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Safe in the family

ABSTRACT: Corporal punishment of children has been a part of everyday life for centuries, as it has long been seen as a means of education. However, in the last century many social scientists, psychologists and doctors warned parents about the dangers of punitive discipline. The concept of child abuse has long been recognised in the paediatric literature, with the term “Battered Child Syndrome” being coined by Henry Kemp.

Many parents see corporal punishment of their children as an effective, socially acceptable method of child-rearing. Parents hit their children not because they want to do so or because they want to hurt them, but rather because they believe that corporal punishment teaches their children positive patterns of behaviour and protects them from various threats. Parents often know of no other way to express their dissatisfaction with their child or their own helplessness. They seldom think about how their child might feel when he or she gets a beating or is waiting for the inevitable slap.

The public opinion is that corporal punishment is a necessary part of discipline and education. It is from spanking and slapping that children learn to respect their parents. To improve the situation of physically abused children, it is necessary to change social attitudes towards such behaviours and to teach parents the negative effects of these behaviours. Another key task is to educate parents about alternative child-rearing methods. Corporal punishment as a means of disciplining children will not immediately disappear from parents' child-rearing repertoires. In fact, as research and expert opinion confirms, constant and consistent educational work will only lead to a gradual change in parents' attitudes and behaviour.

KEYWORDS: child maltreatment, physical, psychical and sexual abuse, child abuse, domestic violence, child psychology.

1. Introduction

If we ask where the child is safest, we instinctively answer: in their family. In a perfect world, this would be true, but unfortunately, the reality is far from it. According to UNICEF's Hidden in Plain Sight report¹ collected from 190 countries, children were most at risk at school and at home. Child abuse and neglect within the family, typically committed by parents, lead to adverse childhood experiences. Anyone who was exposed to maltreatment as a child or was only an eyewitness to domestic violence bears the consequences as an adult. The root of countless somatic and psychological problems in adulthood is the trauma suffered in childhood. Unfortunately, the topic is surrounded by many misconceptions and in 2023 it is still considered taboo even though every tenth child in Hungary is at risk² and approximately 15-30 children die every year from abuse by their parents.³ For some reason, society only considers extremely serious abuses, which end in death or result in severe disability, even though emotional abuse can have serious consequences, even to the society as a whole.

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¹ UNICEF, 2014.

² UNICEF, 2023.

³ Herczog and Kovács, 2004.

Adults who have been maltreated as children report a lower quality of life than those without any abusive past. These findings may indicate that multiple maltreatment is associated with an even lower quality of life relative to single maltreatment.⁴

The other problem is that many people still think that what happens within the family is a private matter and should not be shared with outsiders, even though publicity is the only escape for the victim. As long as the abuser has reason to believe that there will be no consequences for his actions - despite the fact that the Criminal Code strictly punishes these actions - the victims have little hope.

As for statistical data related to child abuse, the number of offenses has been steadily increasing since 2016. The reason for this is not that parents abuse their children at an increasing rate, but that society has become much more sensitive, pays more attention to the signs, and fewer cases are kept secret, but at the same time, the latency is still extremely high. According to data from the Central Statistical Office, 6,300 cases of child abuse occurred in 2020, which is 500 more cases than in 2019.⁵ This significant increase may also be due to the COVID pandemic, as the incidence of domestic violence increased due to lockdowns and confinement.⁶

Child maltreatment, according to the World Health Organization, is a type of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence, and commercial or other exploitation, which results in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development, or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust, or power. Exposure to intimate partner violence is sometimes included as a form of child maltreatment.⁷ Domestic violence is a complex phenomenon that can occur in several forms. Violent behavior (which causes physical, mental, or sexual injury) and the fact that the victim and perpetrator know each other well (usually relatives) can be considered the cornerstones. The purpose of violent behavior is for the perpetrator to keep the other party under his power and to exercise control and dominance over them. The offense is cyclically repeated and becomes increasingly severe over time.

According to the definition of the National Institute of Criminology, domestic violence is violence and abuse between people who live together and are physically, emotionally, materially, or legally dependent on each other, which includes all forms of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse or neglect.

2. The typical forms of domestic violence and child maltreatment

According to the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim, we can distinguish between intimate partner violence, violence against children, and violence against the elderly and sick family members. Each type rarely occurs in isolation. Someone who is violent is usually violent toward all members of the family.

The American model⁸ distinguishes between three basic types of domestic abuse. In the case of "reciprocal family violence", the father and mother mutually abuse each other, and both beat the child. If they do not hurt the child, they cause him enough trauma when he sees them fighting. In "hierarchical family violence", everyone has a place in the cycle of abuse. The father hits the mother and the mother hits the child. We speak of paternalistic family violence when the father and the child (mostly boys) act together against the mother and the female members of the family, who are considered inferior.⁹

⁴ Hoefnagels et al., 2020.

⁵ Gyurkó, 2022.

⁶ Wong et al., 2021.

