

# PEER VIOLENCE: FROM CHILDREN'S AGGRESSION TO DELINQUENCY

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## **Abstract**

Violence among peers is a growing social phenomenon, which is becoming more brutal from year to year and directly threatens children's human rights. There is an entire range of unacceptable behavior among young people, from threats, giving derogatory names, gossiping, ignoring, depreciation to physical violence which, not rarely, lead to serious physical injury. Aggressive behavior of young people towards their peers is a serious violation of human rights and represents every act that causes physical, psychological or sexual injury, suffering or social harm. Peer violence has been constantly increasing in the recent years, with a high probability to become a delinquent criminal behavior. Aggression among peers is only one of the developing phases of aggression and violence toward others. Violators towards peers become delinquents, in a considerable number, who use violence in committing criminal acts and achieving criminal aims.

When studying the problem of peer violence, this must be taken into account: socio-political, socio-cultural, family, educational and individual factors. The responsibility is on everyone and without reviewing all the aspects of the problem, it is realistic to expect drastic forms of violence among peers in which life itself does not represent any value. What kind of contents and negative influences young people face with, is perhaps the best described in the words of Dušan Kovačević: "Children are born and grew up watching live broadcasts of death", or "enduring the terror of mad parents at home, because of politics, or because of sorrow and misery, detonate these days, weeks, years, kill those close to themselves, known and unknown"<sup>1</sup>.

*Keywords: peer violence, verbal violence, psychological violence, physical violence, aggression, delinquency.*

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<sup>1</sup> Kovačević, D. (2008), 20 Serbian divisions (Srbs to Srbs), NN and Novosti, Belgrade, p. 192

## INTRODUCTION

Peer violence is a phenomenon which has been seriously examined only since the last decades of the twentieth century in the world, and only in the last few years in Serbia, so it is not surprising that there is no a single universally accepted definition of peer violence. Although peer violence is not a new social phenomenon, it is still quite aside from scientific studies and social responses. Violence among peers is characterized by permanent transformations, both in character and by the forms and extent of occurrence. Peer violence has been constantly increasing in the recent years, with a high probability to become a delinquent criminal behavior which happens not in a small number of cases. Today, this phenomenon is actualized and great efforts are made to protect children from violence. The problem of the peer violence has been also expressed in Serbia, but only after 2000, an active coping with this issue has begun. The Subcommittee on Children's Rights and the Council for Prevention of the Ministry of Education are formed as a result of that effort. The UNICEF project "School without violence" was realized, such as many other activities at the community level. A significant effort has been made by all these activities in the overall perception of violence among peers. The project "School without Violence" achieved a great success, which was launched in 2005 in only four schools in Serbia, and 120 schools were included later, with approximately 70,000 pupils, 7,000 employees and over 70 trained mentors. But all these projects and actions have ended in the conclusion that it is necessary to adopt a national strategy on violence in schools and ensure its implementation, which would, along with other forms of prevention, give serious and concrete results<sup>2</sup>. Problems of violence, in terms of the adopted models of behavior, are often linked to the problem of identity in the literature, because the identity could simplest and most easily be determined through a model which is build, approved, or transmitted by an individual. In cultural terms, the identity can be defined as commonality, by which a being is identical to itself, means specific to some beliefs, values, and expectations. The psychological interpretation of the concept of violence is linked to the extreme, hyperactive behavior of young people. Sociological determination of violence is based on a social change and community, as basic factors where the elements of violence are sought. From an anthropological point of view, man is a violent being, not only by nature but also because violence is an act of learning, acquired in the process of socialization in a particular social and cultural context.

Violent behavior among peers is a specific form of aggressive behavior, a process that can lead to serious and far-reaching consequences of

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<sup>2</sup> Government of the Republic of Serbia adopted the National Strategy for Youth in 2008

every participant of physical as well as of the social and emotional life. It is considered as the most frequent form of unacceptable behavior of children in school, which can escalate into an extremely serious forms of antisocial and delinquent behavior. This form of violent behavior is a base of many problems associated with the violence among people. Participation in bullying among peers could be an important step in violent behavior, which is a combination of power and aggression, which can be manifested as: sexual violence, violence in relationships, violence in the workplace, spousal abuse, child, adult abuse, and other. Therefore, it is important to identify the elements of this form of deviant behavior and the factors that may be crucial in its formation and also work to prevent them.

