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Domestic Violence Against Children

Strategies of Explanation and Counteraction

Children's safety: the letter of the law and society's attitudes

The safest place for children should be their own home and family, but the facts place this assumption in doubt. In the United States there have been approximately 1,400 registered cases of children's deaths as a result of actions by adults (including criminal neglect), but according to estimates of the University of Tennessee, as many as 4,000 children die annually through the fault of adults. Additionally, up to 116 million cases of abusive treatment are reported [1].

According to data of Russian statistics, 2,000–2,500 children

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die every year as a result of domestic violence; about 2 million minor children up to the age of fourteen are beaten by their parents, more than 50,000 children run away from home every year to avoid abuse, 25,000 of them are being sought by the authorities, about 2,000 take their own lives every year, more than 50 percent of domestic crimes are committed in the presence of children, and 30–40 percent of all crimes of violence in Russia are committed in the home. The number of homeless children in our country, now 3–4 million, is rising [2].

The legal base has been created for the prevention and combating of this dangerous phenomenon [3]. In 1948 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which constituted an international act to proclaim the rights and freedoms of the individual. All individuals (women, men, and children) have the right to live a life free of violence. In 1959 the United Nations adopted the Declaration of the Rights of the Child and stipulated that a child has all the rights listed in the Declaration of Human Rights. In 1989 the United Nations General Assembly approved the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, which went into effect in the Soviet Union in 1990. A number of the articles in the Convention spell out special legal measures that acknowledge the child's right to healthy development, the right to be protected against various kinds of infringements, including abusive treatment and sexual perversion, and measures to assist children who have been the victims of abuse, including abuse committed by parents.

The relevant articles in the laws of this country include those in the Constitution of the Russian Federation, the Family Code (1995) and the Criminal Code (1996), the Law on Education (1992), and the Law Guaranteeing the Rights of the Child in the Russian Federation (1998). In the past seventeen years a vast array of laws, Russian Federation presidential edicts, and governmental decrees have been passed for the purpose of ensuring the basic rights of children and women: laws and regulations for the protection of the health of citizens, labor safety, the principles of social services to the population, additional guarantees for the social protection of orphans and children not under parental care, and the principles

governing the state system for the prevention of homelessness and juvenile crime.

Abusive treatment of children has not been seen as a social problem everywhere and at all times, by any means. Surveys have shown that public opinion is tolerant toward corporal punishment. In 2006 we conducted a survey¹ in three cities of Russia (Izhevsk, Samara, and Saratov) that included an on-the-spot street poll of residents, a questionnaire survey of school students and parents, and interviews with specialists. The street poll was participated in by 1,783 people, of whom 842 had minor children. It turned out that one-third was aware of cases of harsh treatment of children, about half thought that corporal punishment was not permissible, while one-third said that such measures should depend on the situation, and about one-tenth thought that it was permissible to beat children.

Almost half of the parents (45 percent) had had occasion to punish their children: this was more often the case with middle-aged people between thirty-six and fifty (about 57 percent). Among those between eighteen and thirty-five, 43 percent were raising children and resorting to various punishments. It was the older respondents who seemed most humane: only one-third reported that they had ever punished their children. The women applied punishment more often (64 percent) than the men (37 percent). It is true, of course, that on the average women spend a great deal more time with children: according to V.A. Artemov's data, women spend two or three times more time taking care of children [4]. Men and women resort to approximately the same kinds of punishment, and any differences in this regard are not significant. According to the data of the survey, more than 30 percent make use of corporal punishment, and most use measures that are quite harsh: beating or whipping with a strap. It turned out that only 14 percent tried to influence their child just with a calm word or a talk.

It is well known that methods of children's upbringing are regularly passed on down from one generation to the next, and the children, as they grow up, learn the same kinds of training methods and the measures that their own parents applied to them. The survey confirmed that the people who were frequently punished by their parents when they were little are inclined to act the same way. This

is manifested with special clarity among parents who have children up to the age of eighteen. In the opinion of the respondent, the more often he was punished in his childhood the more widely prevalent corporal punishment is in today's society and the more permissible it is and justified by different circumstances. People who were not punished when they were children speak with greater certainty about the unacceptability of physical punishment. What this means is that their children have a greater chance of living a serene and happy childhood. It is true, however, that relations between parents and children do not depend solely on family traditions. After all, the family is subjected to numerous risks in today's society.