⁷ WHO, 2022.

⁸ Browne and Hamilton, 1999.

⁹ Szöllösi, 2005, p. 83.

The expression of violence can be physical, psychological, or sexual, and it can also manifest itself in the form of neglect.

2.1. Physical abuse

Physical violence includes all kinds of intentional physical abuse: beating, punching, kicking, biting, wounding with a weapon, burning, scalding, shaking, grabbing, pushing against a wall, and pushing on the floor or bed. All the above-mentioned behaviors fall under the concept of abuse, even if there is no visible evidence of injury, and the injury does not require medical attention. Concussions are especially dangerous for babies since the brain and skull of young children are still underdeveloped, and even moderate shaking can cause serious brain damage or even death (i.e., Shaken-Baby Syndrome).

One may ask, “why do people beat their family members?” This is usually because they are unable to manage their tempers, and they cannot channel the accumulated stress and frustration in any other way than through an aggressive act against a weaker person. In most cases, aggression is not due to provocation by a family member, it is only directed at them. A typical case is when the head of the family is regularly humiliated at work by his boss and colleagues. They obviously cannot turn the anger and tension accumulated due to negative criticism towards the person they want to, but they will take out their anger on their child or spouse, which they cannot express to their boss.

In 1962, an American doctor, Henry Kempe, first described battered child syndrome. Subsequently, it soon became clear that the perpetrators were parents in 90% of the cases.¹⁰ Intracranial injuries and femoral fractures occur almost exclusively as a result of abuse. In Hungary, approximately 30 children die each year because of provable abuse and negligent endangerment.¹¹

Head injuries caused by human hands can cause immediate death in children, and brain damage caused by continuous, regular abuse can lead to mental retardation and epilepsy.¹² The younger the age at which abuse occurs, the more serious the consequences. Neglect and abuse affect all areas of a child’s development, endangering their physical, emotional, social, psychological, moral, learning, and cognitive abilities.

It is typical that not only parents but also abused children try to hide the abuse. During the examination, the children report almost verbatim the made-up story told by the parents about the origin of the injury. The doctor may detect that the child is denying previous abuse, is alarmed, looks to establish eye contact with the parent, and expects confirmation from them. The parent is often irritable and hostile towards the doctors and the child, criticizes them, shows little concern, and refuses further examination.¹³

According to Kaiser, 7-9-year-old boys are most at the highest risk of physical abuse. Kaiser states that this is because children start school at this age, increasing the likelihood of discovering abuse and the number of cases in which parents feel the need to discipline their children.¹⁴ According to Gelles’ research, the most vulnerable group of children is the age group between three months and three years old. He believes that it is a source of great frustration for parents who are not able to communicate with their children since they cannot speak yet, so they do not understand why they are crying. This tension can only be relieved by aggression against the children. Furthermore, the birth of a child results in a tense atmosphere, as

¹⁰ Révész, 1999.

¹¹ Pászthy, 2007, p. 15.

¹² Ibid, p. 16.

¹³ Pászthy, 2007.

¹⁴ Kerezsi, 1995, p. 61.

everything is transformed as a result, which may also cause financial difficulties. The escalating tension from several directions is difficult to manage.¹⁵

Parental stress is a factor found to be positively associated with harsh parenting practices. The perpetrator's intent to punish a child's crying behavior was the main precipitator of abusive head trauma – shaken baby syndrome. Harsh physical punishment to the point of death was used to correct child disobedience or to punish child misbehavior. According to American studies, 70% of children were being cared for by a male caregiver at the time of the fatal event. The study found that mothers' male companions (boyfriend, stepfather) had 2.4 times the odds of perpetrating fatal physical punishment compared to fathers. The elevated risk associated with mothers' male companions may be influenced by attachment or connectedness, which might be absent in this nonbiological relationship.¹⁶

According to another American research, boys under the age of 3 are most likely to be exposed to physical abuse. In all cases, boys were abused more often and more severely than girls. At the same time, the research also showed that children under the age of three were abused by their mothers in 68% of cases, given that they spend most of their time with them at this age.¹⁷ However, in the case of sexual abuse, the proportion of male perpetrators was already close to 90%.¹⁸

According to Ranschburg, the physical abuse of a child develops gradually.

At first, the parent just gets frustrated, feels powerless, unable to establish a relationship with his child, and unable to influence him. When his patience finally runs out, he hits the child in utter desperation. First, this is not a real beating; it may just be a slap or a small blow on the diaper, but in any case, it is effective, as the child is very shocked by the unexpected consequence. The parent then feels that he has found the solution, but in order to always achieve the desired effect with beating, he has to use increasingly harsh methods. This is how the first weak slap turns into regular beating with the waist belt. However, after a while the child will become immune to abuse and violence will no longer be suitable for achieving the desired effect, only aggressiveness, irritability, hatred, and the enjoyment of breaking the rules will slowly become integrated into the child's temperament and personality.¹⁹

Although all forms of corporal punishment against children are prohibited by law (the Act No. XXXI of 1997), corporal punishment remains accepted in many places.

