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## EMOTIONAL NEGLIGENCE OF A CHILD IN A FAMILY – A CHALLENGE FOR SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

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*Summary.* The article deals with the issues of emotional negligence of children in a family. The role of parents is taking care of a child, and it is not just about the physical side, but it is also about emotional bonds. Their lack causes anxiety, sadness, stress and aggression. In the case of physical violence there are traces visible on the body, the emotional abuse causes traces on the soul, which stay in a child forever. In the case of the latter kind of violence, it is also more difficult to diagnose and prove to the parents, who should bear legal consequences for it. This type of child abuse requires intervention from the institutions appointed for this purpose. One of them is social assistance, in which social workers provide support in a situation when the basic conditions of the existence of a person or a family were threatened or the quality of life has deteriorated to the extent that it is below the socially acceptable minimum. In article presents the task of social assistance working with children emotionally neglected in their family home.

**Keywords:** emotional negligence, psychological violence, social assistance, family.

## ЕМОЦІЙНА ЗАНЕДБАНІСТЬ ДИТИНИ В СІМ'Ї – ВИКЛИК ДЛЯ СОЦІАЛЬНОЇ ДОПОМОГИ

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*Стаття присвячена питанням емоційної занедбаності дітей у сім'ї. Функція батьків – піклуватися про дитину, і не лише про її фізіологічні потреби, але й про емоційний стан та емоційні зв'язки. Їх відсутність викликає занепокоєння, стурбованість, стрес та агресію. Результати фізичного насильства спостерігаються на тілі, емоційне насильство викликає сліди в душі, які залишаються у дитини назавжди. Останній вид насильства важко діагностується, важко також довести батькам, що вони повинні нести правову відповідальність за нього. Цей тип жорстокого поводження з дітьми вимагає втручання інститутів, призначених для цієї мети. Одним з них є соціальна служба, працівники якої надають допомогу в ситуації, коли основні умови існування людини або сім'ї знаходяться під загрозою або якість життя перебуває нижче соціально прийнятного мінімуму. У статті представлені завдання соціальної служби, що працює з дітьми, емоційно забутими в їхньому сімейному домі.*

**Ключові слова:** емоційна занедбаність, психологічне насильство, соціальна допомога, сім'я.

**Introduction.** Family is the most important institution for bringing up children. It is obliged to carry out multiple tasks, among which the most important are providing financial base, and meeting emotional, cultural, and moral needs. However, a family does not always duly fulfill these functions. This especially happens when there are problems (not always caused by the fault of its members). According to Elzbieta Tarkowska [9], who prepared the expertise within the “EAPN Poland – Together for the Social Europe”, the most difficult issues in a family are poverty and negligence of children. Citing the research of the Central Statistic Office, the author reported that in 2008, 34% of the population being at risk of severe poverty were children [9]. Poverty, unemployment, parents' diseases, including addictions, and other dysfunctions are the source of negligence of children. “Families who live in poverty see a big problem in solving simple tasks, everything starting from fulfilling the basic needs of everyday life: food, clothing, books and school supplies, adequate housing, safeness of a small child, growing social and cultural needs of an older child” [9]. Parents' financial problems make children live in extremely difficult conditions, cramped apartments, sometimes without a bathroom, or a secreted place to study, in the atmosphere of quarrels, fights. Lack of school supplies, textbooks, notebooks, lack of the opportunity to participate in extra-curricular activities make children perform worse at school in comparison with their peers. Some of them quickly leave their family home, wanting to become independent and detached from the environment in which they grew up.

However, child abuse also occurs in the so-called “good homes” where parents work and neglect their children. And it is not about the lack of financial resources, but indifference to own children and not satisfying their emotional needs. These children may have a lot of toys, fashion clothing, go on trips abroad, but they do not have the love of their parents. Support to these families is provided by state institutions, among which social assistance plays an important role. Its function in the prevention of child abuse is what I would like to write about in the rest of this article.

**The issue of emotional abuse of children in a family.** The issue of child abuse in a family is very often raised in our country. Journalists, politicians and scientists all take the debate on this issue and try to work out appropriate rehabilitation programs. In Poland, every year, children become victims of domestic violence, they are abandoned by their parents, and even cases of infanticide occur [2]. Police statistics show that in 2013 there were 50 934 procedures of “the Blue Cards” (it is activated in a situation of domestic violence), there were 19 254 children – the victims of domestic violence, and 426 of minors who were taken away from their parents and placed in fostering environment [8].

The role of parents is taking care of a child, and it is not just about the physical side (so that the child has a hot meal, clothes, books for school), but it is also about emotional bonds. They are needed by a human as much as food or drinking, without them, you can not function normally. Their lack causes anxiety, sadness, stress and aggression. According to Anita Czerkas, parents must use the proximity with the child to build mutual relations, touching the child, hugging him at every opportunity. This is particularly important when a child is small, he needs tenderness, he wants to know that parents love him unconditionally, and that for his parents there is nothing more important. Kissing the child goodnight, reading a bedtime story, being with him when he cries or when he rejoices, shared meals - all of these make a young man not feel alone [3]. Never frighten the child that he will be abandoned for his inappropriate behavior, you can neither show that for the parents he is negligible. Such improper attitude may cause the fear for loss, uncertainty and feelings of rejection. This in turn can cause various forms of escape, to the world of the Internet, addiction, and finally, suicide. Lack of care, support and love exposes the body to loneliness, and its effects can be experienced in adulthood [5, p.59].