We asked the respondents in the street what they would do if they were to witness abusive treatment of a child. About 30 percent said that they would not get involved in what was going on, that it was the family's private matter; in their opinion, the parents themselves know what they ought to do. Almost 70 percent would try to stop the abuse, get involved, and somehow help the child. Only about 14 percent have any concrete idea of what they would do. Half of them think that they would use force to put a stop to the physical abuse of the child, and the same percentage would make an attempt to appeal to the appropriate bodies of authority (social welfare services, the police, school administration, kindergarten teachers, or civic organizations). Does this mean that Russia does not have an effective system to protect the rights of children?

On the one hand, the majority of Russians are not tolerant of abusive treatment of children, and they are not indifferent to the sufferings of a child: two out of three people reported that they would intervene if they saw a parent beating his child, while the third would just pass on by. On the other hand, these ideas are quite contradictory: corporal punishment as a measure of upbringing is applied in one out of every two families, and only half of the respondents think that it is not permissible.

In addition, in our study we conducted a poll of 700 students between the ages of eight and fourteen in Saratov, Samara, Izhevsk, and Kazan, as well as 510 parents of children of the same age in Saratov, Kazan, and Izhevsk. The young respondents are well aware that physical abuse is practiced in the families of their classmates.

About 57 percent of the students in the entire sample said that they knew about such cases; about 60 percent of the parents surveyed are aware that children are beaten in families that they know. Only 12 percent of the adults answered that children are not beaten in families that they know. Half of the students surveyed justify that kind of behavior on the part of adults.

Virtually all the parents surveyed say that the use of physical punishment is a method of upbringing, and just about all of the respondents agreed with that answer choice.

Will a child stand up for his rights? According to the laws, minor children up to the age of fourteen can lodge a complaint with the welfare and guardianship agencies, and after fourteen they can go to court. Most school students whom we surveyed were not about to lodge a complaint against their parents. Such a desire had arisen only in 16 percent of the young respondents.

The mythology of domestic violence against children: The attitudes of specialists

In present-day professional practice, a number of techniques have been developed in Russia and in other countries by which to detect incidents of abuse and to monitor children's condition. In spite of this, the abusive treatment of children continues to remain a closed topic not only in the mass media but also in educational institutions, the social services, and institutions of health care and justice. Our study's objective was to determine the characteristics and problems in the functioning of the system involved in solving the problem of domestic violence. In implementation of the project, in 2006 an analysis was conducted of forty-one interviews relating to twenty cases of abusive treatment of children in Saratov, Izhevsk, and Kazan. The materials were gathered in the strategy of a multimethod case study, making use of interviews, observations, and the analysis of documents.²

Just about all of the informants exhibited a pronounced negative reaction in regard to violence: "it is not good to punish a child, at any rate physically; after all, we are not living in the Stone Age"

(a female teacher, age forty-eight);³ “essentially, children are very innocent creatures, and for this reason raising your hand against them is in general a very mean act” (male legal expert, age thirty-six). The informants account for cruelty on the individual level by attributing it to a deviation from the norm in the personal development of the parents, who are “mentally ill” (a female psychologist, age thirty-six) and characteristics of personal relations in the family: “even if the family is intact, and there is a daddy, there might be some kind of miscommunication, quarreling and squabbling, misunderstanding or rejection, or there might be another woman involved, interpersonal problems like these, and, as usual, it is the children that are caught in the middle” (a female psychologist, age thirty-four). A second type of explanation, relating to the specific character of the culture of parenthood, mentions widely prevalent practices of upbringing and ways of resolving conflicts that provoke or encourage violence; the parents are not able to prevent violence and are not properly trained pedagogically: “our punishment stems from helplessness, from our own inconsistency . . . we are not able to find the right words, the right methods, humane methods” (a female schoolteacher, age forty-five).