Many people think that a "father's slap" or a little "mother's spanking" is not yet domestic violence, it fits into education. However, the science of pedagogy and psychology has long stated that physical abuse is serious and unforgivable, a crime that cannot be justified; moreover, it even has a personality-destroying effect as it affects the child's personality development. Overall, there is no boundary between paternal slap and violence, and any form of physical punishment against a child is impermissible, even if it is done with the best intentions. The purpose of education is not to make the child obey out of fear of physical pain, but to understand and

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Wilson et al., 2023.

¹⁷ Tamási, 2005.

¹⁸ Szöllősi, 2005.

¹⁹ Popper et al., 2005. pp. 19-20.

experience the rightness or wrongness of his actions, to learn what is allowed and what is not.²⁰

Beatings, therefore, only serve as temporary deterrents, and they only provoke intense anger, a desire for revenge, a feeling of helplessness, and self-loathing in the child, which will have far-reaching consequences.

Parents beat their children either because they believe that it will be useful and they do not know any other, more effective way of raising them, or because they cannot handle their dissatisfaction, frustration, or helplessness in any other way.

There are cases in which both parents abuse the child, but mostly only one passively lets it happen. The children were not usually angry with the passively watching parent; they always found some reasonable explanation as to why they are unable to help them. Rationalizing the situation is much easier to bear than admitting that both parents actually betrayed him. (Forward, 2000, p. 134).

Anger boils in the souls of children exposed to violence. No one can be beaten, humiliated, terrorized, belittled, or blamed for their own problems without feeling resentment. However, a child who has experienced violence has no way to vent his anger. Temperament therefore, necessarily finds the way to get rid of it in adulthood.²¹

Despite this, thousands of families in Hungary still use corporal punishment as an educational tool to discipline their children.

Studies have revealed that physically abused children show selective attention to anger cues, have difficulty disengaging from them, and are more likely to misinterpret facial cues as anger or fear.²²

The occurrence of physical violence does not depend on economic or social status or even education, it occurs at all levels. This is a sure sign that the aggressor is also abused as a child. Because someone who grew up in a loving atmosphere as a child and whose parents never laid a hand on him will certainly not beat his family members as an adult. Conversely, if he grew up in an environment where he learned that physical violence is the only appropriate way to deal with conflict and relieve stress, then he would stick to this tried-and-true method as an adult, even if he promised it a thousand times as a child that he would never be like his parents. Since these young people enter adulthood with huge emotional deficits and unsatisfactory needs, no matter how late they have children, they will not be mature enough to raise them properly.

There is an extreme case of child abuse, Münchausen syndrome, by proxy, but in this case, the parent damages the child's physical and mental health due to a serious mental illness. Their purpose is to attract the attention of others, primarily doctors. Mothers typically do this to their children (e.g., they poison them or expose them to pneumonia).

Hungarian criminal lawyers, whose interests do not extend to the field of children's rights, still believe that there is a so-called domestic disciplinary right, which means that the parent has the right to punish the child physically and mentally within the framework of education, such that it does not cause serious injuries. However, Article 6 paragraph 5 of the Act No. XXXI of 1997 on child protection, which entered into force on January 1, 2005, after the amendment, clearly states that the child's human dignity must be respected; the child must be protected against assault – physical, sexual, and mental mistreatment – neglect; the child must be

²⁰ Ranschburg, 2006, p. 29.

²¹ Forward, 2000. p. 142.

²² Strathearn et al., 2020.

protected against harmful effects caused by different sources of information; and that children are never allowed to undergo torture, corporal punishment, and any other cruel, inhuman, or humiliating punishment or treatment.

The Act No. LXIV of 1991, which promulgated the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted in New York in 1989, sets similar expectations. The Convention is linked to comprehensive commentary No. 8 entitled 'The right of the child to be protected from corporal punishment and other cruel or degrading forms of punishment' and No. 13 'The right of the child to be protected from all forms of violence' issued by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. Children have an inalienable right to respect their human dignity and physical integrity, as well as equal protection from violence. The child is not the property of the parent but an individual with his own rights, a person entitled to human rights.

In general, the abuse or humiliation of a child is prohibited, harmful, and condemnable. It is not possible to hit, slap, pull the child's ears, pull the hair, push him, kneel him in a corner, or use violence against him in any other way, as all of these can cause physical or mental pain. The pain caused to the child violates his right to protect against violence. Zero tolerance is important because it is not possible to draw a limit to the extent to which it is acceptable to abuse a child, since adults - especially if they hit the child out of sudden excitement or anger - often do not even assess how much force they use and how much pain they cause to the child. Even if beating does not cause physical pain, it still violates the child's dignity and causes humiliation and emotional damage.