The violence being experienced from the closest ones is the highest dimension of cruelty. Parents who should be the mainstay of the child’s security, his support, become executioners. And while, in the case of physical violence there are traces visible on the body, the emotional abuse causes traces on the soul, which stay in a child forever. In the case of the latter kind of violence, it is also more difficult to diagnose and prove to the parents, who should bear legal consequences for it. According to the record of Article 111 of the Family Code: “If the parental authority can not be performed due to permanent obstacle or if the parents abuse their parental authority or flagrantly neglect their duties towards a child, the court will deprive the parents parental caring authority. Deprivation of parental authority can be ordered also to one of the parents” [11].

According to Dany Glaser there are several forms of child abuse:

- failure in fulfilling the emotional needs of children (emotional indifference) – parents are busy with their own affairs and forget about the children,
- constructing a negative image of a child, noticing only defects, lowering self-esteem,
- improper relationship with a child, having too high or too low demands, excessive protectiveness or lack of care,
- not accepting the individuality a child, a young man has to run parents’ commands and meet the needs of adults’ mental health,
- teaching antisocial behavior [6].

In 2008, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy prepared a report on child abuse in Poland [1]. 3,000 adult Poles (selected at random) and 502 people who professionally help the victims of violence (educators, social workers, police officers, curators, health professionals) were examined with the tool of interviewing. The results turned out to be appalling. In our country, there are still people who believe that calling a child names is a normal thing (8%), that there are situations that justify violence used (12%). 24% of respondents accept beating children, 19% of people say that psychological violence against children (frightening, threatening) is not violence, and 9% believe that there is no sexual violence against children at all. These stereotypes appear most frequently among people who have low education and financial difficulties, among men and people under 18 years of age and over 60 years of age. In the further part of this study questions about having experienced violence appeared. It turns out that 44% know at least one family in which violence is used against a child, 31% of respondents admitted that they knew a family, in which there is psychological violence and as many commented on the physical. 17% of respondents knew who applies economic violence against children, and 5% - sexual. What is more, 19% had used violence against the closest in the family (more often these are the people who were once victims of violence themselves), 37% of adults said their parents had used different forms of violence against them in childhood. 82% of families in which there was violence turned for the assistance to the institutions and majority, unfortunately, was not satisfied with the help given. The same research shows that Polish society believes that one should not interfere in domestic violence against the child, because:

- you can have problems yourself (9%)
- it is hard to get to who is actually guilty and who is right (8%),
- you can cause more trouble to the child – the victim of violence (7%) [1].

The established institutions come with the assistance to an abused child. One of them is social assistance, in which social workers provide support in a situation when “the basic conditions of the existence of a person or a

family were threatened or the quality of life has deteriorated to the extent that it is below the socially acceptable minimum” [13, p. 8]. In the following part, I will present the task of social assistance working with children emotionally neglected in their family home.

**The tasks of social assistance in the range of intervention and prevention of emotional negligence of a child in a family.** In the Social Welfare Act of 12<sup>th</sup> March 2004 one can read that “Social assistance supports individuals and families in their efforts to meet the needs and enables them to live in conditions equivalent to human dignity” [12]. There are many reasons due to which social assistance is granted. These problems, among others, include: poverty, unemployment, homelessness, orphanhood, illness, disability, having many children, natural disasters, addiction, leaving prison or childcare centers, as well as domestic violence [12]. Assistance which may be provided by social welfare centers is divided into money benefits (permanent, temporary, targeted benefits, loans to prop independence, support for foster families and foreigners) and non-monetary benefits (e.g. social work, social insurance contributions, material assistance, counseling, shelter, food, clothing) [12]. Institutions operating within the framework of social assistance have assigned tasks:

Social Assistance Centre: support in overcoming the life problems, financial and commodity assistance, social activation of individuals, groups and communities, integration of the socially excluded;

District Family Assistance Centers: issues related to foster care, helping addicts and foreigners;

Crisis Intervention Center: supporting people in times of crisis, advising, giving psychological and social assistance, giving shelter for 3 months;

Support Centre, including specialized centers for victims of domestic violence: the provision of shelter to victims of domestic violence for 12 months, psycho-pedagogical support, prevention of social exclusion [4].

Another important issue related to the problem of abuse is the Act of 10<sup>th</sup> June 2010 amending the law on preventing domestic violence and some other acts. This regulation sets more detailed tasks of municipalities, district and provincial government, with the reference only to the prevention and fighting against hurting the closest family:

– tasks of municipalities – the preparation and conducting of communal violence prevention programs, counseling and intervention, organizing intervention teams, placing the victims in the support centers,

– county tasks: prevention of violence, especially related to children in families, organization of crisis intervention centers,

– tasks of the local government: provincial programs preventing domestic violence, creating new solutions to this problem, preparing the training for people who help these families [10].

