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ZJAWISKO PRZEMOCY MAŁOLETNICH DZIECI WOBEC RODZICÓW

THE PHENOMENON OF VIOLENCE AGAINST PARENTS BY THEIR MINOR CHILDREN

Received on: 28/01/2021 Approved on: 19/05/2021 Published on: 15/06/2021
DOI: 10.5604/01.3001.0014.8938
Original Article
Source of funding – own research

Streszczenie

Słowa kluczowe: przemoc, czynniki ryzyka, sprawca przemocy wobec rodziców, konsekwencje przemocy wobec rodziców, profilaktyka

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Abstract
Abuse of parents by their minor children is a more and more distinctive family and social problem. Parents and guardians are reluctant to report violence inflicted upon them by their own children. There is a number of reasons: shame of being criticised and assessed; a feeling of helplessness; no clear, specific definition of child-to-parent violence. This article describes the phenomenon based on the available literature. It provides a set of definitions connected with child-to-parent violence, and a description of forms of the abuse concerned. Also, the article contains an overview of selected research on the phenomenon. And conclusions drawn from the research concerned rendered it possible to determine child-to-parent violence risk factors, and to take an attempt to determine prevention actions.

Keywords: violence, risk factors, the perpetrator of violence against parents, the consequences of violence against parents, prevention

Introduction
A prerequisite for a healthy society is the health of its basic unit and the most lasting and oldest social group – family. Family provides its members with the basic socialisation and the development required to successfully function in the society. One of the aspects of a healthy family is the parent or guardian looking after their child and supporting it until it starts an independent life. Such a family helps the child satisfy all of its needs: from the basic needs connected with the living conditions to higher-level needs related to feelings and proper growth. Family and home are inseparably tied together through a sense of security, love and mutual warmth. But if those relationships are disrupted, we can sometimes see something opposite in daily life. It is obvious that conflicts happen, both in the society and in the family. According to theoreticians, they differ in several aspects. They can have a varied impact and intensity but they are still often considered as normal phenomena forming a part of our human nature. J. Mucha² observes that conflicts can be caused by divergent interests,

² J. Mucha, Socjoterapeutyczne aspekty zarządzania sytuacją konfliktową w wymiarze jednostkowym i społecznym. Kilka uwag wprowadzających, in: Rozwiązywanie sytuacji
values and expectations. The fundamental question is: when does a conflict turn into violence, domestic violence?

Domestic violence is a phenomenon that has been considered as a major problem for many years. It is defined as set of behaviours intended to control another person through force, intimidation and manipulation. It always involves abuse of power in relations based on inequality.\(^3\) It is intended to cause elimination, manipulation and domination which stem from various psychological motives and processes such as: fear, power, revenge, desire for profit, pleasure and addiction.\(^4\) Domestic violence is not homogeneous. It includes behaviour directed against the partner, abuse of parental authority against children, neglect of children by parents or guardians, abuse of seniors and abuse of parents by children. The last category, which is central to this article, is not listed by the World Health Organisation as a separate form of violence. This phenomenon is classified into abuse of seniors. Abuse of parents by children is a new and underexplored phenomenon in many societies; it is socially marginalised so systematic research in this area is sparse. However, the few studies on abuse of parents by their children show that the phenomenon is increasing and has grave consequences.

1. Definition of the phenomenon

Domestic violence is nothing surprising or new nowadays. We can quite often read articles about abused women, less frequently men and children, about a brutal husband, an aggressive wife and the problems that accompany such a family, as well as the consequences of violence inflicted by family members. But the form of violence where children, especially underage children, abuse their parents is something that few are aware of and it invokes disbelief. This is most likely because parents believe that they are the ones primarily responsible for the behaviour of their children,


while children are perceived as individuals directly or indirectly harmed by violence or neglect and they are not easily seen as abusers.\footnote{E. Gallagher, \textit{Children’s violence to parents: a critical literature review}, http://eddiegallagher.com.au/Child%20Parent%20Violence%20Masters%20Tesis%20Gallagher%202008.pdf (access: 07/01/2019).}

