Violence from cradle to school

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In our time violence became fashionable. You switch on the TV and usually you can see pictures of an action movie: the good kills the bad, but before the end the bad rapes one or two women, kills some men, often children as well. As long as you see these actions on the screen, you do not think that at the same time it is reality as well.

Violent actions, perpetrated against anyone, are always shocking. But they are most shocking when the victims are underage children.

Until the 19. century child protection was not at issue. In our time children rights are regulated by law. Although in Hungary the law says that „children have the right to grow up in their own families providing circumstances of welfare enabling them to have growth physically, mentally, emotionally and morally”. Still, there are families where these principles do not prevail.

The concept of children as value changed in accordance with the modifications of their role and place in family and society.

Upbringing, promoting development of their personality and forming their character is not the exclusive task of parents or teachers but their mutual effort complemeting the activity of one another. In the meantime, one should not forget about the negative effects of social conditions, one even should take them into consideration not only to protect children, but also prepare them how to defend themselves properly. How can one achieve that? How can one prevent deviance?

Families with children, especially with more children, are affected by the negative influence of social changes. In Hungary, at least one of three children lives in absolute poverty. Poverty reproduces itself in the next generation and this process means a permanent lag behing, which may form the basis of different kinds of deviance. One spectacular sign of this is that „among those on the periphery of society the reproduction process of deviant behaviour accelerated during the last five to ten years.”

Threatening situation of children and the underage comes not only from the financial situation of the family, but it also may arise from a variety of other harmful effects within the family. Earlier threatened situation and later frequent criminal behaviour show close connection. On one hand, the recent number of perpetrators among children and minors is continually increasing, on the other hand more and more children and minors become offended by crime.

New deviance furthering factors have infiltrated into the modern Hungarian society (international migration involving crime and drug trafficking, unemployment, formation of legal business spheres, social differentiation with strata lagged behind, stuck integration of gipsies, feeling of uncertainty without prospects, etc.) In the 80s the number of children and minors as perpetrators increased suddenly and significantly. Different kinds of deviance can be traced back to problems rooted in society, furthermore absolute or relative poverty, permanent frustation lead to them. The main reason for deviant behaviour is alienation.

The family

Family is the smallest unit in society and for children it is the first and most important mediator of values and it remains in the same position in case of minors who are shaping and determing their value preferences. The norms of life and values of the parents, and in wider sense of the family, are cruical considering the child's personal development.

The basics of how a child becomes a moral and social human being can be found in family life. The very basic criterion of upbringing children is to provide them with clear and objective ideas and values about society.

Social tensions, unemployment, homelessness, privation are emphatic factors, but they are not definitive. Helped by existing social problems subcultures come to life which deviate from the habits of the middle class and normal life style. Even in the most depressing situation, by no means is necessary to follow deviant behaviour and commit deviant acts.

Socially accepted possibilities for children to succeed in life often decrease, get limited and lose prospects owing to loss of family status. It is highly possible to involve a loss of career, but even that is not preventing the minor from becoming a decent citizen, a useful member of society, because coping with life is not a quantitative, but qualitative criterion. Among adults the so called „white-collar criminals" do not come from periphery of the society and they do not commit crime in order to secure their livelihood. Among minors also boredom occurs as a motive for crime, the idea „we should do something for fun". This idea is bound up with the fact that minors' personality and character is shaping, these are their formative years, their will-power is not tempered and their capacity to endure frustation is not developed yet. Their incapability or limited capability of acting, the lack of their financial stability prevents them from starting their independent lives.

Influence of the milieu

If the family does not fulfill its function priviling the children with human values, then the children will not consider family ties as important or essential. Having no attachment to their own families they look for contacts, communities and human relations elsewhere. If parents work „day and night" in order to give their children everything possible, their children will feel that not they are important for their families and parents but money alone. In families with similar approach it is rare to find more than one child. Being neglected within the frames of the family a strong urge appears to belong to someone. This „must" appears with an overwhelming force. In lack of harmony and intimate atmosphere in the family remains nothing else but the street, where the similar ones are. The child, the minor is dragged into groups of others with the similar background and together they shape a life with self-imposed rules. Minors dragged out from their families have no other choice and on the other hand they are attracted by such groups where it is so easy to find their identity. In this new milieu new members want to be stars to show their capabilities. In the group rivalry takes place and the members intend to come up with outstanding results in everything. Owing to the given situation they form their own values and live out their lives under their self-imposed rules. Youngsters forming themselves into groups consider alcohol as means of encouragement, which gives strength. Their ideology is often determined by false doctrines, many times shamanism. They identify their patriotism by xenophobia. Drugs are elixirs of life.

