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Violence as a cause of pathological behaviour in a contemporary family

ABSTRACT: In every family there are certain elements of the abusive situation of family life and parental attitudes and behavior, but in the dysfunctional family, regardless of its severity and scope, exhibit behaviors that cause parental neglect of children in many areas: care, biological, physical, educational, emotional and social. Eliminating the educational problems in children with dysfunctional families is not easy, because they reside in an environment that is ailing educationally and of disturbed socialization and emotional interactions. In the contemporary world violence is becoming a more and more common phenomenon. The scope, variety of forms and consequences of violence, which has educational, psychological, health and economic nature, result in the need to treat violence as a social phenomenon of a significant importance. The attempt to solve this problem requires actual cooperation between representatives of different areas of social life. The first important step on the road to solve the problem is to unveil its existence and to identify the need to deal with it.

KEY WORDS: violence, pathology, social maladjustment, dysfunctional family.

In the contemporary world violence is becoming a more and more common phenomenon. The scope, variety of forms and consequences of violence, which has educational, psychological, health and economic nature, result in the need to treat violence as a social phenomenon of a significant importance. The attempt to solve this problem requires actual cooperation between representatives of different areas of social life. The first important step on the road to solve the problem is to unveil its existence and to identify the need to deal with it.

Of course, there are many different environments where violence occurs that could be mentioned. Due to the main source of violence, the most common ones include domestic violence, violence at school (or another institution caring for children) as well as violence in a social environment.

Dealing with the problem of violence requires explaining the terms used in specialised literature as well as the press, radio and other media. The two alternate terms that are used most often are aggression and violence. However, there are suggestions to separate the meaning of the act of violence from the meaning of the act of aggression. For example, Borecka-Biernat (2013), states that in the case of aggression we can always find a clear intention to cause damage or harm to the subject of one's actions while the objective of violence is mainly to have a certain influence on the victim. According to the author, aggression can be the way to subordinate the subject and then it plays the function of violence. However, aggression doesn't always aim at making another person subordinate while violence doesn't have to be manifested through aggression.

Heterogeneity of intentions as well as ignorance as far as the perpetrator's motives are concerned makes it difficult to use these terms adequately to the situation according to the above mentioned criterion.

Another differentiation often used in practice refers to violence and child abuse. According to the World Health Organisation, child abuse is any intended or unintended act of an adult person that has a negative impact on a child's health or physical and psychosocial development. At the beginning this term was understood as physical violence which results in permanent damage or death. This may be the reason why in practice the term "abuse" is used mainly to describe behaviours that are particularly cruel and dangerous for a child's health and life, such as kicking, rape or burns.

In Poland the battered child syndrome was introduced to the diseases registry as late as in 1971. Every doctor who diagnoses such a medical condition is obliged to register it and notify the authorities.

The concept of a wronged child which still functions in literature and which was widely characterised by J. Mazur includes both mild forms of child maltreatment as well as those more severe ones. An important indicator of behaviours that harm a child is the feeling of being harmed which appears when "in an individual's experience three important elements come together – suffering, helplessness and conviction of injustice – as well as the sensation of a certain order defining important aspects of an individual's life being destroyed". It is the suffered harm, unless it was obliterated, that an adult's attention and energy revolves around later on. It has an impact on an adult's

thoughts, feelings and behaviours. This phenomenon is called the unforgiven harm syndrome and has to be treated. The “maltreated child” term focuses on the victim of violence and his or her experiences and not on the perpetrator or the act of violence itself. Therefore, it enables a deeper analysis of direct and long-lasting effects which is conducive to planning the treatment. Despite the differences, all the terms mentioned above have one thing in common – they emphasise inclinations and a relatively constant tendency to a physical, verbal or psychological pressure directed against someone or something, most often against those who are not able to protect themselves effectively (Mazur, 2020).