The problem is becoming increasingly noticed not only in Poland or Europe but also for instance in Taiwan, South Korea, Egypt, Sri Lanka and Colombia. \footnote{A. Holt, \textit{Working with adolescent violence and abuse towards parents: approaches and context for intervention}, https://dl.uswr.ac.ir/bitstream/Hannan/140492/1/9781138807990.pdf (access: 07/01/2019).} Gallagher believes that the phenomenon needs to be approached more seriously\footnote{E. Gallagher, \textit{Parents victimised by their children}, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/261529464_Parents_Victimised_by_Their_Children (access: 7/01/2019).} because it causes a lot of stress in the family and may break it apart. It may also be “the beginning, an incentive to abuse one’s future family,” i.e. the child may identify with such a model and continue the behaviour in the family it will start one day. The problem of children’s violence to parents may not be given enough attention due to the firm belief of the society that all children love and respect their parents and that parents can cope with the aggression of their own children.

It is hard to find the definition of violence towards parents. The term is ambiguous and hard to define because the behaviour of children is often characteristic of a certain stage of their natural development. The problem of defining violence towards parents also lies in drawing a distinction between violence and everyday behaviour, such as various family conflicts and the rebellious attitudes of teenagers manifesting disgruntlement and testing the limits of how much their parents can take. Sometimes those limits are crossed and they lead to violence. What also makes it hard to define the term is the parents’ feelings and tolerance to such behaviour. However, in the attempt to arrive at a definition, we can say that the phenomenon includes any situation where parents feel helpless and powerless, humiliated and deprived of a sense of authority by the children who are under their supervision and because of that such parents experience fear, anxiety, suffering, and physical and mental pain causing an unaccepted change in behaviour. Violent conduct of children as rebellion against parental authority is intended to humiliate, abuse and hurt

the parents. It may take various forms; it often starts with verbal abuse, insults and yelling. Zlokočić made an attempt to define the phenomenon. According to her, violence towards parents means any behaviour of a child, a kind of strategy, which deliberately, and in a way detrimental to the parent, is intended to cause the parent physical or mental harm or financial loss in order increase the control over the parents. Other related definitions of the problem treat it as children’s overuse of harmful behaviour towards parents in order to gain power and control over them. Friend, Howard & Parker defined such violence as any behaviour that leads to seizing power over the family by dominating or intimidating the parent or bending them to the child’s will.

2. The phenomenon of violence against parents

Some studies show that there is no significant difference when it comes to the sex of children using violence against parents. Still, they suggest that boys inflict this violence more often than girls. Research shows that boys who witnessed domestic violence at the age of 5 to 7 engaged in self-destructive behaviour or started to display aggression towards those from whom they experienced violence. The risk of violence against the mother by a son was higher when the mother lived with the son alone after a divorce or separation. Boys may identify with a father who had abused the mother. The assumption was supported by research results (McCloskey & Lichter, 2003). According to some authors, girls represent one third of all such abusers, although they engage in mental abuse more often than in physical violence. Just like boys, in most cases they redirect their anger and rage against the mother, who may demand submissiveness

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from the daughter. If this is the case, girls may at some point no longer control their tension, frustration and stress and may express them towards the mother in an unacceptable way. In the future, girls may behave the same way towards their partner or their own children (Cottrel, 2001).

Abuse of and addiction to psychoactive substances are considered as high risk factors for aggressive behaviour, including violence against parents (Calvi Orue & Gamez-Guandix 2013). Taking such substances may be a major risk factor leading to conflicts with parents and disrupting family relations. Numerous studies show that disrupted relations with parents, lack of closeness and lack of discipline or inconsistent rules are risk factors for addictions. The characteristics of parent abusers are very similar to those listed in the description of the personality of addicts: low tolerance to frustration, low self-esteem, depression, and difficulty expressing emotions and establishing contacts. Such characteristics may appear in a family environment with improper upbringing in a broad sense (Singer, 1975).