The role of drugs

Drugs have a prominent role among deviances of minors. The greatest obstacle of adequate dealing with drug problem is the lack of authentic data about drug-addicts, so we do not have knowledge about the real scale of the problem or social situation of those concerned. In lack of accurate knowledge about target groups and those at risk, it is impossible to deal with the problem effectively.

In our country the very first signs appeared in 1968. Young people were interested in inhaling gases of glue and using special medicines. Marijuana appeared in 1975. In the 80s young people from the level of subculture made a turn towards hard drugs and intravenous narcotics. It is a problem that authorities have not precise data on drug consumption or drug abuse. Even sociological research and statistical results show only estimated values. According to certain representative studies 43% of minors have tried drug. One single minor having tried a kind of drug gives it to five others to test it and accounts of his experiences for twelve others, evaluating the effects of the drug as positive.

Social environment has a prominent role among the social factors of drug use. It is a well known fact that in socially and economically disadvantaged regions the figures of drug-addicts are high. Ordinarily, in these areas the levels of unemployment and crime are high. In this milieu self-esteem of minors and their trust in future can get damaged easily. This hopelessness can be cured by drugs in the short term. Taking advantage of the situation drug traders are very active. So, it is a real risk that almost anyone can have easy access to drugs.

In addition to family background, among factors making the individual prone to use drugs the group has a stressed significance where the individual belongs to. The group expects the accepted new member to identify oneself with the habits within the group and also the new member has a strong urge to do so. Under this psychological effect many youngsters become drug-addicts.

According to F. Morullo and F. Bruno the main distinguishing marks of the personality are necessary preconditions, but they are not the only specified factors of the drug-addicts' behaviour. If the minor runs into drugs and the rejection is stronger than curiosity, then the personality is positive and the desirable decision will be made. In this case the values determining the minor's personality will prevail as a precondition. This way comes to life a positive, cultured and heatlhy life style not only rejecting drugs, but also other addictions such as alcohol and smoking. Otherwise a deviant, criminal behaviour comes from the values of the subculture. This life style is shifted more and more towards a negative direction and „separates drug addicts from the normative system of society."

Examining crime related directly to drug producing, the very profitable drug trafficking or in case of urge to get the drug for own consumption at any price, we can see that both drug-addicts and those wanting profit are capable to commit the widest range of crime. This behaviour is called indirect crime caused by drugs.

Children as perpetrators

Children, similarly to adult perpetrators, mostly commit crime against property. In 19.. 86% of crime committed by them belonged to that category. The half of it (1761) was theft, one fourth of it (880) was burglary. In violent crime and breach of the peace children take their parts in 9,4%.

Among infringement of lawful rights committed by children the number of latent cases is very high. The reason is that the cost of the damage caused is generally trifling and it is below the limit to be considered as crime. The attitude of the offended parties towards children as perpetrators is very particular. Generally, they do not want start a criminal procedure against them.

According to the unified figures of criminal statistics by the police force and public prosecutor's office, in 2000, among 125.915 perpetrators who became known 3.689 were children. The figure is smaller by 479 than that from the previous year. The proportion of children among all perpetrators is 2.9%. From 1990 on this proportion fluctuates very slightly. The highest figure of perpetrators occured in 1992, it was 4.488.

74% of perpetrators was being brought up in whole familes, parents are divorced in case of 20%. Those being brought up in state homes have a suprisingly low proportion among children committing crimes, their percentage among perpetrators did not reach 10%.

Perpetrators as minors

In 2004 statistics show 13.544 minor perpetrators. Compared to the figures of the previous year (14.321) it is a decrease of 9.5%. In 1996 minors' proportion among all perpetrators is 10.8%. During the 90s the highest number of perpetrators occured in 1992 with a number of 15.706. 8-9% of all crimes are committed in an intoxicated state. These statistical data are not favourable since the population of that age-group is decreasing continuously.

The half of minor perpetrators live in whole families, the parents of 20% are divorced. 7-8% of perpetrators were brought up by state homes. It is an accumulated danger that their crimes committed in groups and in an organized way can be characterized as rough, aggressive and having organized contacts with adult criminals. The lack of positive, socially accepted norms and values to be followed, emotional bleakness, indifference, the epidemic increase of addictions and the deviant influence of perpetrators on one another are all endangering factors. Recently, the number of crimes among minors committed under the influence of alcohol has increased.