The four types of pathological treatment of an individual in a family that are mentioned in the source literature most often are: physical violence, mental or emotional abuse, sexual abuse and negligence (Pilaszyk, 2007).

Although the data in this area is very limited, in 2016 about 57,000 children below 15 years old were killed worldwide. Very little children are most exposed to the risk: murders among children between 0 and 4 years old happen two times more often than among children between 5 and 14 years old. The main reasons behind this kind of deaths among children include head injuries, followed by stomach injuries and strangulation. A reliable and specific data on other results of violence towards children is very scarce but researches conducted in many countries suggest that children below 15 years old are notoriously victims of violence and negligence (Tremblay, 2018).

Among individual factors an important role in the victimisation process is played by age and gender. Generally, small children are exposed to greater risk of physical violence and those entering adolescence – sexual violence. Boys are victims of beating and corporal punishments more than girls but girls are victims of sexual violence, negligence and being forced to prostitute themselves more often than boys. Other factors that increase the chance of acts of violence towards children include: having only one parent, parents’ young age, lack of support and care from extended family, overpopulation in a family environment (e.g.: having many children), violence between parents. Women use psychological violence towards children more often than men. Physical violence used towards children by men leads to serious or mortal consequences more often. Men are also responsible for sexual violence towards children more often than women. The factors that increase the probability of parents being violent towards their children include unrealistic expectations towards children, weak mechanisms of controlling one’s emotions, high stress level and social isolation. Many researches suggest that violence towards children is connected with family’s poverty and lack of social “capital”, meaning the lack of social and neighbourly networks that protect children.

It is difficult to grasp the actual size of domestic violence although it is a common phenomenon. Researches show that domestic violence is the most common form of interpersonal aggression.

An American criminologist, Brandon, claims that the most dangerous place on earth is a family home after dark.

The scale of parents' physical violence towards children in Poland is not exactly known. The existing data comes from the analysis of the police statistics and court records. Regardless of how the value of data was estimated, it is limited to discovered acts of violence – those most drastic cases – the less severe ones seem to be unnoticed, most often approved by sociocultural norms. Domestic violence is still a taboo subject due to a specific privacy of a family life. Social isolation, weak family ties, lack of empathy in the society result in aggressive behaviours being reinforced among children, which means that many children's dramas will not be stopped. When we think about physical violence towards children we usually imagine that this violence occurs only in pathological, alcoholic, unemployed or incomplete families.

However, the research presented by the “Dzieci Niczyje” Foundation and conducted in educational care facilities, hospitals, schools, kindergartens and health centres in Warsaw indicated that abused children come from all types of families. 57% of questioned pedagogues claim that some cases of abused children they are aware of involve children brought up in pathological families. At the same time, more than 50% of pedagogues claim that among physically abused children there are also children from “regular” families and 20% declare that they include children from intellectual families. 77% of kindergarteners who experience physical violence from their parents come from “regular” families, including 44.4% from intellectual families:

Marysia (age 7). Her father is a doctor, mother doesn't work. The parents noticed that the child had a tendency to left-handedness a long time ago. The father, demonstrating significant rigorism and educational ambitions, was angry about that. Catching his daughter in the act of writing with her left hand again ended with the father putting the child's hand on a hot plate causing extensive second- and third-degree burns (Berkowitz, 2019).

This act caused a tremendous suffering for the child as well as permanent scars not only on her skin but also on her soul. This act was done not only by the rigorous father but also by a doctor who, being a specialist in medical aspects, should know the stages of a child's development and considerations connected with left- or right-handedness.