### **DEFINITION OF THE TERM AND ETIOLOGY OF PEER VIOLENCE**

Violence is a complex, multidimensional, and dynamic phenomenon and necessarily requires a comparative approach. Definitions of violence range from a narrow definition in terms of equalizing with some of its forms - for example, physical violence, to the broader definition, which inclines of verbal violence toward incivility. Violence is presented in a wide range of human relationships - between parents and children, teachers and students, students and other students, violence in politics, economy, sports, etc. One of the key concepts associated with the term violence is the concept of power. In the widest sense, it can be defined as the ability to achieve the desired intent. Aggressive behavior includes a wide range of specific behaviors which, based on different criteria, can be divided into physical, psychological, and social. Physical and verbal aggression belongs to the direct forms of aggression, and the social to indirect aggression. Anyway, violence is a special form of aggression, whereby the dominant individual (the abuser) continuously behave aggressively towards the less dominant individual (the victim) for a long time.

Peer violence implies any physical or psychological violent behavior focused on children<sup>3</sup> on the part of their peers, and which was done with the intention of injuring. It reflects the unequal balance of power, whose characteristics are: a stronger person against a weaker person or a group against an individual. Bullying as a form of violent behavior of children aims to inflict harm to other child, and suffering and fear are the features of the victim. Study of the problem of violent behavior among young people from the viewpoint of different theoretical approaches enabled the understanding of the complex nature of the phenomenon of violent behavior but, at the same

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<sup>3</sup> According to the UN Convention any person younger than 18 is considered a child

time, contributed to the creation of terminological and conceptual confusion in the determination of the peer violation. The complexity in understanding the problem of peer violence is reflected in the various definitions and terms used for its determination. Today, violence is a particular challenge of theoretical and empirical studies of various sciences and disciplines, and this diversity causes methodological and theoretical outlines and specific conceptual definitions. Violence is a conscious and deliberate hostile activity with the purpose to hurt and cause a fear through threats or continuous severe aggression. Although violence may seem like a chaotic process, it always contains a few basic elements. The following elements are parts of bullying:

- disproportional power of the abuser who may be older, stronger, more popular, richer, etc. than the victim,
- the number of children who participate together in the abuse shows that bullying does not always involve a conflict of two children of equal power,
- the intent of injury - the abuser wants to inflict an emotional or physical pain. Violence implies a desire for harming other person,
- continuing threat of bullying - the abuser and the victim knows that violence will probably repeat,
- fright, fear - occurs as a result of violence, which is used to intimidate others and maintain the dominance of the abuser.

Forms and types of violence are different, according to the contexts in which they are manifested.

Passive (neglect) and active violence (physical, psychological, or sexual) could be considered. There is also individual or collective violence, and organized (gangs, groups), etc. The most common forms of the peer violence are: verbal aggression, threat of beatings, money extortion, "racketeering", physical injury, even armed and sexual violence. In all of this, based on previous research, the school environment does not provide protection from peer violence, in the opinion of a large number of students, teachers and parents. Violence is a behavior that reflects the short-term and long-term effects of socialization and whose expression varies depending on the social context and circumstances. The perception of violence is also socially conditioned. The way in which individuals and groups perceive violence and its severity is subjected to change and is influenced by the cultural and social norms on what constitutes acceptable or unacceptable behavior (Levine & Rosich, 1996: 3)<sup>4</sup>.

At least two types of factors affect a significant range of violent behavior among peers. One is the psychological and emotional structure of personality of an adolescent, and the other is the social environment. Both of

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 16 - 17

these factors can not be considered truly separately, because socialization of personality depends on the impact of the micro and macro environment, and the personal features are the main base for socialization<sup>5</sup>. Psychosocial explanations emphasize that violence and aggression are learned kind of behavior in response to frustration, to serve for achieving the objectives, and used as a means of violent behavior. Also, these theories indicate the cognitive learning abilities, personality factors, early child development, socialization, but also wider cultural and social factors that influence the peer aggression. The literature emphasizes the role of personal and situational factors in the explanation of the peer violation. Erick Fromm in his book “Anatomy of human destructiveness” indicates that aggression is not a unique occurrence and distinguishes its two kinds:

- benign, which is biologically adaptive and serves to life; and
- malign, which is biologically non-adaptive.