2.2. The psychological violence

The appearance of psychological violence varies. This includes repeated teasing, insults, threats, belittling, humiliation, shaming, mocking, criticizing, and emotional blackmail. During the insult, the aggressor was continuously criticized by a superior. Whether he does it with or without reason, his goal is to destroy, humiliate, and make the other person feel small. The aggressor is as unfair and mean as possible to make the other person believe that he is in no way worthy of being loved. Rejection can cause serious damage, especially in children, but can also destroy the self-confidence of adult women and men. In many cases, it precedes or is accompanied by physical violence, but it can also occur on its own. Its main goal is to destroy the victim's self-esteem and it usually succeeds.

There are two problems with examining psychological terror. First, it is difficult to define and extremely difficult to prove; second, it causes a much more serious and profound effect than physical violence. As the victims usually say, the physical wound heals, but the mental wounds persist for a lifetime.

It belongs to the scope of psychological violence and has very serious consequences: making the child feel worthless, unloved, unwanted, and useless; setting expectations that do not correspond to age or development; creating a constant feeling of fear or anxiety; violent and cruel upbringing; using bizarre methods of punishment; emotionally unpredictable behavior; social isolation; moral corruption; teaching deviant behavior; and coercion.²³ However, it can also appear in the form that the perpetrator deliberately abuses someone or something that is important to the child (e.g., damages, throws away his favorite toy, or abuses his dog).

Humiliation with intentional and long-term psychological torture are especially shocking in the case of children because it seriously affects their personality development. The most serious consequences are punishment with deprivation of love and continuous doubting of the child's skills, aptitude, and intellectual ability.

Disparaging criticisms and degrading comments carry negative messages for children and dramatically affect their mental health. Cruel words have more power in a child's development

²³ Pászthy, 2007, p. 18.

than we think. It is especially harmful if a child's appearance, intelligence, abilities, or even human values are insulted on a regular basis. Parents defend themselves by saying that they were only joking. A small child cannot distinguish between truth and a joke, threats, or good humor. If he was hurt a lot when he was younger, he would never understand the joke even as an adult; he will interpret every funny comment literally and consider it an attack on his person.²⁴

Furthermore, when "toxic parents" react to behavior they do not like with punishment and withdrawal of love, it has a very negative effect on the child's emotional development.²⁵ This destroys children's self-confidence and self-esteem. Even in adulthood, children will not be able to believe in themselves, they will become timid when it comes to initiating relationships because they are afraid of disappointment and rejection.

Emotional abuse in early childhood may lead to psychopathology via insecure attachment, which has been associated with externalizing behavioral problems and impaired social competence.²⁶

2.3. Sexual abuse

The driving force of sexual violence is usually not the insurmountable desire for sex but the breaking of the victim's will, humiliation, and making them feel inferior. Victims of sexual violence are mostly women or children; however, it can also be directed against a man, although significantly less often.

In terms of the degree of violence, we must distinguish between sexual violence committed against adults and children. If it is committed against an adult, a much greater degree of violence is required, since the adult is aware of what she wants and what she does not want, so it is usually only possible to induce unwanted sexual behavior through coercion or threats. It is not necessary to use physical violence against a child as a small child is already frightened by verbal aggression. Furthermore, seduction also works in many cases through nice words, promises, and gifts to persuade the child to play sexual games since they do not know what is happening to them.

The majority of sexual crimes against children are not committed by strangers, but by relatives and acquaintances, persons whom the child trusts, and whom the child loves. Therefore, such an event causes a particularly great mental turn. The perpetrator of sexual abuse is most often (75%) a family member or an unrelated acquaintance (20%); only in the rarest cases is a stranger (5%).²⁷

The age groups most at risk for violence against children are 10-15 years old for girls, 6-8, and 14-16 years old for boys.²⁸ The seriousness of the situation is further aggravated by the fact that, according to the 2020 data from the Central Statistical Office, sexual violence is the crime most often committed against children aged 0-13.²⁹ Violence against a child can often remain secret, as it is much easier to intimidate and keep a child in fear than an adult. Her fear is further enhanced by the fact that she is mostly completely vulnerable to the perpetrator. When a child is molested, the child has an irrational sense of guilt, which prevents things from coming to light.

Children blame themselves for what happened and feel guilty, dirty, disgusting, and ashamed that this could have happened to them. In addition to fear, shame prevents them from reporting the crime to someone. Unfortunately, in many cases, society and the authorities

²⁴ Forward, 2000.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Strathearn et al., 2020.

²⁷ Pászthy, 2007. p. 18.

²⁸ Hegedűs and Pintyi, 2012.

²⁹ Central Statistical Office, 2022.

believe, and the perpetrators also defend themselves with the notion that the child behaved too defiantly, irritating the adult with this overheated sexual behavior. This attitude is absolutely reprehensible and extremely destructive since even if it was the case (which is almost impossible, but possible in some cases), the adult should control the events and not expect the child to behave like an adult.

