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### **Child Abuse As an Interdisciplinary Problem**

*This article focuses on the modern approach to the problem of child abuse, and provides results of empirical research from Child Health Research Center. There will be shown features of emotional sphere and behavior of abused children, psychological characteristics of their parents, causes of cruelty. The authors have developed proposals on organizing a comprehensive family and child support, highlighting the decisive role of the pediatric service in this matter.*

**Key words:** *child abuse, psychological characteristics of parents, children's behavior, solutions, family support, psychological studies with families.*

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The younger generation is the strategic resource of any state and also one of the important subjects of socio-economic policy. The future of civilization depends on the physical and mental health of children. Children's health is influenced by a complex set of biological, ecological and social factors. The goal of progressive scientists is to combine efforts and develop a unified strategy for medical, psychological and social help to the younger generation in order to preserve the biological potential of mankind [1, 2].

This article is devoted to one of the most serious modern social problems, that is abuse of children by close adults and relatives.

Many believe that child abuse means single, egregious cases of solutions to adults' problems that arise due to life situations or the behavior of the child. Another wrong assumption is that cruelty could be only in certain categories of families - with the bad economic situation, mental disorders, or low levels of parental education. Unfortunately, the reality looks different.

The phenomenon of child abuse acquires frightening scope. In 2009, Russian law enforcement agencies reported 108 thousand crimes against children, 1,600 of them died because

of adults; 2500 suffered from heavy damages; over 50 thousand, ran away from home to escape the cruelty of their parents. Due to the initiative of women's organizations the issue was widely discussed, information was widely spread that 40% of all violent acts are committed in the family, regardless of families' social and economic status [3].

This statistics also covered children whose parents asked for health restoring help in the Institute of Preventive Pediatrics and Rehabilitation.

It is known, that doctors and patients address different departments of the Centre in the psycho-pedagogical service to explore the psychological state of young patients. The laboratory specialists determine the rate of cognitive and linguistic development, especially the formation of personality, emotional state and social interaction. During 2009 - early 2010 there were identified instances of abuse of parents or other relatives throughout the standard psychological examinations of children. Since September 2010 there was introduced the scheme on special techniques that identify children at risk of abuse; then there was conducted a more detailed study of the social situation of these children.

Within 1 year (from September 2010 to September 2011), 886 families underwent psychological examination. There were revealed 59 cases of child abuse (6.65%): 11 preschool, 29 primary school children and 19 teenagers.

Analysis of collected data has shown that cruelty is not dependent on age and sex of the child.

According to most scientists, the causes of child abuse may be adverse changes to the system of humanistic values and norms of public morality. Rising intolerance in communication is currently the dominant trend in the relationships of people around the world. In Russia, the number of reported cases of child abuse increases annually [4-7].

Psychologically, cruelty is always caused by acute personality discomfort, emotional state, which occurs as a reaction to the experience of some insurmountable barriers or lack of possibility to get something desired [8, 9].

According to literary sources, four types of abuse can be identified:

- physical violence;
- sexual violence;
- psychological abuse;
- disregard for the basic needs of a child.

The classification was the basis of forming groups of abuse cases in the surveyed families:

— physical abuse (69%): corporal punishment, tying to a chair, etc.;

— psychological abuse (80%): screaming, insults, humiliation, locking in the basement, threats of the parents to disclose any personal information of the child, emotional coldness;

— sexual abuse (8%): mother sleeping with a teenage son in the same bed, father bathing a 15-year-old girl;

— neglect of basic needs (20%): educational neglect, lack of systematic studies, failed parents in leisure and spiritual life of the child.

In most cases (76%) children received a consultation in the psycho-pedagogical service without prompting from their parents. Parents were confident that they are competent in matters of education and were doing everything correctly. In 24% of cases, parents complained about the bad behavior of the child, problems in communication with peers, school difficulties, chronic failures ("not eating, not sleeping, lazy, does not want to learn, cannot fight back bullying). Children's parents were convinced that the problem lay in the nature of the child.

Query analysis of physicians showed that in most cases (60%) children's behavior was not different from the ordinary, and only a small group of children (25%) alerted professionals with symptoms of increased excitability (irritability, sleep disturbance, disobedience, behavior change, the growth of excitation at the moment physical examination), as well as 15% had some specialities in interaction with adults (the child is responding to the tone increase or volume of voice, warily watching the reactions and behavior of parents, afraid to speak in front of relatives, refuses to undergo the procedure).

Thus, direct evidence confirming the harsh treatment of a child during the observation has not been revealed, and there were no complaints from the children themselves. Therefore, it was hard to detect infringement of child's rights and to protect his health, mental health and life. The problem could only be discovered during the detailed medical examination (bruises, abrasions), during psychological counseling or systematic communication of professionals (teachers and tutors) and a child.