3. Forms of children’s violence against parents

The phenomenon of violence against parents includes already familiar forms: physical, mental and financial.\(^\text{12}\) Aggressive behaviour of children against parents is not always easily detectable, mainly because, as has already been mentioned, it may be considered as normal and passing “with age.” Parents of every adolescent often have to deal with conflicts, difficulties, insults and mutual misunderstanding on a daily basis. Such situations are characteristic of the period of adolescence and they are seen as normal because the child is attempting to be independent and is developing their own identity. The conflict may arise for example from lack of permission to a new style (hair, clothes) of the teenager, to contacts with the peers with whom the child spends the time, risky behaviour etc.\(^\text{13}\) The question is: where does normal “healthy” conflict with the child end and violence begin?

Despite the fact that the phenomenon is underexplored worldwide, we can observe many forms of children’s violence against parents. The most visible one is physical violence, which includes a catalogue of aggressive behaviours on the part of the child, such as kicking the parent, hitting them with fists or throwing objects at the parent, tugging on the parent’s parts of the body or clothes, pinching, biting, pushing, and in extreme cases even causing bodily injuries or attempting murder. Physical violence also means destruction of personal belongings, refusal to eat, drink or take medications. It can be concealed, and the parent or another person from the child’s environment may not recognise it as violence. Those are the cases where the child is pulling the parent’s hair, arms, legs etc. in order to knock the parent over, throw them off the chair, couch etc.

Another form of violence is mental violence which is when the child knows that the parent is in a difficult emotional state and uses the parent’s weakness to elicit specific conduct and decisions. This form of violence includes but is not limited to: insults, criticism, humiliation, threats of self-aggression, threats of inaction, swear words, verbal abuse against other people (friends, relatives, neighbours), fleeing from home.

Children’s behaviour such as yelling or ignoring the needs of the parents, failing to inform them where the child is going and what it is doing may be treated as a part of daily life. If the behaviour is lasting and recurrent, it is classified under the National Clearinghouse On Family Violence as violence against parents because it is intended to inflict physical pain on the parents in order to control them.

Financial violence is a form of violence that is slightly left out in the issue of children’s violence to parents; still, researchers believe it is present. This category includes all the behaviour intended to achieve financial gain through deception, lies, extortion, spending money without the parents’ permission. It is any behaviour the child uses to influence the parents in order to take advantage of their financial resources in a way that

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15 J. Zloković, *op. cit.* (access: 07/01/2019).

threatens the financial security of the whole family. Zloković classifies the following behaviour as financial violence against parents:

– stealing money or other valuable objects, selling personal belongings without the parents’ permission, deliberately destroying the property of the parents, forcing the parents to buy expensive things which the family cannot afford,
– forcing parents to pay off the debt or loans taken out by children and forcing the parents to pay for goods acquired without the parents’ knowledge and permission.

In today’s consumer society the pressure felt by the parents may be a source of stress, especially if it comes from their own children. As Zloković has noted, financial exploitation often starts with the child asking for money; if the parent refuses, a verbal conflict arises in the form of insults, blackmail, which may also lead to physical violence. This form of violence includes elements of emotional violence because the parents feel constantly guilty because they do not meet the expectations of the child.

4. Research overview

Given that this is a relatively new area of research, children's violence against parents is qualified as a type of domestic violence, for which it is hard to collect accurate data. An older study by Straus et al. shows that 18% of children aged 3 to 17 have inflicted violence against their parents by hitting them. In another study, by Fiqueiry-McDonough of 1985, involving 2000 American students aged 15, 9% respondents had admitted to have hit their parents at some point of their lives. Peek et al. studied young people aged 14 to 18. 10.8% of the respondents confirmed that they

18 J. Zloković, op. cit. (access: 07/01/2019).
19 Ibidem.
20 I. Pospiszyl, Przemoc w rodzinie, WSIP, Warszawa 1994, pp. 126-127
have hit their parents in the past 3 years.\textsuperscript{22} This area of violence was also explored by Evans and Warren-Schlberg, who conclude that the most common form of violence against parents is physical violence (57\% of cases), followed by mental violence, mainly verbal (22\%). An interesting study was conducted by Pagani. She discussed violent behaviour with mothers and teenagers. The results are that 64\% of mothers have experienced aggression from their children. The teenagers have inflicted physical violence by pushing the mother or pushing her away in 73\% of cases, 24\% have hit her with a fist or kicked her with their legs, while 12\% have thrown objects at her. Data show that mothers (82\%) more often than fathers (18\%) fall victim to violence. Pagani.\textsuperscript{23}