Sexually abused children are psychologically damaged to such an extent that they are almost certainly unable to lead a normal sexual life as adults. Either they completely reject sexuality and become asexual or become sick people who satisfy their aberrant desires in a perverse way. Girls who are molested by their fathers almost invariably feel unfit to be mothers,³⁰ thus perpetuating their suffering. In addition, they hate themselves for the rest of their lives, regardless of whether they reveal the secret.

The family burdened with the secret of sexual abuse usually lives in seclusion in its own closed world, having little contact with the outside world. Since the secret must be kept, it is very important that the environment notices clear signs in the child's behavior, such as physical and psychological exhaustion, refusal to eat, sadness, indifference, fear of adults or intensely provocative behavior, and repetition of erotic movements.³¹

2.4 Neglect

Neglect is complex and multidimensional in nature. It can consist of neglectful caregiving; insufficient provision of food, clothing, hygiene, healthcare, and shelter; inadequate or general lack of supervision; unsafe environment; failure to protect from violence; emotional neglect; abandonment; failure to provide required medical care; exposure to illegal or other activities that promote delinquency or antisocial behavior; and failure to ensure school attendance.³²

A child needs love, care, emotional security, and close attachment for healthy development; if they do not receive this, it will have serious consequences both in the short and long term. An emotionally neglected baby is single-minded, indifferent, trying to entertain himself, rocking, stroking, or shaking his head. His gaze is blank and apathetic. Older children experience low self-esteem, underdeveloped empathy skills, speech development disorders, retarded cognitive development, regressive behavior, concentration difficulties, and declining school performance. A neglected child is difficult to motivate and communicate. Adolescence is characterized by self-destructive behaviors, such as alcohol, smoking, drug use, and uncritical sexual relations.³³

As a result of childhood neglect, the risk of developing personality disorders increases dramatically, and the tendency toward depression, anxiety, aggression, and diseases, as well as self-esteem and self-image, is severely damaged.³⁴

Emotional neglect, in particular, may lead to deficits in emotion recognition and regulation as well as insensitivity to rewards, potentially influencing social and emotional development.³⁵

3. In what kind of families can domestic violence occur?

It is a widespread misconception that domestic violence occurs only in families with low education and low economic and social status. In fact, it can appear at any level of education in families, of any status and its occurrence is roughly uniform at all levels.

³⁰ Mérai, 2006, p. 53.

³¹ Ibid, p. 45.

³² Ogle et al., 2022.

³³ Pászthy, 2007. p. 20.

³⁴ Ranschburg, 2006. p. 25.

³⁵ Strathearn et al., 2020, p. 399.

The most reliable predictors of occurrence were the personality of family members and family history. Most of all, those struggling with narcissistic personality disorder become aggressors within the family, and if someone is a victim of domestic violence in their childhood, the probability that they will end up in a similar situation in adulthood increases dramatically. If the victim is male, it is quite possible that he will be the aggressor in adulthood. If the victim is a woman, she will either be very neglectful and rude to her children or she will choose a partner with whom she will have to repeat the injuries she suffered in her childhood.

The head of the family who keeps his family in constant terror and regularly abuses and humiliates them almost always has a pathological personality, so punishing him alone will not bring about the expected results.

The likelihood of the occurrence of violence is increased by the following: certain socio-cultural traditions (“a child only learns if he is beaten,” “a woman is good if she is beaten”), alcohol and drug addiction, the occurrence of violence in the previous life of a family member, regular viewing of rough action films, authoritarian personality.

According to American research, the basis for the appearance of domestic violence is always a protracted or recurring conflict that usually arises because of the child. Money is the second source of dispute, followed by the division of housework, spending free time, and finally, sex. A poor financial situation and unemployment can be an increased risk factors.

For those families where there are no children, wife beating either does not occur at all or occurs in very small numbers, the frequency of the crime increases with the number of children. At the same time, in the case of six or more children, physical violence between couples ceased.³⁶

The following factors may increase the risk of neglect: childbirth difficulties, child development or behavioral problems, age of parents who engaged in neglectful caregiving, parental history of childhood abuse, poor parental coping skills, limited knowledge of child rearing practices, parental isolation, parental history of substance abuse, criminal behavior, lack of access to childcare, family stress, and family mental health challenges.³⁷

According to Hungarian public opinion polls, the size of the family is decisive for the appearance of aggression, so the larger the family, the more children there are, and the more certain the occurrence of violence. The Children’s ages matter; small children and young parents further increase the likelihood of disputes, which, according to Hungarian experience, arise in the vast majority of cases over money (or the lack thereof).³⁸

According to Hungarian research, domestic violence is more likely to occur in cases where pregnancy is unplanned (the child is born outside or before marriage), unwanted, or when parents are very young. The researchers identified the following factors that predict or are closely related to the possibility of later child abuse: low birth weight, premature birth, and neonatal separation in the first six months of life (prolonged hospital stay due to illness of the mother or the child, or if one of the parents was in prison during the critical period), because of which the bond between mother and child will be weaker from the start. A lack or weakness of attachment has been shown to be closely related to child abuse. They also researched the characteristics of children that also easily lead to abuse: hyperactive behavior, children who cry a lot, eat poorly, refuse physical contact, and hugs. Children born in bad marriages or broken relationships, or if the father leaves the mother during pregnancy, are at an increased risk.³⁹

³⁶ Tamási, 2005, pp. 32-36.