Researches on “Disorders in the behaviour of junior-high school children” were conducted in the population of young people (the national sample was recruited from 8 primary schools selected at random from different provinces of Poland). The general population of respondents involved 726 young people but the research was essentially based on 394 questionnaires. The questions included in the questionnaire referred to, among others, type and frequency of physical and psychological punishments used towards the respondents. The collected research material provided the data showing that physical violence was used towards 94% of children. It concerned children of all ages and both genders. Aggression was more often directed at boys than girls (56.7%). Boys have behavioural issues more often than girls and their behaviour triggered and exacerbated parents’ aggression more often. The severity of tensions connected with emotional and social maturation, developing one’s interests and aspirations, are subjected to the destructive effects of physical and psychological violence most. Extra expectations towards children at this age as well as traditional expectations (obedience, diligence, politeness) cause the exacerbation of punishments when children evade them or meet them to an insufficient degree.

Among the aggressors using physical violence towards children the biggest group is fathers (63%). In ca. 12% of cases physical violence was used by partners who were not a child’s parents (a stepmother, a stepfather, a cohabitant). Physical violence towards children usually happens in complete families (64%). In complete but reconstructed families (8%) those who use violence towards a partner’s children are always those from outside – a stepmother or a stepfather.

It is difficult to identify true reasons behind violence and aggression within a family. It requires long observation of a family and its psychological analysis. The most visible problem is a father’s, mother’s or both parents’ alcoholism.

In Poland there are 0.5 million alcoholic families with more than one million children harmed by their parents – not only those who drink but also those trapped in a co-dependency relationship. The questionnaire conducted among patients of rehab centres shows that 40% of them hurt and abuse their children (Tucholska, 2012).

The situation of children who are brought up by a parent abusing alcohol and using physical violence is very difficult. Most often such children have no support from other relatives and they are exposed to danger because they are not able to predict how a drunk parent will behave. Such a situation often makes children run away from home, start taking drugs or drinking alcohol, have suicidal thoughts or suffer from mental disorders.

Another factor that may cause physical violence towards children is a sickness within a family. 5% fathers maltreating their children were diagnosed with mental disorders documented by medical opinions. Most dramatic situations happen when children are sick or disabled. They are subjected to suffering caused by their relatives and parents. The adverse factor is the fact that disabled children have a limited possibility to move around and contact a larger group of people, including their peers, which means less chance to get a professional help.

The situation of a child was presented by the President of the Homeless Support International Organisation who stated that every 26 seconds a child runs away from home and every 47 second a child is beaten or neglected. Researches show that violence towards children is more often used by mothers. However, mothers use much subtler forms of violence than fathers. Fathers usually demonstrate such types of violence towards their adolescent children as mental abuse, sexual abuse as well as physical violence towards girls (Poraj, 2006).

The research conducted by the author of this article also provided information about three types of aggressive behaviours demonstrated by parents towards their children: strength aggression, physical aggression and symbolic aggression. The results show that the most common manifestations of aggression towards children are:

- slapping (84.4% of investigated parents)
- hitting with a hand (61.8% of investigated parents); the respondents said that they did it rarely, quite often (21%) or very often (5%)
- proper beating (43.5% of respondents)
- hitting with a belt or another object (40.6% of respondents)
- behaving with significant brutality (lashing out, hitting with one's fists, kicking, taking down) admitted by several percent of respondents.

The police statistics show that 63% of adult Poles use corporal punishments towards their children below 17 years old. Every seventh 14-year-old admits that as a result of parents' being violent he or she was injured. Almost 28% of Polish students admit that there were at least a few cases of violent behaviours in their homes. 34% of patients from rehab centres stated that in the period of intensive drinking they used violence towards children.

The second important environment where a child's personality is shaped apart from family is school. Due to the fact that education is compulsory all citizens go through school. Therefore, apart from family, the school is also responsible for the quality of the young generation and the level of its education. School educates children in an intended way, directed at specific objectives, professionally, using the pedagogical knowledge and experience

of teachers. However, there are also unintended education processes and spontaneous impacts shaping pupils' personality happening at school. The school's influence is not always positive.