In 2011, the Amendment to the procedure of Blue Cards was introduced. Their aim is to help, in cooperation with individuals and institutions dealing with this problem, families in situations of violence and to prevent its occurrence. It includes social worker's responsibilities, which involve: diagnosing the situation of the family, providing social counseling, educational, social, legal, medical treatment, if necessary, organizing a shelter for victims of violence, working with the perpetrator of violence in order to motivate him to seek therapy [4]. The victims of domestic violence are invited to participate in an interdisciplinary team or a workgroup. It is made of people assisting victims of violence (police officers, district police officers, social workers, probation officers, NGO, schooling, health care representatives). Their task is to develop a plan of assistance for victims of violence. The members of this team (or workgroup) shall also take action against the perpetrators of violence. If the problem is addiction – the ill family member is directed to a municipal committee for solving alcohol problems [4].

Each voivodeship is obliged to carry out the tasks stated in these regulations and to provide assistance to victims of domestic violence. Here is an example of such activity in a selected area of Poland:

– educational and legal counseling,

– family mediation,

– advisory assistance offered by the Crisis Intervention Centers, Crisis Intervention Points,

– preparing conferences, training about domestic violence,

– organizing activities for school counselors and teachers on the rules of behavior in situations of violence,

– activities for the youth, school assemblies on the subject of violence and its prevention,

– social workers from welfare centers prepare preventive measures for parents – perpetrators of violence,

– school shift of Student Ombudsmen [1].

According to the Art. 12 of the already mentioned Act of 10<sup>th</sup> June 2010 in a situation of domestic violence when life, health or safety of a child is in danger, a social worker together with the police or healthcare professionals can take the child away from the family and take him to a member of the wider family (grandmother, aunt, an adult sibling), a foster family or an intervention institution. However, in order to avoid such situations, social workers along with other experts taking care of the family, should work with the family and take a number of actions so that the family “rebuilds again”, knowing what mistakes shall not be made, so as not to lose their children and not to hurt them.

**Conclusions.** Emotional negligence is a complex problem, especially if it affects a child. Every person should

at home experience the feeling of security, acceptance and love. Impaired relationships with parents and the child's unmet psychological needs, make the youngest feel rejected, unwanted, and thus arises the feeling of loneliness: "The hardest part is the fear of people, on whom we depend. We feel worse and immature to what they say. This fear makes us close ourselves in their presence. We do not have the courage to reveal to others what do our loneliness and fearful thinking hide. We are afraid that we may not be liked by someone. There is strong inner need to prove others that we mean something" [7].

Prevention of domestic violence should therefore start with education of parents. They must realize the importance of emotional closeness with their children. Anita Czerkas [3] suggested the parent decalogue that I would at this point developed a little:

– "Love begets Love" – if the child is loved, is being said that he is loved, he will reciprocate those feelings. What's more, the child will not only learn to respect his parents, but also other people and will try not to hurt others,

– "I respect the views of others" – you have to be open to what the child says, listen to him carefully and learn to hold discussions with him, to show the multiplicity of paths to choose. In some time, the young man will have to learn to make decisions, therefore, he must know that there is always a solution, and if necessary he may turn to parents for assistance,

– "fear is the enemy of trust" – the child needs to feel safe at home. This is the most important place where you can always "hide". When parents do not ensure that feeling the child will look for other places and people to have this need met,

– self-reflection – the parents shall insight into themselves, constantly learning and discovering their unknown "self", they are critical about their own actions and open for improving social skills, including educational ones that are needed to work with their child,

– empathy – is an important skill of the parent, it is an attempt to understand the behavior and emotions of the child,

– a parent must be a parent, not a partner – you can not be a friend of your child, you can be in a friendly relationship with him, but remember that it is an adult who sets the rules and boundaries,

– own example – to be a good tutor for your child, you have to start with yourself, change own bad habits, be a role model,

– reinforcements – a parent must respond to the child's behavior and properly use either a reward or punishment. The use of penalties only does not motivate to work on yourself. Therefore, you must take care of the balance between these reinforcements,

– helping within reason – the task of parents is to teach the child independence and self-reliance. This is possible only when adults allow the child to make decisions and bear the consequences of them,

– providing for own needs – parents need to take care of themselves, of their needs, they can not fully devote themselves to children, as they will experience the emptiness and become miserable themselves, and an unhappy parent cannot give happiness to a child.

In Poland there are many state institutions to fight against violence, and there are many non-governmental organizations as well. However, if such situations are not disclosed no effective interventions may be undertaken. The whole society has to change the way of thinking about this issue and realize how much harm it brings to those who are unable to defend themselves against it. As long as we passively watch violence, it will last, and the youngest will be the victims of their own parents.

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