A third type of legitimation suggests harsh punishment when the child is at fault: “there are times when the children themselves drive you to it; I have had times when I punished my own children very severely, and it is only now that I realize that very likely my action constituted violence against them” (a female psychologist age fifty-two). Instances of this kind can also, supposedly, stem from children’s overall failure in school: “the child received a low grade and his mother . . . scolded him . . . and deprived him of something” (a female teacher, age forty-five), as well as so-called incorrigibility on the part of children: “there are children who are hyperactive, and hyperpassive, and very inattentive, and very restless” (a female psychologist, age thirty-four). Psychologists and educators attributed difficult relations in the family as a consequence of age: “the adolescent years are a very difficult time . . . and parents do not always react appropriately to it, which can result in conflict” (a female social educator, age forty-eight).

A fourth type of explanation has to do with structural causes that are linked to the quality of life in the households. Overwork and stress owing to the necessity of earning extra money to make ends meet, everyday troubles, and a low level of material security, cases when “a person’s nerves give out because he has to work at several jobs just to survive” (a female educator, age fifty-three). It was also asserted that abuse is supposedly registered more often in families that have just one parent. In the opinion of a psychologist, for example, “in families that are incomplete, where the head of the family is generally the mother, emotional tension is very high, which is why cases of physical punishment of children are frequent” (a female psychologist, age thirty-six). Families headed by a mother predominate among households with just one parent, and this may account for the frequency of children’s physical punishment by the mother. On the other hand, very often such households include the mother’s unregistered partner, and he may indulge in aggression against the children. In other words, specialists lay the blame on the mother even in cases where she is not the source of the violence.

Most of the interpretations are linked to a justification of violence—as a result of parents being overloaded with work, as the result of bad behavior on the part of children, with the root of these practices either in the personality characteristics of parents or children, or else in the cultural traditions of the upbringing of the rising generation. All of the explanatory schemas that specialists use in determining the causes and the character of violence can be represented metaphorically in the form of several myths.

The myth that “children are the source of the problems” asserts that “the children themselves provoke the abuse.” This widely prevalent conviction brings us to the social stereotypes of the infantilization of the victims of violence, stereotypes rooted in numerous cultural texts and practices. What is meant by the provocation of violence is that if the child (the adolescent) conducted himself differently—if he helped out around the home, if he acted right, it would not be necessary to “punish” him. This explanation falls apart if we apply it to the situation in which a foreign college student is

beaten up because he “provoked” racists by the color of his skin or the shape of his eyes. The myth of provocation focuses attention on the characteristics and actions of the victimized child as being the cause of adults’ negative behavior, and asserts that the victim’s behavior leads to violence. The data of surveys show that children often do everything they can trying to please their tormentor, who will still find some excuse to act with aggression.

The myth of the “atypical family” accounts for abusive treatment of children by reference to families’ demographic characteristics and social status. It is believed that so-called incomplete families exhibit the most abusive practices. The frequency of physical punishment in such families is linked to a lesser degree with the character of the household but to a greater degree with the cultural practices of upbringing, methods of anger management and irritation, which are widely prevalent not only in poor families of the risk group but also in families that are more well off.

The myth of “drunkenness that gives rise to aggression” seeks the roots of aggressive behavior in parental alcohol abuse. The use of alcohol reduces anyone’s ability to control behavior, but some abusers lead a healthy way of life and are not addicted to tobacco or alcohol. While undergoing treatment for alcoholism, a number of people continued to be aggressive and abusive. A great many studies in other countries confirm that alcohol is not the cause of violence but is utilized by abusers to excuse their aggressiveness [5].

The myth of “the inevitability of evil” asserts that it is not worthwhile to try to combat domestic violence, since it is so widely prevalent and has always existed everywhere. However, criminal statistics provide evidence of the opposite: according to official data of the World Health Organization, every year over 1,300 children die in Europe as a result of physical violence, and meanwhile the data are different within the region. In the Commonwealth of Independent States that figure is almost three times higher than in the countries of the European Union, where the system to combat and prevent domestic violence is well developed [6]. In contrast to the other countries, Russia does not have mechanisms in place, including legislative mechanisms.