The first is a response to the threat of vital interests, it is reactive and defensive. It is common to human and animals and solves the problem of the threat by removing the one who causes this condition. In contrast, the malign aggressiveness, i.e. destructiveness and cruelty, is related only to the human race and is manifested in the life through violence of all forms and intensity<sup>6</sup>.

The essential question is why children and adolescents become aggressive? What is that in their nature, or better, in their nature modeled by the social circumstances which motivates them to aggressive behavior? These issues are dealt with numerous psychological theories and different theoretical models, including various aspects and factors of formation and maintenance of aggression among children and adolescents. It is considered that many psychosocial factors in the interaction contribute to the creation and manifestation of peer violence: individual characteristics (gender, history of parenting, temperament, personality, emotional intelligence, etc.), situational factors (peer group dynamics, social norms, school) but also dysfunctional patterns in family (corporal punishment and violent emotional outbursts by parents, presence to domestic violence, conflict between parents, etc.). Parents play a very important role in creating the capacity of their children to establish healthy relations with others, and with peers. As a significant figure to which the children are linked, parents provide a secure base which allows the children to trust the others and to cope with stress. As a figure of authority, parents teach their children to appropriate social behavior and set limits for inappropriate behavior. Parents are the model of different roles to the children:

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<sup>5</sup> Prelić, Lj. ( 2012 ) Causes of increase of peer violence among minors, Compilation: Juvenile legislation in the Republic of Serbia, p. 31 - 32

<sup>6</sup> Ignjatović, Đ. (2011) Concept and etiology of violent behaviour, CRIMEN (II) No. 2., Belgrade, p. 181

wife, mother, father, employee, etc., and teach children of social skills and values by their behavior and attitudes, non-violent resolution of marital and other conflicts through assertive communication, relating to others with respect, establishing self-control, tolerance of differences, feeling of justice and fair play. Regarding the risk factors specific for the occurrence of violence among children, numerous studies have dealt with precisely the influence of *family functionality*.

The research indicates that families affect the occurrence of violence among children via four factors. The first factor relates to *a parental commitment*. Children who are low on the scale of parental commitment, parents who are emotionally insensitive to the child's needs and provide little emotional support, attention and interest in the child, are more frequently disobedient, aggressive and have behavioral problems. The lack of warmth and care, especially in the youngest age, increases the risk of subsequent violence of boys and their hostility toward others. Basic emotional relationship between parents is extremely important. Basically, negative emotional approach which is marked by a lack of warmth and care, clearly increases the risk of later children's violence and hostility towards others, who also become violent delinquents in a considerable number of cases. Boldri believes that poor care for children and neglect of their feelings could be significant risk factors for the development and manifestation of the peer violence. Growing up in such a family environment leads to the development of a low level of empathy in the child towards other children<sup>7</sup>.

Another dimension of parental style is *a parental supervision*, and the degree to which the child is supervised, disciplined, and directed. Parents who do not establish clear limits in relation to the violent behavior of their children towards peers and adults, or parent who are permissive for expression of aggression, will increase child's aggression, and thus increase the risk of later delinquent behavior. A greater number of researchers suggests that if manifested aggressive behavior is not sanctioned, then the child reinforces aggressive responses to the failure to adopt mechanisms of inhibition of aggression. To corroborate aggression in any form, inaction, wrong response, or consideration of violence as a child mischief, children enhance their aggressiveness and violence to the scope of a violent crime.

Third important factor that increases the level of the child violence is *a corporal punishment and violent emotional outbursts by parents*. The research results<sup>8</sup> show that children who behave violently towards their peers at school, as well as those who are victims, grew up in families where parents

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<sup>7</sup> Baldry, A.C. (2003) Bullying in schools and exposure to domestic violence, *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 27 (7), p. 713 – 732

<sup>8</sup> Baldry, A.C. (2003) *Ibid*, p. 723

tend to be violent towards each other or towards children. In these families, violent behavior of children and adolescents is explained as a learned behavior. There is less probability for development of children antisocial behavior in cohesive families.

Apart from the child abuse, witnessing domestic violence is a risk factor for the expression of aggressive behavior, and together with it, violence among peers. This standpoint is supported by the results of numerous studies. The study results of the *Canadian National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth* (Baldry, 2003) indicate that children who witness home violence often abuse their peers directly or indirectly.