Endangered minors

In connection with minors as endangered ones experts usually refer to the importance of taking social measures, the creation of a social net, insituitonal support and provision. Under the Constitution citizens have the right to live in social security. In case of unemployment standing apart from their own fault, they are entitled to have provision necessary to

livelihood. This is the objective side of how to deal with the problem. On the other side subjective factors appear, for instance, confused family life.

If the institutional systems of the society work properly and the individual fits in the surrounding society, the person enjoys protection. For that, it is necessary to accept and adapt eternal human and moral values. The minor should be enabled to live in accordance with social norms accepted by everyone. It is a great task, and it is not the task of a few persons but the task of the society as a whole.

In the interest of prevention every measure should be taken because „above a certain, not defined frequency level of deviancy the operation of soceity as a whole is at serious risk".

Several investigations have shown that the highest percentage of violent actions against children and minors (80%) occurs within the family.

With regard to the consequences, the most cruel violence against children is sexual assault. On the whole, it is more frequent against girls, but we should not forget about boys, either.

Children are subject to sexual assults from the age of 4 until they are 14-15. In case of girls, the most dangerous period is when they are between 10-15 years old. Boys are threatened by homosexuals especially between the ages of 6-8 and 14-16.

Assaults against girls were committed, with no exception, by the fathers or foster-fathers. Against boys a family member, a friend of the family or a stranger used acts of violence. It is interesting that cases of girls were reported much later, while cases of boys were typically reported to the authorities immediately.

Girls usually report their cases when they find a person to rely on in life (for example, a friend or a relative). They have fears, they are terrified and in the interest of their mothers and siblings they remain silent. If the father has a job and they report him to the police the family remains without breadwinner. Therefore, also mothers choose to remain silent.

As we know, from the age of 4 on, children are potential victims of sexual crime. They can be subject to physical assault and are neglected from their conception or birth on.

It seems to be logical that girls are more endangered by sexual assaults and boys by physical mistreatment. (On the whole, both crimes appear in case of both sexes.)

Investigating the family background one can get to the conclusion that the most endangered children can be found in families where there is no harmony and alcohol and deviancy of parents have significant roles. In addition, young ones brought up by state homes should be mentioned, who are threatened not only by homo- and heterosexual assaults, but also by prostitution. For instance, some children after having escaped from the state home take on prositution rather than going back. Later, when they would go back, they are prevented from doing so and their situation becomes absolutely hopeless.

Among threatened children there are many mentally retarded ones among those offended. They are easier to exploit shamelessly and with them is the least risk of being reported.

Almost every child has the characteristics of performance below average at school, and verbal skills not equal to their age-group. They often use a bad language, do not inflect in a proper way, their vocabulary is rather poor.

In most cases, after the detection of the crime they get into state homes or placed under the guardianship of a family member. They try to continue and rebuild their lives from there.

Violence can have serious consequences affecting further life of the offended one. Anxiety, fear and shame are the first reactions and these often remain for years, affecting also the adult lives of the victims. A long time is needed until they come to terms with the situation, if they will ever be able to do so.
It is important that these children should be taken to specialists, because with special help they may have chance to realize their cherished dreams and desires, because they do have dreams and desires. Of course, their first wish would be to wipe out those terrible events having happened to them, but beyond that they are long for other things as well.

The most important aim of children and minors is to create a safe milieu around them. They yearn for a normal, balanced family life, but many of them do not succeed in achieving that. Those, having suffered violence in their formative years, are more likely to commit violent crime. Among other things, that is why we should deal with children having suffered violence.

Why are these young ones unable to create a balanced life? There may be many reasons for that, but probably the most significant reason is that they are not accepted by our society. Mostly they are felt sorry for, but often rejected at the same time, especially, if the child is gipsy by birth.

Violence at school

As well as on the roads, at workplaces and in family homes, violence is getting more and more widespread. Public opinion can only be shocked by major tragedies, for example, aggression by children causing sometimes mass catastrpohy. At home and abroad, both theoretical and practical specialists of education and bringing up of children are more and more concerned about what can be done to prevent such phenomena. Can anything be done in order to improve the present situation, which is obviously taking turns for the worse? Are we taking at least those measures within the bounds of our means, professional and ethical possibilites?

According to Lorrain violence can be described well by the definition after Yves Montoya, professor of Bordeaux University. His definition: quote „Social phenomenon defined by specific social and historical circumstances" unqoute. In case of violence taking place at schools, certain classification must be accomplished. Namely, these are to be dealt with separately:

- crimes and offences: theft, burglary, blackmail, beating, bodily harm, drug-trafficking, drug consumption, grouping into gangs and rape
- roughness: insult and carping
- emotinal uncertainty
- functional accidents
- self-aggression, suicide and self-mutilation

More than twenty-five years ago experts and the media started drafting up the recent phenomena of violence at school. In France, for instance, surveys are being carried out to form an opinion and analyise the issue of violence from the aspects of sociology, education, psychology, psychiatry, theology and ethics. Recently, also media has been laying emphasis upon the phenomena of violence at school.