“Family affair” . . . Problems of the functioning of the system of prevention

On the basis of our analysis of interviews and documents we were able to conclude that cases reviewed by specialists and taken to court are extraordinarily harsh: there are huge bruises on the victims’ bodies, burn marks, and even life-threatening injuries: “we deal with children who, with no other way out, run away, they try to find help somewhere—in other words, these are children who have determined for themselves that violence is being practiced against them” (a female psychologist, age forty-five). A child’s realization that his parents’ actions are not right serves as a symptom of the extreme degree of the abuse, since, as is well known, many children put up with physical punishment in the belief that they do not have the right to resist, and also because they are afraid of losing the love of their cruel parent. This respondent’s reply invokes the well-known principle that in order to receive a service one has to apply for it—in other words, unless the child himself comes to seek help (and when that happens it is an extreme option), no case of abuse will be detected. No mention is made of neighbors or other witnesses getting involved; evidently such a practice is not widely prevalent. In addition, this comment is an indication of the acute problem of the low effectiveness of efforts to prevent the abusive treatment of children.

Even when there are obvious signs of abusive treatment of children it is very difficult to establish proof—in the first place, owing to the complexity and, at times, even the impossibility of intervening in the private sphere. A second factor is that it is difficult to break the cycle of violence in view of the codependency of family members: “family cases are very hard to prove, and in addition to that, very often an application will be withdrawn before it gets to court” (a female Division of Juvenile Affairs inspector, age twenty-nine). Third, there is an absence of appropriate alternatives such as a substitute family, and complicating factors such as the undesirability of placing the child in an orphanage, and the child’s fears of losing his family and home or of being punished for lodging a complaint against his parents. Before a specialist

receives the “authorization to take a child from his family for a temporary stay in a shelter, before a court decides to strip parents of their rights, parents do so much to frighten their children that the children only tell wonderful stories about how nice it has been to live with their mama” (a female psychologist, age thirty-six). Fourth, the chain of actions necessary to provide evidence of abuse is not properly organized: “a lot of time passed, enough so that the bruises and scratches had disappeared, and without a ruling by forensic medical appraisal the case falls apart” (a female PDN inspector, age twenty-nine).

The specialists were unanimous concerning the importance and urgency of holding discussions in public about violence against children, and they sharply criticized what they see as incorrect information purveyed by the mass media. Journalists describe in detail instances of abusive treatment, they show the unhappy faces of the children and the drunken faces of the parents, instead of showing what has been done to punish the wrongdoers. In the opinion of our informants, by showing abusive treatment of children in their families, the mass media only serve to provoke aggression. These days, “in the newspapers and the magazines, and in television broadcasts, everything is negative; you turn on the television in the morning . . . and you get the impression that nothing good ever happens in the world” (a female social educator age fifty-three). But the television screens ought to be showing positive examples of relations within the home, because the basic aim of social policy ought to be to preserve the family, to teach people how to get along with each other in the little domestic community that they have created.

Our respondents believe that the policies of the mass media need to be changed: any problem that they are reporting ought to be reported on a multiplane level rather than in a one-sided manner. It is essential to explain to children what their rights are and teach them how to stand up for themselves. “Children have to know how to exercise their rights rather than abuse their rights” (from talks with specialists of the social rehabilitation center in the town of Balakovo, Saratov oblast). From the standpoint of the specialists, it is legal experts who ought to initiate programs of this kind.

Something that has to be considered a definite breakthrough in the work of professionals is the acknowledgment of the existence of psychological or emotional abuse as a form of abuse. Not very long ago, about five years ago, it was believed that there are only two forms of abuse, physical violence and sexual abuse, and although emotional abuse was mentioned in the literature, hardly anyone, even among professional psychologists, had any idea how to recognize it and work with the consequences.

It was found that professional networks are not well maintained, and this is especially true in the raion centers. In some institutions in major cities, there is still a taboo on any discussion of the topic of domestic violence against children, and researchers encountered this taboo in the course of studying the social phenomenon. In the opinion of specialists surveyed, nonstate organizations have been more progressive, and have mastered methods of working with the victims. Exchanging this kind of experience would be very useful to the personnel in state-run institutions: "Whenever we encounter the problem, we always start to look for some way to deal with it that is not hurtful to the child, we look high and low, and meanwhile . . . there are answers available that could definitely make our job easier" (a female psychologist, age fifty-two).