The fourth risk factor for expression of violence among children, which relates to education, is, by Olweus, the temper of the child. Specifically, the researchers (Vasta, Haith, & Miller, 1998) state that "difficult to bring up" children have more behavioral problems. Some authors use the term "difficult temperament", which is defined as frequent and intensive expression of negative emotions since the earliest age. Children who are estimated to have a difficult temper at the age of 6 months, show behavioral problem at the age of 3 to 6, and tend to be aggressive at the age of 6 to 7. Caspi (2000) believes that the most important dimension of children's temper, which is out of control (restlessness, impulsiveness, poor attention, etc.), is what represents a predictor of aggression and delinquency at a later age<sup>9</sup>. However, the results show that there is no direct correlation between temperament and the antisocial behavior, but the connection where the mediating variable is the relationship of parents and children. There is an increased risk that these "difficult to bring up" children develop an insecure commitment in the interaction with insufficiently sensitive, insufficiently patient, insufficiently persistent and insufficiently stable parents, and that parents respond aggressively to the child's behavior. Thus, even when we talk about the role of temperament, we should rather consider the interaction of temperament of the child, and the parents' relationship to the child, rather than the isolated effect of a temperament. It is interesting to note that studies have not found a correlation between the peer violence and educated parents, economic standards, and social status<sup>10</sup>. Socio-economic conditions in the family (parents' educational level, income and housing standards, etc.) based on the research results, are not associated with the level of bullying. There are violent (and nonviolent) students in all social strata, and the same is true for the students who are

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<sup>9</sup> Caspi A. (2000) The child is a father of the man: Personality continuities to adulthood, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 78: p. 158 - 172

<sup>10</sup> Olweus, D. (1978) *Aggression in the schools: bullies and whipping boys*. Washington, DC: Hemisphere

victims<sup>11</sup>. Identifying the causes that lead to manifested violence involves research of the social factors, decoding of latent and symbolic elements that call for violence, which are inherent in different social and cultural discourses. The final aim is to define recommendations for effective social interventions at different levels (educational policy, employment policy, cultural policy) that will prevent the activation of violence on the scale when it is no longer possible to control. We should bear in mind that the nature and source of violence are complex, dynamic, and that the actors of violence often change their social and ideological roles and positions.

The condition of social crisis is what precedes and coincides with violence as a social-psychological phenomenon. The crisis can be defined as a conflict situation that has the potential to change, and sometimes violence appears as a mode of its removal and possible return in a stable condition. However, the crisis may become a permanent condition that persists with smoldering hotspots whose removal is not certain because there is no potential for radical twists, but represents a generator of constant frustration and a source of aggression and violence<sup>12</sup>.

## CONSEQUENCES FROM THE PEER VIOLENCE

Violence is behavior which reflects the short-term and long-term effects of socialization, whose expression varies depending on the social context and circumstances. The perception of violence is also socially conditioned. The way in which individuals and groups perceive violence and its severity is a subject of change and it is influenced by cultural and social norms of what represents an acceptable or unacceptable behavior (Levine & Rosich, 1996: 3), i.e. at different social systems and cultures. Violence is understood and defined differently, which refers to the approach to the problem and the effects of violence prevention. Thus, the acceptability or the legitimacy of violence directly or indirectly addresses the prevalence and forms in a social system<sup>13</sup>. From a psychological point of view, the study of this phenomenon is significant because the aggressiveness in the early period is the basis for the development of aggression in adulthood, and because the quality of childhood and personality development largely depends on the expression and inhibition of aggressive behavior. Peer violence can have

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<sup>11</sup> Batić, D. (2013) *Psycho-social factors of the risks in the etiology of peer violence*, Peer violence (etiology, phenomenology, solutions and comparative experiences), Compilation of works

<sup>12</sup> Pavićević, O. & Kron. L. & Simeunović - Patić, B. (2013) *Violence as a response: social and psychological implications of crisis*, Institute for criminologic and social researches, Belgrade, p. 11 - 12

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 16 - 17



numerous negative psychosocial consequences as well as consequences on the mental health, both for the victims and the perpetrators of violence. For these reasons, to violence in general, and specifically to peer violence we can not and should not be neutral, but engaged and active in the prevention of this phenomenon. Numerous studies indicate that children's aggressive behavior undoubtedly leads to increasingly intense aggression and violence during adolescence, which is typically put in the function of criminal behavior. A very high percentage of juvenile offenders who commit crimes with elements of violence had expressed the aggression to peers and younger children in childhood.