Corporal punishments have their infamous position in a schooling tradition. Children were beaten at schools in Middle Ages as well as in Jesuit and dissenter schools (Reformation). Erasmus of Rotterdam compared schools to galleys and torture chambers. Only at the turn of the 19th and 20th century there was a radical revolution with children's rights started to be promoted. A child became the centre which the education and upbringing system was built around and adjusted to a child's natural tendencies and needs. Currently, despite the official prohibition of using corporal punishments, there are cases of this kind of violence towards pupils in Polish schools being used. Here is an example:

I like all subjects very much but when we are going to have a PE class, we are reluctant to go because we are punished for the smallest offence, such as kicking a handball or doing an exercise incorrectly. We have our hair pulled, we are hit or kicked at our butt, sometimes even at our stomachs. We don't like our PE teacher very much because sometimes we are hit so hard that we have bruises. Sometimes he hits our heads with a ball so hard that we start crying. (a six-grade male pupil)

Corporal punishments express pedagogical helplessness of those people who cannot find any other ways to discipline pupils. A child's right to be respected is particularly trampled at school but also in the whole society. In a family a child is treated like the parents' property and at school – like an object that has to be formed according to a specific pattern. It's not a secret that for many pupils school is an institution that cannot be liked. Some pupils are hit at the head or hands with a ruler, with a violin bow during a singing class or with a stick during a PE class. Children don't always tell their parents that a teacher hit them. They are afraid that parents will find out about their bad behaviour. They are also afraid that their parents will talk to the teacher or a headmaster because it could have unpleasant consequences. Pupils are convinced that it is impossible to win with a teacher and that they are always a lost cause. There are parents who demand using corporal punishments from teachers if their child deserves such a punishment. These are undoubtedly rare situations but they clearly indicate that adults cannot accept the prohibition of using physical violence towards children. A child hit by a teacher feels humiliated. He or she is helpless although he or she knows very well that a teacher has no right to hit a pupil. A teacher's behaviour

is often accompanied by other pupils' laughing and ridiculing the one who took a beating. An individual punished in this way can have a grudge against the person executing the punishment, want to get revenge and behave in defiance of expectations set by the unaccepted teacher. An equally harmful and ineffective way to discipline pupils as beating is teacher's yelling. Yelling works in such a way that it reinforces the reaction instead of attenuating it. A teacher's raised voice makes pupils tired and those sensitive and gentle individuals feel humiliated by the yelling. Those who cannot meet expectations and disregard everything and everyone simply laugh. An angry teacher often uses mean and indiscriminating words humiliating not only a pupil but also himself.

School is a community consisting of boys and girls with different temperaments and moral level. It includes cultured, well-mannered, agreeable and friendly individuals but also those depraved, aggressive and bullying their peers. Teachers don't always know that some pupils are bullied by others. Other pupils' aggression often concentrates on so-called weirdos. Children who stutter, have problems with seeing or hearing, are very short and thin or too burly, those who wear different clothes than other pupils – they make others laugh and become the object of sneering and teasing. Peer solidarity doesn't allow for denunciations or complaints. Especially in higher grades complaining about another pupil can cause revenge and complete exclusion from the peer community. A child beaten by an aggressive pupil doesn't talk about it at home because parents' interference can be even worse than a teacher's involvement. A child that is hurt by others has no one to turn to unless there is a brave and strong boy who will stand up for a hurt pupil. Some pupils, not very popular in their class, become victims of blackmail used by aggressive pupils, sometimes from higher grades, who demand money, specific things or cigarettes from their victim. The oppressed children usually give everything they have and then they tell their parents that they lost the money. If they don't have any money, they don't have courage to ask their parents because then they would have to tell the truth and then their parents would interfere at school which, in the children's eyes, would make the bad situation even worse. In such a case there is no other way than to steal money from the parents' wallet followed by remorse, feeling guilt and despair.