According to data from the Central Police Headquarters, 314 minors were suspected of domestic violence in 2019, versus 303 in 2018 and 293 in 2017. This reveals a clear growth trend.\textsuperscript{24} However, this data does not reflect the actual problem of violence because this is the number of the actions taken within the Niebieska Karta procedure (domestic violence procedure) exclusively by the Police (without the interventions of other non-police entities authorised to fight domestic violence). Besides, a lot of violent behaviour is not reported to the support institutions and organisations, and the reported cases are often classified simply as domestic violence.

5. Risk of children’s violence against parents

This category of violence varies considerably depending on whether the family has two parents or one only. The authors agree that the frequency of violence against parents increases in incomplete families.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{24} http://statystyka.policja.pl/st/wybrane-statystyki/przemoc-w-rodzinie/50863,przemoc-w-rodzinie.html.
The risk that is taken into account in the context of violent behaviour of children is considered increased if specific factors arise. Those factors explain why the problem arises and why certain individuals or groups engage in violent behaviour more or have a tendency to adopt an attitude of a person harmed by violence. On the other hand, the mutual dynamic and interaction between various forms of behaviour oriented towards the child during its development weaken the impact of the risk factors and thus reduce the probability of aggression. An analysis of these processes makes it easier to decide which directions of preventive and therapeutic activities to choose. In literature, the most important, empirically confirmed, risk factors for aggressive behaviour are:

- genetics;
- other biological factors connected with perinatal injuries and with an adverse set of the child’s temperament traits (including: deficits in the behavioural inhibition system, excessive impulsiveness, exacerbation of negative affect);
- a specific arrangement of family-related factors, including improperly enforced discipline (excessive, too poor or inconsistent), lack of proper supervision over the child’s behaviour, attachment deficits, mental problems of the parents, anti-social family values and improper modelling (criminal behaviour and anti-social personality of parents, divorce, unemployment);
- adverse sociocultural context of the child’s development: poverty, crime, low socioeconomic status of the family, frequent relocations, a dangerous neighbourhood, belonging to youth subcultures, too much time spent watching TV and playing aggressive computer games.

One of the most important risk factors for violence against parents is a negative family environment, with special emphasis on upbringing styles, and children being victims to domestic violence inflicted by another family member. A family which is torn by conflicts and aggression and where relationships between the family members are cold and neglected increases a risk of the child’s negative behaviour. Poor quality of...
parenthood encourages aggression. Financial difficulties of the parents invoke fear and frustration in children, and as a result led to violent conduct.

Researchers identify two types of families where violent behaviour of children directed against parents may occur:

• the first one is where the parents fail to define transparent and comprehensible rules. The boundaries they set are unstable and the consequences of inappropriate behaviour are not maintained. Such an approach is often adopted by parents who feel guilty because of separation with or death of their spouse and want to compensate the loss of the other parent to the child. Sometimes they also feel helpless because they experience financial, health or social problems. In such an environment with little interest in the child, without rules, the parents fail to fulfil their parental responsibility and they “fall out” of the role of the parent as an adult guardian. If this happens, the children may, through their conduct, subconsciously “punish” their parents for improper performance of their parental duties;

• the other one is where the parents control the child and completely deny it any autonomy. Such children are entirely dependent on their parents, who immediately fulfil all of their wishes and avoid any behaviour which could disturb the child. In such conditions, there is a high risk of the child’s demands transforming into “tyranny.” Aside from permissive parenting, the authoritarian parenting style is problematic too. It is a harsh and strict style where the child is required to face high expectations and its behaviour is powerfully controlled. Rigorous parent control is harmful because the child can develop depression and anxiety. The factor identified in such families is lack of emotional warmth and support, which are necessary to ensure high-quality relations between the parents and the child.28

