.
- Children in orphanages and detention centres are the most exposed to personnel's acts of violence (they are tortured, beaten, isolated, violated, harassed).
- 150 million girls and 73 million boys worldwide are raped every year or subject to sexual aggressions, the aggressor usually being family members or relatives.
- It is estimated that every year, around 133 to 275 million children are subjected to forms of domestic violence.
- Domestic violence and severe physical punishments are common practices both in developed and developing countries, in all regions of the world.
- Over 50,000 children are killed every year (frequently by cuffing or after they have been raped) and around 1-2 million children get to hospital with wounds or injuries caused by acts of violence;
- Most acts of violence against children are performed by persons from their circle of friends or relatives and guardians: parents, teachers, school mates, employers, guardians.

Sweden has been the first country in the world that has prohibited all forms of corporal punishment against children. The experience of this country shows that a major change in the attitude and disciplinary methods applied to children by parents and teachers as well the reduction of physical punishments cannot be exclusively based on enforcing prohibitive laws, but particularly on campaigns of public education carried on during several decades. In 1980, the studies showed that 51% of parents had used beating as a method of

correction. Twenty years later, this percentage has decreased to 8%.

Although Romanian legislation is among one of the few in the world that forbids physical punishment on children, experts consider that there are many things to be improved in this field, as long as a large number of Romanians still believe in 'spare the rod and spoil the child'. Half of the Romanian parents use beating as a disciplinary method.

Notwithstanding this law, according to the statistics published in the study "Child abuse and neglect" (carried out by The National Agency for Protecting Children's Rights, the World Bank and World's Health Organization in 2001), 47.2% parents admit that they use beating to discipline their children, whilst 84% of children state that they are beaten by their parents. Physical punishments applied to children are most frequently encountered in the rural environment. Thus, 87% of parents from the countryside who have children aged between 3 and 5, respectively 78% of parents who have children aged around 6-7 state that they physically punish their children. In cities, physical violence has a lower percentage (52.6% for children between 6 and 7 years old and 50.2% for those between 3 and 5 years old).

Moreover, 75% of schools record violence phenomena and 48.1% of children from institutions state that they are punished by being beaten by the teaching staff, as indicated by a study on violence in schools carried out by UNICEF, The Ministry of Education and Research, Institute of Education Sciences and Institute of Criminology.

Another study, carried out by The Board of Education of The Municipality of Bucharest between December 2005 and January 2006, indicates that 60% of students are verbally and physically aggressed in school and family.

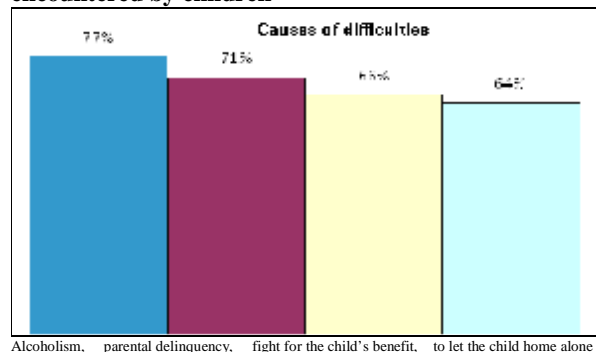
Recent researches confirm a higher risk of individual violence with abusive, hostile, even indifferent or negligent parents and with families with a history of violence. The public opinion also sanctions parents' deficiencies in terms of faulty educational style, considering them the causes of abandonment of children.

A national study regarding the perception of Romanian public opinion of children in need indicates that alcoholism (77%) and parental delinquency (71%), lack of parental responsibility (66%) and family disorganization (64%) are the main causes for the difficulties that some children face. What is to be noted is that the family economic situation, i.e. poverty, is considered as a diminished risk factor (58%) in comparison with those previously listed; it is also considered that the acts of abuse of children take place within the family, in their home (44%).

The family's emotional environment has the ultimate importance in the process of developing self-esteem, necessary to define one's identity and to build a positive self-perception. Rejection, isolation, ignorance, negligence, threats, humiliation, irony, too many demands – all these represent different expressions pertaining to the

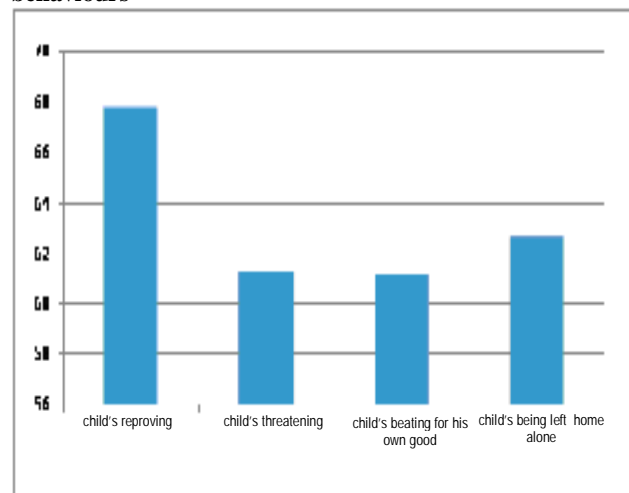
vast phenomenology of emotional abuse against children, performed either in public, with witnesses, or within the exclusive environment of family. The social visibility of emotional abuse in general, as well as the abuse against children represents a feature recently implemented in our public conscience; it will take time until it is reflected into the legal realities.