Violence used at school by teachers towards their charges as well as by pupils towards their peers causes a strong fear of school called school refusal. It is lesser or greater inability to attend school. This inability can have different intensity: from a partial reluctance to absolute refusal to stay at school. It is accompanied by somatic symptoms such as headache, stomach ache, nausea,

vomiting and diarrhoea. By using corporal punishments, even sporadically, a teacher loses its authority, causes children's aversion, parents' outrage and pupils' jokes. Realising that beating children is unacceptable, such a teacher feels bad which has a negative impact on his/her relations with children.

A very important factor conducive to children maltreatment is unrealistic expectations towards children's capabilities that result from the lack of knowledge of a child's correct development. Parents can be convinced that their children don't want to do something they are not able to do thinking that their children are bad or stupid and not being able to notice that many of children's behaviours are the result of limitations connected with age. Gaining knowledge about children's development and regularities connected with it may adjust the ideas of children's proper behaviours, teach joy and pride with children's achievements and help overcome difficulties connected with bringing up children who require special care.

Very often domestic violence occurs when a family faces difficulties it is not able to cope with. According to Anna Lipowska-Teutsch social stress such as unemployment, necessity to suddenly change the family's functioning model, poverty and accumulation of unsolved life problems, can become factors activating physical violence within a family. Unsolved problems are never accumulated when a family has support in a wider community. However, the very fact that a potential support system exists, is not enough (Norton, Glick, 2017).

Numerous researches confirm that families where child abuse takes place cannot use the support systems available. It is said that 81% of families where violence is used declare that they prefer to solve their own problems on their own (Henslin, 2021).

In the last few years there were numerous empiric researches conducted on personality and social effects of domestic violence. They irrefutably revealed a negative impact of violence on an individual's psychosocial functioning. It applies both to victims as well as individuals being brought up in the atmosphere of violence (Giligan, 2020).

Physical violence has not only psychosocial effects but it also demonstrates itself in the form of marks on one's body, such as bruises, signs of beating (with a belt, a cable, etc.) on a face, chest, back, buttocks and legs, burns (cigarettes, poker, iron), head and face injuries in different stages of being healed, repeated bone breaks, sprains, swelling, a child's fear to undress before a PE class, fear of being touched, cowering, weeping, etc.

Violence, like any other significant experience, has its mark on a child's psychosocial functioning having a negative impact on a child's development.

The importance of this experience is stressed by the fact that it's usually caused by parents or guardians, meaning people who are naturally predisposed to provide a child with a feeling of safety.

Śniegulska introduced the term of the battered child syndrome to describe numerous physical and psychological, direct and long-lasting consequences of a child maltreatment. The contemporary empiric researches indicate that abusing children has a particularly negative impact on the child's emotional development. A child's direct reaction to hurting behaviours is increased aggression, low self-esteem, emotional lability, inability to create interpersonal relations as well as hostility towards the environment while being strongly attached to the guardians at the same time (Śniegulska, 213).

A natural human reaction in a dangerous situation is fear. In the case of maltreated children it is strongest and, considering that running away from fear is not always possible, after some time children become indifferent to punishments. The behaviour of children exposed to such an experience is called pseudo-adult. Maltreated children's sleep is restless, interrupted, shallow and sometimes feels more like napping. Moreover, suppressing spontaneous reactions in situations evoking strong emotions, especially when children feel pain (e.g.: an injection), repressed crying and holding on to a parent tightly or, on the contrary, not reacting with anxiety when children are taken away from their parents, are observed. Some maltreated children demonstrate a strong withdrawing behaviour, they are depressive and have a tendency to isolate themselves. Development differences between maltreated children and those growing in normal environments reveal themselves in the increased aggression or lowered self-esteem.

It has been noted that maltreated children have a huge psychological dependency on their parents-aggressors. In the case of children-victims this dependency on their parents is described as the total lack of distance towards the parents connected with rejecting other important people from the children's environment, such as grandparents or teachers. Abused children are usually distrustful and hostile towards their environment, full of negative emotions, not very reactive and they often adopt the passive resistance attitude. Impulsiveness, indecision, mood swings, irritability often discourage other children from playing or having friendlier reactions with them (Sęk, Ciborowski, 2018).