- spread of aggression and roughness can be experienced everywhere
- in the first place, violence appears at grammar schools, but it is spreading over to younger age-groups as well
- in the first place, it is an urban phenomenon and occurs mainly at vocational schools
- in its development family background, financial situation play a significant role as well as failures suffered by students at school

From the aspect of spreading aggression others realize the very harmful fact that in many homes children do not obtain proper patterns of behaviour. Especially in case of unemployed parents, there are families where unemployment has been present for two generations and presses heavily their scale of values. These parents are unable to show up the pattern of an active and purposeful life. Consequently, these children do not gain the „ammunition" needed for fulfilling requirements and in lack of that their school career may get into a dead-end street very easily.

In-depth studies carried out in such milieu have shown that verbal violence takes places in technical schools and vocational schools in the first place, where also forms of physical violence are predominant, while in case of theft highs schools overtake the previous ones. The most serious problems appear in students' hostels and state homes. Both predominant perpetrators and victims are boys. One can obeserve a periodicity, since most of violence actions occur immediately before or after school holidays or after class council meetings. Finally, awareness of getting away with impunity and the silence of victims in student communities increased significantly.

There are also other froms of violent actions different from the ones mentioned earlier.

- sexual harassment
- various threats
- incitement to hatred because of age, ethnic diversity, physical or psycholigical handicap
- manipulations threatening professional career
- rough rituals when initiating new members of the community

Obviously, against violence at schools, the schools themselves can take action most effectively, and teachers having direct contact with students can do most, provided they are suitable in person and received proper, special training. During this special training teachers, among other things, have to learn teamwork, the only way to avoid isolation which can be dangerous in this field, how to analyse and evaluate a given situation, and they acquire the necessary knowledge about themselves and the ability to practice self-criticism.Of course, they also have to acquire the skills how to find different partners and how to cooperate with them adequately. The teacher has to find the most important partners among parents, teaching staff, auxiliary staff, and in the organizations of health care, administration of justice and police force.

What can a teacher do if a student behaves aggressively during lessons or breaks? How can the teacher bring the aggression under control if the health of others students is in danger and they are humiliated? What means does a teacher have and what are the expected consequences of the measures taken?

As we know, the increasingly aggressive behaviour of students is related to the changes in he outside world.

Owing to its nature, the school is an open system and reflects the world of macro-society. As it is in its narrower and wider environment, also at schools human relations become more and more rough. There is a correspondence between these two worlds, but they are not directly proportional to each other. In addition to the increased inclination to aggressive behaviour the most sorrowful negative change at schools is in the judgement of diversity, connected with changes in politics, where in recent years disbarring and demarcating statements and behaviour became stronger. Tolerance towards both individual and group-characteristics decreased perceptibly.

Aggression at school works on the principle of self-induction. An initial impulse quickens itself and rises to the extreme. With a very good sense, students at school weigh up the given situation and become acquianted with their rights and obligations. Being fully aware of those they draw up their challenges. After a short career at school they come to realize that students' rights have to be guaranteed for them by others in any case, but they can violate their obligations without consequences. They also know that teachers are pitiful human beings without power and without any means at their disposal, so their promised retorsion for violation of obligations is not to be taken seriously. What can teachers do against students behaving aggressively during lessons and ignoring the teacher's personality? Teachers can admonish students over and over again and waste most of their time and energy on one single student. If admonition has no result, teachers turn to the form-master, principal or parents. After specious solutions the student's prestige and self-confidence increases, while the teacher's situation declines. Students ascertain that teachers are unable to take effective measures against them and their position is stronger. They make teachers feel that every time when opportunity arises and conduct themselves more and more aggressively. Other students come to the same conclusion and their inclination to destructiviness gets stronger.

It is a well obeserved fact that children in cities are more aggressive than their counterparts in villages. In all probability it can be explained by the urban milieu. Circumstances in cities do not enable children to let off steam by the means of manual work testing their bodily strength. Manual work shapes a strong character and nothing else is able to substitute it. Unfornately, manual work is sent into exile from schools in our time. In this meaning young people live an idle life and they often get rid of their superfluous energy by negative activities. One obvious sign of that is the foolish destruction of the environment. In oversized urban schools crowded environment increases inclination to aggressiveness. Here, number of all students may reach one thousand, and the number of class-mates may be up to thirty-five. Depressingly many people are in classrooms, corridors and schoolyard. Therefore, as far as possible, children draw back into cosy little corners, where their intimate sphere is not disturbed by anyone. Ability of people to tolerate crowds is average, but of course, it is different individually. In the course of planning schools these facts should be taken into consideration by all means.