³⁷ Ogle et al., 2022.

³⁸ Tamási, 2005, p. 49.

³⁹ Kerezsi, 1995. pp. 59-60.

According to Ranschburg, the extent to which a child meets the expectations of their parents is also of great importance. If a child's temperament and developing personality do not fit the family's lifestyle, this will certainly be a source of countless conflicts and predict the appearance of violence with great certainty. 'If there is something different in the child's backpack than what the parent expected, then there is always a problem, and the signs of this can be observed and detected already in the second year.'⁴⁰

In the case of domestic violence, the treatment of the entire family is necessary. The victims should be helped to overcome the trauma, and the perpetrator should be freed from his aggressive urges and supported in learning alternative methods of stress management and child-rearing. Multigenerational cycles of violence in which parents regularly abuse their children, who then grow up to do the same as their own children, must be broken.

According to the experts dealing with domestic violence⁴¹ the appearance of aggression depends on the family heritage - the conditions in which the parents grew up, what experiences they brought from home - and the personality traits of the aggressor, so it can occur in families of any economic and social status.

However, according to Kerezsi, numerous studies indicate that among the causes of the appearance of domestic violence, we can primarily highlight financial problems, the parents' integration disorders, and deviant lifestyle, as well as the inadequacy of living conditions. According to her point of view, at-risk families are usually characterized by larger-than-average family size and an atypical family structure.⁴² Her claims are also supported by the data of Fehér's empirical research, according to which low education is a risk factor, as is an unfavorable labor market position and low income.⁴³ All these risk factors can be summarized and grouped according to increased stress.

Frivaldszky emphasizes parents' marital status; in his opinion, if the parents are married, domestic violence cannot occur only in cases where the parents are in a cohabitation relationship, since the essence of such coexistence is missing: respect.⁴⁴ Empirical research and statistical data also contradict the above statements, as the perpetrator and victim were married in 41% of cases, cohabiting in 28% of cases, and divorced in 19% of cases.⁴⁵

In poorly functioning family subsystems, the heads of the family tools are inherently incomplete. There are countless advanced means of influencing family members, including verbal persuasion, argumentation, and exemplary behavior. However, the aggressor's problem-solving and conflict-handling tools are exhausted by the use of milder or more serious forms of violence, so violence becomes a means of family communication. Because there is a lack of external control in such cases, there is a great danger that the problem will escalate and aggression will increase.⁴⁶

It is worth mentioning the signs can be used to recognize an abused child. A physically or sexually abused child typically avoids eye contact and flinches in the event of sudden unexpected contact. They are timid, shy, alarmed, oversensitive, and mistrustful. They are characterized by sleep disorders (they cannot sleep due to constant stress and fear; they are unable to relax) and eating disorders (due to complete rejection of food; they become conspicuously thin or seek comfort in constant eating, which leads to extreme obesity at a very young age). Abused children have a harder time establishing relationships with their peers than others and are typically lonely or excluded from the community. A neglected child is

⁴⁰ Popper et al., 2005, p. 21.

⁴¹ Morvai, 1998; Ranschburg, 2006.

⁴² Kerezsi, 1995, p. 43.

⁴³ Fehér, 2005. p. 176.

⁴⁴ Frivaldszky, 2012. p. 2.

⁴⁵ Fehér, 2005. p. 175.

⁴⁶ Kerezsi, 1995, p. 53.

conspicuously dirty, unkempt, and smelly. Since their parents do not care about them, their school results are also very poor. Adolescents are much more likely to show signs of depression, and their repressed negative emotions are expressed in aggression or auto-aggression (self-harm and suicide attempts). Sexually abused children may also exhibit over sexualized behavior and frequent mentions of sexuality.

3.1. Vertical families

In the case of vertical families, relationships are based on a clear hierarchy of subordinates and superiors, where subordinates are unconditionally obedient to their superiors, even if they do not agree with their superiors' wishes. In the vertical family, coercion, violence, and fear ensure the dominance of the family head. The main rule is that the dominant family member commands and punishes and the subordinate obeys and suffers. The punishment is not proportionate and is mostly unrelated to the offense; it is mostly just an excuse for aggression. This is known as the sandbag effect. Especially in the case of the head of the family with an authoritarian personality, it is common for him to be frustrated and tense because of something, but he cannot direct this frustration-induced aggression against the person who triggered it—for example, against the boss who criticizes his work—so he transfers the tension to the weaker members of his family.⁴⁷