One of the results of parents' physical violence towards their children is children running away from home. 70.6% of respondents ran away from home because of their fear of being punished. It is emphasised that the younger the children who run away from home are the higher the probability that the

home is no longer a safe haven for them and that running away is an act of desperation caused by the parents' fight, being afraid of corporal punishment, being rejected, etc.

Maltreated girls run away from home more often than maltreated boys. Girls usually run away while boys are rather sent away from home.

The effects of children being physically abused as well as of using too severe forms of violence indicate that violence has an impact mainly on a child's socialisation process. The following socialisation problems can be noticed among children who experience violence: uncontrolled outbursts, repeating a grade, disobedience and bad behaviour at home, difficulties with making friends, fighting with other children, breaking or damaging objects, stealing, drinking alcohol and children being arrested (Olubiński, 2019).

A very controversial data on the effects of children maltreatment refers to IQ. It should be emphasised that maltreated children have a lower IQ than average.

Kacprzak states that in a psychological dimension a few personality features developed as a result of experiencing violence in childhood could be selected. A permanent mark of growing up in an "abnormal world" is inability to meet one's needs in a socially acceptable manner. Another feature of individuals growing up in such an environment is role-reversal and the feeling of responsibility connected with it. This role-reversal demonstrates itself in pseudo-adult behaviours in childhood and social infantilization as adults. Excessive feeling of responsibility in childhood can become a permanent and rigid behaviour giving in the adult age a paradoxical effect, meaning similar expectations towards one's children, which undoubtedly proves the inability to play the role of a parent. Another described feature is inability to make choices and decisions. It results either from inconsistent social education, for example children being neglected, or from a strict obedience training (following orders on command) that limit an individual's initiative to minimum and, as a result, doesn't give an individual too many opportunities to make choices. Finally, the last feature highlighted by the author is a poor control over one's emotions, specifically the inability to separate an emotional and behavioural sphere (Migala, 2008).

Another effect of physical violence towards children is a posttraumatic stress disorder. An important element of this disorder is isolating experiences and memories connected with the traumatic event. A human being is not able to cope with what he or she went through and it remains in a hidden corner of one's psyche like an explosive. This leads to losing control over a very important part of one's internal world. One is on edge. A careless step

and one can fall. The more a traumatic event is seemingly neutralised by being pushed outside one's memory the more it gets out of one's control and can reveal itself as an unexpected element of everyday thoughts and actions, nightmares, irrational fears or outbursts. It can make one withdraw from any actions and experiences that are dangerously close to specific memories. A tendency to isolate and withdraw can paralyse any activity and possibility of making contacts in wide spheres of life. It can also make it difficult or impossible to have an emotional relation with other people. Within the phenomenon connected with various forms of domestic violence there are research results regarding disorganisation of behaviours, thoughts and feelings under the influence of chronic stress going beyond an individual's adaptive possibilities (an extreme example being battle fatigue syndrome) connected with the accumulation of destructive experiences (Kacprzak, 2020).

The effects of violence towards children are also mentioned in Seligman's theory of depression as learned helplessness. This theory, born from experimental tests, proves that regular failures in attempting to avoid suffering are perceived as the lack of possibility to have any impact on the course of events which results in feeling helpless. This feeling of helplessness covers wider and wider areas and leads to apathy, sadness and cessation of any attempts to find a solution. Not only when the circumstances don't allow to avoid suffering or overcome difficulties. Symptoms of major depression can develop when failures are attributed to internal, regular and global causes, for example when someone is thinking: "it is me who's useless, this is my fault". Learned helplessness can be an important cause of a breakdown, unwillingness to receive help and accepting the fate of a violence victim because "everything is just a big nothing, I'm useless, everything is my fault, I cannot expect anything better happening in my life and I don't deserve anything better" (Tyszka, 2002).

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