According to the informants, among ordinary citizens, among neighbors and acquaintances, this problem is passed over in silence, since many believe that a family's affairs have nothing to do with them. And many of our respondents also classify themselves among these ordinary people: "it is not our business, it is the family's private affair, and suppose I try to intervene, what's going to happen? He's not going to stop humiliating the kid, that's for sure, and he will either dump something on me or tell me to go to hell, and what do I need that for?!" (a female psychologist, age thirty-four). The respondents complained about the inaction of ordinary citizens who, when they witness abusive treatment, keep silent about it and thus encourage the aggression: "a lot of violence is being shown [on television] . . . we have simply got used to it, and we don't even make a distinction between real life and the television screen. . . . When we are walking along the street and see someone lying there, and we suppose that he is just drunk, but that is not always

the case, the same as children who are being beaten behind closed doors” (a female PDN inspector, age twenty-nine). In the opinion of the respondents, it is only people of the older generation who have a strongly developed civic stance, and it is possible that they will provide assistance in protecting children. But in the first place, citizens are not very well informed about the problem of domestic abuse against children; second, they tend to be tolerant toward the phenomenon; or, third, they do not know about the agencies and specialists whose job it is to prevent and eradicate that evil. Meanwhile, the abusers not only deserve to be subjected to punitive sanctions, they also need psychological help.

In the course of discussing the functioning of the system of prevention and legal remedies, our respondents had the opportunity not only to criticize the system as it stands but also to propose ways to make it better. All of the specialists have a pretty good understanding of how the system works, possibly as a result of the fact that explanatory work has been stepped up in a number of oblasts. In Saratov oblast, the Committee for Juvenile Affairs under the oblast administration has drawn up recommendations that have been sent out to all of the institutions that are involved in the work of preventing domestic violence and investigating cases of that kind.

In the opinion of the specialists, the main shortcoming in the organization of the prevention of domestic violence is the fact that the system of court justice needs to be improved. In the first place, difficulties arise when it comes to instituting criminal proceedings in cases of “abusive treatment of children”: “very often they tell us that we are overdramatizing things” (a female psychologist, age thirty-four). Second, there are difficulties when it comes to the structure of the system of evidence and the different criteria in regard to the different agencies’ interpretation of guilt: “we social welfare institutions, the PDN, and agencies involved in child welfare and guardianship . . . work harmoniously, and then the verdict is handed down . . . such injustice is just horrifying” (a female social educator, age fifty-two). Social educators, psychologists, and schoolteachers believe that the methods of punishment ought to be more humane, methods such as family counseling and group work. The system of penalties, in the opinion of the specialists, is also not very ef-

fective, because “as a rule, these are needy families, and hitting them in their pocketbook will definitely have an adverse impact on the child. By punishing the guilty parties we are also punishing the victims” (a female social educator, age fifty-two). Although all the experts mentioned the imperfections of the system of justice, only a very few insisted on imposing criminal liability that would involve serving a sentence; this was the point of view experienced by legal experts and PDN inspectors. The most effective impetus for the start of the functioning of the system consists of severe consequences that result from abusive treatment. The project included not only the instances that made it to court and resulted in a sentence being handed down but also cases that were not dealt with by the procuracy. A feature that is common to the majority of the cases is that they involve the infliction of beatings on minor children. In one case, the incriminating evidence of abusive treatment was that the child had become addicted to alcohol.