3.2. Horizontal families

In democratically organized families, everyone is equal; they can decide on important issues together, and they love and respect each other. Violence has almost never occurred in these families. Of course, there can be conflicts here as well, but their resolutions and outcomes are very different from those of vertical families. Among other things, anger and dislike are sincere and directed against the other person. It is quite natural that even in a well-functioning relationship, there can be arguments and conflicts, but they are triggered by the behavior of the partner rather than an outsider.⁴⁸

Even in otherwise completely “normal” families, i.e., where neither party was a victim as a child and neither suffers from some kind of personality disorder, there may be some hostility, however, this must be clearly distinguished from manifestations of domestic violence. In dysfunctional but non-pathological relationships, “games” often appear, which can easily and quickly poison the relationship of the parties, but in some cases, these games keep the dying relationship alive for a long time. During the games, the roles of the “victim” and the ‘perpetrator’ are constantly changed, and the parties mutually abuse each other.

4. The consequences of maltreatment on children

Developmental psychologists have long known that the quality of the early mother-child relationship and the family environment can have lifelong consequences on a person's personality, so it is crucial to understand how a person's childhood develops. ‘In adult character traits, we find the quality of the parent-child bond that once existed.’⁴⁹

Child maltreatment can cause severe damage to their mental and psychological development. Some of the adverse outcomes associated with maltreatment include cognitive disability, anxiety, depression, PTSD, substance abuse and addiction, psychosis, behavioral problems, having multiple sexual partners, teenage pregnancy, obesity, cardiovascular disease, and overall decreased quality of life. Cognition and education outcomes including reading ability and perceptual reasoning, verbal intelligence, failure to complete high school or

⁴⁷ Ranschburg, 2006. pp. 35–39.

⁴⁸ Ranschburg, 2006.

⁴⁹ Popper et al., 2005. p. 26.

employment, and attention problems were measured in studies and showed significant associations with maltreatment. Physical abuse is also associated with high dietary fat intake, as maltreated children often turn to food for comfort, a risk factor for obesity and poor sleep quality in men.⁵⁰

For small children, sanctions are typically independent of what happens.

For example, if a three- or four-year-old child sees another child doing something right (e.g., washing dishes), but his parents still punish him for it, he concludes that he must have been punished because he was bad, so the punishment qualifies the action. Five- or six-year-olds are confused in this situation, so, to resolve the contradiction between action and sanction, they assume that they must have been punished because they did something wrong previously. Until the age of seven, children are incapable of classifying parental sanctions as unjust. They also think that if they are punished, they must have been bad, and on the basis of this, irrational guilt develops, which later becomes fixed and leads to serious personality distortion. They will have constant self-esteem issues that they will be anxious and withdrawn.⁵¹

A family saturated with violence consumes puts a lot of effort into giving the impression of a normal family. For a long time, outsiders will not detect a problem. Maintaining this appearance is particularly destructive to the child. It is impossible for them to develop strong self-confidence because they have a constant feeling of guilt due to lying. Because of this, they will later doubt whether people believe them, and after a while, they will avoid making friends and become lonely.⁵² Alternatively, they will lie to their friends all the time or exaggerate the incidents that have happened.

It often happens, especially in alcoholic families, that children are neglected and they almost grow up by themselves.

Such children have an extremely high tolerance and accept being neglected. For them, love and rudeness are forever intertwined, and this guides them throughout their lives, even during the choice of a partner. Adult children of alcoholic parents inherit anger, depression, joylessness, suspicion, damaged relationships, and an excessive sense of responsibility. They also resort to drinking like their parents. It is a terrible experience for the child that the person who should love him the most disregards him, is terribly unpredictable, and hurts him. This experience will accompany him throughout his life and will be there in all his relationships.⁵³

Children's self-image is shaped by the adults close to them—primarily their parents and kindergarten teachers—by rating criticizing or praising their abilities and actions. Unfortunately, many times, they are unaware of the effect of the personality traits they helped their children develop. The child makes every qualification part of his developing self, and if he constantly hears that you are worthless, he will become so.⁵⁴ The child can only love himself or herself with that love and can only return to his/her environment what he receives. A child who is not loved will struggle with self-esteem disorders throughout life; if he does not learn to love

⁵⁰ Strathearn et al., 2020, pp. 389–390.

⁵¹ Ranschburg, 2003. pp. 20-21.

⁵² Forward, 2000. p. 81.

⁵³ Ibid, pp. 88-89.

⁵⁴ Ranschburg, 2003. p. 34.

himself, he will not develop self-esteem. Once self-esteem is formed, it resists any attempt to change it.⁵⁵

It is difficult to regain a sense of trust and security once parents have trampled it. A person's personality is formed based on the basis of her relationship with his parents.⁵⁶ During the loving relationship, the so-called "primordial trust" develops and solidifies, which then accompanies a person throughout his life. If this primordial trust does not develop in the child because of the fault of the parents, no one will be able to develop it in adulthood.