Picture no. 1 Graphic representation of the difficulties encountered by children



A survey conducted throughout a full year, on a sample of 682 respondents, with the aim to reveal the public opinion on how to raise a child and the perception on children's situation in Romania, indicated that adults disapprove fully of the following parental forms of behaviour: child's reproving (67.8%), child's threatening (61.3%), child's beating for his own good (61.2%), child's being left home alone (62.7%).

Picture no. 2 Graphic representation of certain behaviours

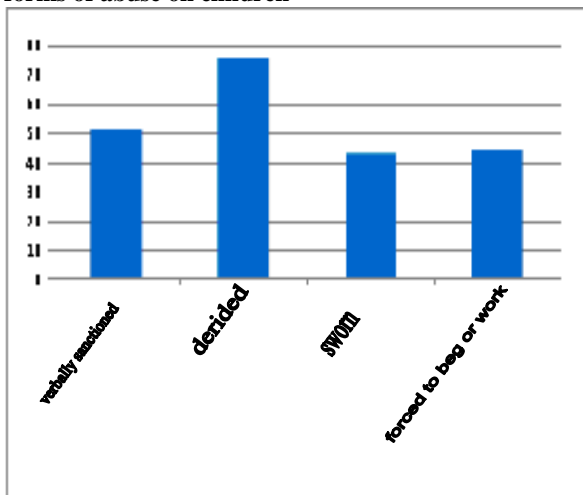


At the same time, a large number of adults are aware of situations where parents fight in front of their children (52.1%) or claim that at least half of the children are exposed to domestic violence scenes (56.3%). The respondents stated that they knew of situations where children were verbally sanctioned (51.6%), derided (75.9%), sworn (43.3%) or forced to beg or work (44.6%). The data obtained show that the psychological

abuse expressed by verbal violence aiming to humiliate or frighten the children, as well as their exploitation prevails over physical violence; only 14.7% consider that almost all children are repeatedly beaten and 17% state that half of children are repeatedly beaten.

Thus, in our country, several research works as well as convincing statistics (Report on Reproductive Health in Romania, Romanian Institute for Protecting Mothers and Children, Bucharest, 1999), conducted on representative samples, indicate that physical violence is associated with childhood, either as a personal experience (41% of women and 59% of men have been aggressed during childhood) or as manner of defining the relations between parents (25% of women and 26% of men have witnessed parental fights during their childhood). The same research works highlighted the fact that, beyond personal differences, *the way that an individual was treated in early childhood may be defining for his/her destiny*. The manifest aggressiveness of some adults – having or not an inborn potential for aggressiveness – has sometimes its origins also in the way they have been treated by their parents or in repeatedly witnessing scenes of violence between parents.

Picture no. 3 Graphic representation of a certain forms of abuse on children



However, it is well known that not every victim turns into an aggressor. However it must be underlined that the traumas suffered during childhood do have psychological consequences, well identified in the criminological research from the developmental psychology point of view, manifested through:

- negative self-esteem;
- depression and/or social isolation;
- major issues in the sexuality field;
- difficulties in socializing;
- the victim's feeling of being different from others;
- the feeling of power in a negative sense (a positive connotation is attributed to violent manifestations, the negative is turned into positive under the conditions of aggressor's attachment to his victim); Some authors state that there are cases where the aggressor

is the only adult who shows attention and affection to the child;

- states of confusion towards themselves (dissociation of ego) or of existential values;
- anxiety.

The analysis of cases of parental abuse and negligence has indicated that family violence represents a cause for the inconsistent or faulty interaction among family members. This perspective emphasizing family interaction focuses on the parental potential of aggressiveness, deviancy, mental health, but especially on style and content of interfamily communication.

Children coming from violent families tend to reproduce violence; they will transfer it as something normal to the relations with the others and they will become aggressors themselves, using physical violence as a way of managing conflicts and interpersonal arguments.

Moreover, an affective and positive climate within the family diminishes the chances that infantile criminality manifest itself in different forms, even when children have inborn tendencies towards violent behavior. In conclusion, *the organizational form or structure of the family is not as important as its functionality, manifested in communicative and affective relations suitable for the private environment of family, in the educational methods applied by parents, the strategies of parental control, the daily practices of interaction and the moral behaviour.*

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