### **PREVALENCE OF PEER VIOLENCE**

The severity of peer violation is confirmed by a research conducted on 26,628 pupils from third to eighth grade in 50 primary schools across Serbia in the spring of 2006. The results show that, according to their statements, 65.3% of the students have experienced some form of bullying in the period of three months (the percentage varies from the range of 48% to 80%). The results of the repeated violence show that 20.7% of the pupils are classified as victims, 3.8% are abusers and 3.6% are victims / abusers. Adult violence was reported by 35.7% of the pupils and 42% have witnessed verbal aggression of other pupils to teachers. The most common forms of peer violence were insults (45.6%) and machinations (32.6%). Boys were declared as abusers slightly more often than girls and some were more often exposed to violence by the peers and adults. Older pupils were violent more often and also more often complained of adult violence, while the age differences in exposure to violence were minimal<sup>14</sup>. Surveys conducted by the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study in 35 countries to more than 120,000 pupils aged 11, 13, and 15 showed a worrying level of school violence - about 34% of the pupils have been subjected to violence at least once. The percentage of those who have been once exposed to violence varies, depending on the country and region, among eleven-year-old children: 14% - 63%; among thirteen-year-old children: 17% - 69%; among fifteen-year old young people: 12% - 61%. The results show that 11% of them were exposed to violence at least two or three times a month. The percentage of frequent exposure to violence varies depending on the country and region: 4% - 28% among eleven-year-olds, 6% - 36% among thirteen-year-olds and 2% - 32% among fifteen-year-olds. It was concluded that exposure to violence decreases with age, and that differences between the two sexes are relatively small. The

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<sup>14</sup> Popadić, D.& Plut, D. (2007) Violence in primary schools in Serbia: forms and frequency, *psychology*, Vol. 40 (2), p. 309

percentage of the pupils who admit that they bullied others is worrying. This percentage is 35% of the overall number of respondents. There were significantly more boys than girls among the abusers<sup>15</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

Aggressive behavior of schoolchildren is one of the most common forms of human rights violations of the modern age. As much as it seems like an internal problem at the first glance, stronger forms of peer violence are closely connected with the forms and causes of family violence, and among peers, in the surroundings of schools, in the city or in the society as a whole. Aggression as a form of peer violence among children is an intriguing topic, because it opens the question of the relationship among the children, away from parental supervision. It is certain that the patterns of behavior, especially aggressive, were learnt from the parent behavior models, but the question is how parents can help to ensure that their child does not become an abuser or a victim. The causes of peer violence among schoolchildren are numerous and they can be classified into those of individual-endogenous and social-exogenous nature. Although there are different theoretical approaches to explain the peer aggression, none of these theoretical concepts can independently and fully interpret such a form of violence. Only by an integrative approach it is possible to explain and understand the aggression of young people in a significant form. The appearance of some forms of aggressive behavior in an early period of growth, in certain cultures, is considered as “normative”, i.e. it is not considered as a deviation from “normal” growth and development of the children. In certain societies and cultures, some forms of behavior, which are a form of violence among school children by definition, are considered as a harmless and acceptable model of behavior. Such a form of “education” certainly confuses the child, and causes confusion in the adoption of a real moral values later. To a more significant elimination of aggressive behavior in the school environment, it is necessary to create the conditions that will encourage the thinking and problem solving through such a model of behavior and communication that leads to understanding and respect. Non-violence as a model that seeks and provides the trust is the need and necessity of every person, above all, the young.

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<sup>15</sup> Popadić, D. & Plut, D. (2007) *Ibid*, p. 313. according to: Craig, W. M. & Harel, Y. (2004), Bullying, physical fighting, and victimization. In: C. Currie, C. Roberts, A. Morgan, R. Smith, W. Settertobulte, O. Samdal, & V. Barnekow Rasmussen (Eds.) *Young people's health in context. Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study: international report from the 2001 / 2002 survey*, WHO Policy Series: Health policy for Children and Adolescents, No. 4. Copenhagen, WHO Regional Office for Europe.

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