Aggression and punishment

Aggression within a community frustrates all members of the community, and if you like, a feeling of frustration multiplies. In this way, one single case raises the level of aggression within the community. This makes it clear that in given cases a destructive minority is able to influence the majority, consequently becomes majority.

If the postulate of the Agreement of Rome is true, which says that human rights in general, and especially children's rights can only be enforced in sound circumstances, consequently, order should prevail in schools. In this sense, let us declare that lack of order is abridgement of rights. Students setting themselves against order in school are jeopardizing the interests of other students, and their own ones, therefore consistent measures should be taken against them. If school management and teaching staff are unable to take firm steps against tendencies abridging rights, they offend against human rights because they legitimize conditions in which fundamental rights of students cannot be enforced.

In the last few years, in France, a programme was worked out in order to control aggressive actions occuring in schools. In this programme, with the help of trained mediators of the same age and from the same community, they try to prevent, or at least relief the destructive effects of violent actions.

Help comes from mediators chosen from the students, who are trained thoroughly for the task by the means of factual knowledge, purposeful and methodical techniques, elaborated by experts. Training can be conducted exclusively by teachers, who have acquired every detail of the training programme.

Experience in France has drawn attention to the fact that in institutions, where trained mediators from the same age have been working for a longer period of time, the number of violent actions and conflicts among students of which teachers had knowledge of, or had to intervene, decreased by 70% in a single year. It is a very favourable result, since it proves that this two-stage programme is very effective. During the first stage assigned teachers from the applicant schools receive a 25-30 hours long training, and after their return to their schools, volunteers, students found suitable for the task will be trained. (According to experts elaborating the programme the most effective division of the 20-hour long training is two lessons a week.)

In the focus of the students' training programme we can see the handing over of psychological knowledge: how to get to know about ourselves and others, how to recognize conflicts, how to react on them, how to acquire the ability to feel empathy, how to develop proper communication skills.

In 1998 the European Council drew up recommendations for its member states how to take steps against different forms of violence within the family, concerning „reconciliation within the family", in order to protect children and secure peace for them. In this recommendation government officials voiced the same fundamental principles having been drawn up by the charta of school mediators, emphasizing the prevention of aggression in children communities and in families.

During the last 15 years several conflict management courses and trainings have spread among teachers with the aim to develop abilities necessary to solve conflicts in a constructive way based on the cooperation between partners involved. Parallel with these, an increased demand appeared for a programme enabling students to deal with conflicts in a non-violent, constructive way.

Constructive problem solving requires the following abilities:

- stable personality, identity awareness, positive self-image, ability to make decisions
- acceptance of others and different ones, empathy, congruency
- effective verbal and non-verbal communication skills
- healthy assertion of one's rights, assertiveness able to consider the needs of the other party
- teamwork, making and enforcing rules, „fair" behaviour
- readiness to get to a compromise, creativity, claim to achieve consensus

Only those teachers are able to shape and develop the abilities of their students necessary for conflict management, who have those abilities and are able to represent in an authentic way the cooperative and constructive approach, on which the programme was based.

The basic requirement of a successful programme is a sound knowledge of the requirements and maturity level of the given group of students. What can be expected from the given group, how far can we get in developing their abilites? All these depend on given circumstances, actual experiences of the group, their rate of development and their relationship with the teacher. Teaching conflict management presumes sound and applicable knowledge of personalities, knowledge in the fields of development and social psychology, comprehension of the world of schools, reflectivity, and in case of unexpected events the ability to react spontaneously.

It is not surprising, but a thought-provoking experience that the emotions of children in pre-puberty and puberty how heavily are burdened with conflicts with their mates and how strong their sense of justice is. And how effective partners they can be if the teacher is willing to consider them as partners of equal rank, accepts them as companions in creating and enforcing common rules. Of course, it is necessary that the teacher acts and behaves according to these rules as well.

Among the characteristics of adolescent boys and girls we can find their inclination to moralize. Although they are very reluctant to listen to moral lessons by adults, they are always ready to meditate on moral lessons of stories they have experienced, lived through, they have been involved in. Especially, if they feel that their teacher is really open to listen to their opinion, if their teacher is really curious to learn their say, they will talk with pleasure, even about abstract issues.

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