The histories that have been analyzed illustrate gaps in the functioning of the agencies, which do not always function effectively, in the interests of the children. From our point of view, this is due to a number of factors. Even though social educators, medical personnel, and schoolteachers may have their suspicions that crimes are being committed against minors, they are not in any hurry to initiate charges of the abuse of children because they are afraid of spoiling the prestige of their organization. There was even a case in one children’s polyclinic where no one wanted to “show their dirty linen in public.” The doctor discovered a case of sexual abuse against an adolescent girl, but she decided to wait “until the girl turns eighteen, after which it would ‘no longer be their problem.’” A similar story was told by an educator in one of the schools. Formalism in the work of some specialists is manifested by the fact that they would much rather relieve themselves of any responsibility. There are many cases that are not looked into, because the parents urgently request that it not be done. On the one hand, it is essential to preserve the family, or the child might end up in an orphanage. On the other hand, because they are aware of the weakness of the system and their own impunity, the parents let their fists do the work

and inflict irremediable damage to the psyche of children and, at times, even endanger their lives.

And so it happens that abusive treatment of children brings the system of justice into play only in cases where very severe consequences result. In such situations, it is medical personnel who initiate criminal proceedings: when they find signs of severe beatings they immediately report it to agencies of internal affairs [police]. The first thing they do is try to punish the person who is guilty of the abuse, but that does not solve the problem. Actions by the procuracy to impose a fine or some other administrative punishment have to go hand in hand with efforts by social services and institutions of education. One hundred eighty hours of mandatory work could be replaced by the same number of visits to a psychologist who could conduct family counseling and help parents and their children to understand each other. At the present time, the law does not call for replacing punishment by psychological counseling.

For various reasons, the majority of cases of violence against children in the home are not reported to the police. For example, a school principal is not going to want to spoil the reputation of his educational institution, so he ignores a case in which a child has been badly beaten: "why should the school look to get a black eye when all over the community people say that there are such children. They prefer to keep everything hush-hush so that everything looks like it is okay" (a female schoolteacher, age thirty-one). And the parents simply reject the evidence. In addition, neighbors and relatives—everyone who can see or hear the child being beaten—have a very low sense of social responsibility. Psychologists say that "if such information (about domestic abuse of a child) is reported to the police, then of course they report it to us" (a female psychologist, age twenty-nine), but very often the information is hushed up. And this means that psychologists are not always able to provide help to the children and people close to them who are victims.

In this discussion the focus has been on violence directed against children, yet so far, specialists have not seen situations involving children as witnesses as situations that have the potential for professional intervention. And yet children who, for example, have

witnessed abuse by their father against their mother suffer from what is called “secondary victimization.” They also have an inclination to engage in aggressive behavior in their childhood and when they become adolescents. The results of surveys conducted in the United States have shown that in families where women have been the victims of violence by their husbands, the children also become the objects of abuse (from 30–60 percent of families). These data are also backed up by Russian surveys [6]. Children’s reactions to violence differ depending on their age, gender, and social support offered to them. But the children who are witnesses to violence as well as the objects of abuse have the most serious behavioral problems. Violence is a model of behavior that is learned in the process of socialization, and for this reason it becomes a genuine epidemic that is passed down from one generation to the next [7].

Our analysis of the survey materials indicate that the system of prevention and eradication of violence against children in Russia is beginning to be effective. In a few cases, the result is that the cycle of abuse is broken, and relations within the family become normalized. At the same time, there is evidence that there are gaps in the system. Efforts to prevent violence are not systematic enough. The mass media, the police, social workers, sociologists, psychologists, social educators, medical personnel, institutions, and civil society can and must put up a united front against the abuse of children.

Notes

1. The article was based on surveys conducted in the framework of the projects “The Needs of Children Who Have Been the Victims of Violence” and “The Proactive Approach to Solving the Problem of Violence Against Children: An Analysis of the Situation and the Formulation of a Policy of Intersectoral Interaction,” with the support of Tacis Institution Building Partnership Programme (IBPP) and “Dialogue” (IREX, CAF, USAID). The data was collected by O. Bendina (Saratov), L. Cheglakova and Ia. Krupets (Samara), S. Demidenko (Izhevsk), and I. Morenko (Kazan). The Center for Social Policy and Gender Research (Saratov) coordinated the surveys

2. A total of forty-one interviews were conducted, including interviews with eight psychologists, twelve social educators, four educators, six medical personnel (doctors and nurses), two inspectors for the commission on juvenile affairs, six legal experts, and three specialists of social work.

3. Here and below, when an informant is quoted directly, his or her professional status, gender, and age are noted.

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