Children who inflict violence on their parents come from various social classes, religious backgrounds and ethnic groups. There is no single “type” to which we can classify and simply categorise them but certain characteristics of young people that could help anticipate this kind of violence have been identified. Garrido claims that there are three main red

flags that occur in childhood and may later lead to violence against parents, i.e. when the child:
• is unable to develop moral emotions, such as empathy, compassion or love, and when it has trouble expressing the feeling of guilt;
• exhibits egocentric behaviour;
• often lies, threatens, blackmails or is cruel to its siblings and friends.
One third of such children engage in aggressive behaviour at school.\(^{29}\)

Such “cold” personality highly predisposes to later aggressive and risky behaviour during adolescence. Violence against parents results not only from dysfunctional family relations but may also stem from disorders developed by the child. National Cleainghouse On Family Violence has noted that violence against parents was inflicted by a group of ADHD, bipolar or schizophrenic young people. However, no mental illness was diagnosed in the majority of underage abusers. However, violent behaviour was linked to the presence of other disorders, e.g. behavioural or learning disorders. Aggressive behaviour in teenagers may be only one of the causes of mental illnesses or disorders, which are often hard to diagnose and invoke embarrassment and guilt in the parents. Forms of children’s aggressive behaviour against the parents vary and they cannot be captured in any specific patterns. Such behaviour can change as the child grows up, its intensity and frequency may change too, it may become weaker and vanish completely with time.

6. Prevention of violence against parents

Violence remains a family secret because the parents are afraid and ashamed of it, which is why the society does not see the extent and frequency of the problem and why the parents do not seek help. It is hard to accept the existence of the phenomenon because there is a belief that the abuser should be stronger than the victim. It is hard for parents to accept the fact that they are victims of their own child, and they excuse its behaviour with temporary bad mood, the influence of the peers, the media, stress or the stage of growing up.\(^{30}\) Those parents who have recognised

30 D. Friend, J. Howard, T. Parker, *op. cit.* (access: 07/01/2019).
the behaviour as violence are horribly ashamed, sad and frustrated. They feel lonely and isolated in their situation. They wonder where they made a mistake in the upbringing and how they “provoked” the teenager to violence. Mothers are afraid of being judged as irresponsible and bad mothers and this is one of the reasons why they stay silent. Parents are confused and they do not understand how this happened.

The modern society is characterised not only by quick changes of the pace of life. The quick lifestyle and the parents’ concerns about financial matters leave them little time and patience for the child’s needs. Some families, though “alive,” do not live together, do not notice each other, are not interested in being together. Sometimes the parents distance themselves from the family, become impatient, facing such problems as unemployment, exhaustion and marital problems. This affects the climate in the family. At some point, they start to feel guilty for being too little involved in the upbringing of their child. They try to cater to every whim of the children, for example by buying them toys and allowing them to engage in various risky activities. To prevent this disconcerting phenomenon, parents should want to be positive role models but also authority figures for their children, remembering that positive communication is the foundation of any good relationship.

Being a parent is one of the most difficult challenges a person can experience in their life. Proper relations with the child require involvement from the moment of the child’s birth and taking care of its needs in the first year of life. Parents as victims to violence do not have sufficient knowledge on how to cope and where to look for help, while institutions are not adequately sensitive and alert to this phenomenon. They want to avoid being stigmatised as parental failures at all cost so the only solution they see is to keep the problem a secret in the hope that it will withdraw spontaneously. Violence often breeds violence. This means that being subject to violence, abuse, a brutal physical punishment or a cruel mental punishment, accompanied by lack of warmth and proper emotional reaction, is a very high risk factor for violent behaviour in children. They become aggressive not only towards their peers but at some point they may direct their anger and frustration against their parents.

31 A. Horsburgh, op. cit. (access: 07/01/2019).
32 D. Friend, J. Howard, T. Parker, op. cit. (access: 07/01/2019).
When this happens for the first time, the child must be observed. But if aggressive behaviour starts to exacerbate and its frequency increases, the parents should seek help from specialists because they may be unable to cope with the problem on their own. Proper upbringing of children requires them to understand the rules, which the parent must consistently apply. Setting the rules and boundaries of behaviour and defining the consequences of their violation teaches children about responsibility. It is important that the parents stay patient and aware of their own incapabilities, mistakes and limitations. Knowing their own shortcomings should motivate the parents to minimise them through psychoeducation, training, workshops for parents or meetings with a therapist.
References