Since the child is constantly afraid and anxious even when the period of calm before the storm is taking place, constantly waiting for the volcano of aggression to erupt, anxiety becomes constant. It remains even into adulthood; he will always be nervous and restless, anxious, and distrustful of everyone because he is used to having nowhere to hide from the rapist, no one to run to, and having to go home to the same hell every day.

Feelings of insecurity and lack of support had the worst effect on a child's developing personality. It is impossible to meet vague and undefined behavioral expectations. Parents adapt the tools of discipline based on their emotions at the time and not based on pre-established principles. Bullied children who grow up in such circumstances quickly learn not to expect support or love. They try to become invisible and do everything to avoid conflicts, which usually leads to abuse.⁵⁷

Verbal insults do not go away without a trace and are even more difficult to heal than physical wounds. Insensitive parents may not even realize that the many insults, humiliating comments, and disparaging comments that they treat their children every day are like burning the child's sense of self with a hot iron and inflicting a never-ending wound on his soul. Parents are at the center of the child's world, and if they claim that the child is not worthy of love, the child will believe that it is so.⁵⁸

Those who are victims of physical and verbal abuse blame themselves for what has happened and carry this guilt with them for the rest of their lives. In addition to anxiety, they have a constant sense of guilt and inadequacy, even if they have no reason for it. Abused children, due to their lack of self-confidence and self-esteem disorders, can only become successful people through incredible willpower and effort, since they must also overcome their limitations and believe that they can achieve the set goal because they are capable of it and deserve it. This is a difficult task.

Raising children is a huge responsibility and a very hard task if taken seriously. It is not an impossible task. There are only two things to keep in mind. One is to love the child unconditionally and sincerely. The other is to remain consistent in all aspects. Aggressive parents cannot meet these two conditions, and by constantly sending conflicting messages to their children, they completely confuse themselves because they never know what to expect. Unpredictability on the part of parents presents the greatest risk for the child. The constant conflicting reactions and expectations (getting praise for the same action on one occasion and being put down on another occasion) can trigger personality disorders, and in severe cases, can lead to schizophrenia.

Abused children are often exposed to a bizarre mixture of joy and pain, so they will constantly search for a source of parental love, they will do everything just to be loved. This pursuit of love continues into adulthood. As they are unable to distinguish between sincere love and exploitation, girls often become prostitutes or engage in inappropriate sexual relations as adults. In their case, it is common for them to run away from home at a young age, get married very soon, or have children to be able to break away from their toxic family as soon as possible.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 33.

⁵⁶ Forward, 2000, p. 129.

⁵⁷ Kerezsi, 1995, p. 152.

⁵⁸ Forward, 2000. p. 112.

However, in most cases, this is an apparent solution. Starting a family thoughtlessly usually worsens their situation.

The most serious problem in the case of these children is that, just like in “well-functioning families,” in pathological families, the advantages and disadvantages are passed down from generation to generation. Thus, boys who see aggression as the only possible way to relieve stress and resolve conflicts will grow up to be just like their fathers, passing on the family’s pathology to their new family. After all, children learn the basic norms of social coexistence in the family at an early stage in their lives.

5. Summary

In general, it can be said that the long-term consequences of domestic violence appear throughout the development of the victim, from the family to relationships with partners, and similar patterns are exhibited when the victim raises their own child. Adults who are victims of violence in their childhood are not able to forget their childhood. Unless they receive expert help, they cannot overcome the past, so they enter the world of adults without a transition from childhood. According to the experience of the research conducted by Kerezsi, children who grow up in this way not only pass on violence to their own children and partners, but their aggressive parents also get back what they gave them.⁵⁹ Adults who were abused as children returned to their aging parents the insecurity, lack of support, and lack of love that they suffered as children.⁶⁰ However, this does not solve the problem; it worsens it.

Child maltreatment is associated with a broad array of adverse outcomes during adolescence and young adulthood, including deficits in cognitive development, attention, educational attainment, and employment; serious mental health problems, including anxiety, depression, PTSD, and psychosis and experience of intimate partner violence, substance use and addiction problems, sexual health problems, physical health limitations, and risk.⁶¹

Domestic violence is also passed on to grandchildren; grandparents expect them to fix what they messed up and continue terrorizing them. There is no escape from the vicious circle without help.⁶² Experience proves that if they receive help to process what happened, the likelihood of abuse and passing on bad family patterns is reduced.⁶³ However, if someone does not have the opportunity to experience nonviolent communication and unconditional love based on true acceptance, neither in childhood nor later, they will have a very difficult time in life. The cycle of violence means that parents who report experiencing physical abuse or witnessing violence at home during childhood are at an increased risk of reporting that they engage in abusive or neglectful parenting.⁶⁴ Thus, it is important that everything must be done to protect children and break intergenerational patterns of abuse.

⁵⁹ Kerezsi, 1995, p. 105.

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 148.

⁶¹ Strathearn et al., 2020, p. 398.

⁶² Mérai, 2006, p. 38.

⁶³ Révész, 1999, p. 392.

⁶⁴ Greene et al., 2020.

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