That is why the standard pattern of children examination included methods of diagnosis of child-and-parents relationship, frustration assessment methodology, and questionnaire of Bass-Darko to detect hostility in the relationship

### **Results of observations**

The study showed long-term emotional mental stress of children, their fixation on the negative emotional experiences, which depleted the nervous system and interfered with the functioning of the whole organism. In addition, the children had one or more deviations in health, which the parents had planned to fix in the course of treatment.

There was also discovered a relationship between the age of children and their emotional state, behavior.

The majority of preschool children were characterized by reconciliation with the case, the lack of resistance, the passive response to pain, and inversion of emotions: children interpreted good and bad behavior the same way, they rated emotional reactions of adults by the same type, associated them with unpleasant images, and could be characterized by excessive deference, obedience.

18 out of 29 children of primary school age and half of teenagers have experienced shame, and anxiety when discussing the causes of their emotional state. The latter children excused brutal actions of their parents by their bad behavior. For example, mother of one girl poured hot porridge on her head when she did not want to eat it, and the girl felt guilty that her mother had to cook porridge again. The boy with chronic constipation considered himself guilty as his mother was very nervous because of his locks, so that she shouted at him, called him bad words, made the painful enemas and beat him.

55% of primary school children began to express such features as negativity, cruelty to animals or younger children.

Only 30% of teenagers tried to excuse the actions of their parents, while 25% openly criticized the adults. They had a desire to protect themselves (for example, a teenager having lungs pathology, every day was punched by his drinking father, so he called to police and wrote application to stop the beating.)

In most cases (13 out of 19) teenagers became rude and did not respond to requests of their parents. Punishment that was applied to them, acted as a model of aggressive behavior. In many cases, aggression for punishment was not condemned by others. As a result, it becomes a normal behavior for a child.

We found that the behavior of a child, who suffered from abuse, varies with age, from passive to aggressive. Often these changes are a surprise to parents.

By the age of 10 children suffering from abuse, reproduce one of the two typical models of protective and adaptive reactions:

- passive type (provocative, or "victim" behavior – the child is behaving in such a way that other children associate him with a victim, such children are not interesting partners for them);
- aggressive-defensive type (expressed as a rigid, rude behavior, identification with the aggressor)

We noted that children of primary school age are the most commonly abused. Often it is school that provokes cruelty on the part of parents. The teacher tells the parents that their child gets bad marks or behaves badly. The purpose of this treatment is clear: parents need to take action. One can predict the nature of these measures in a family where cruelty is common: the least will be moral influence, the maximum - physical one.

Experience shows that mostly violence reflects not a degree of real misbehavior of the child, but how much shame their parents experience when communicating with the teacher. In this case, the punishment is originally inobjective and unfair, and influence type selected by parents does not help to form social norms and regulations in the child, does not cause a sense of trust and love, does not improve their relations, but only increases the tension between family members exacerbating child's discomfort, fear and distrust of adults.

The brutality of the relatives in whom the child is usually trying to find support and assistance, does more psychological and physical damage than abuse by a stranger. In this case, there is violated the basic principle of the family - the safe existence of any of its members. In this situation, the child can not satisfy their basic need for unconditional acceptance and love. If they do not experience this feeling as a child in the family, they will not be able to feel it with anyone, ever. Due to long-term emotional stress and psychological discomfort, the natural course of human development will be broken, that will soon lead to the abnormal formation of character.

### **Social and psychological characteristics of parents who are likely to abuse their children**

Parents who show cruelty to children were of both sexes, of different nationalities and social status, and did not relate to "social risk" group. Their violent actions were aimed to improve the child's behavior by establishing power and control over it (80%); achieve emotional release ("the child got hit occasionally, when the problem was not related to him") - 20%.

The survey identified the personal characteristics of parents who are prone to child abuse:

- Emotional and personal instability, which leads to the depletion of resources of the individual;
- Temperament characterized by impulsivity, intensity of reaction, high activity and dependence;
- Cultural specialities: childhood experience of family violence and violence in other social institutions (kindergarten, school, hospital);
- Confirmed practice of adverse behavior - frequent success with cruel words and actions;
- Low psycho-pedagogical culture (parents reproduce someone else's experience without judgment, or did not have basic knowledge in the field of child psychology).

The analysis of parental attitudes to children using a questionnaire of Varga-Stolin showed the following common types of child-parent relationship in studied parents:

- Rejection (45%) – cruel treatment is associated with emotional rejection of the child, he feels to be "burdening" his parents;

- Authoritarian (27%) – the cruelty is associated with the rigid system of penalties and incentives adopted by the family "for the benefit of the child";

- Symbiosis (28%) – the cruelty is caused by emotional merge with the child, projecting on him problems of parents. There arose a special effect, known as "love terror".

There was found no direct correlation between the type of parent-child relationships, motives, type of cruelty and adaptive responses of children.

In all the studied cases, parents and children were hostages to severe psychological situation in which there are no winners, and all participants are victims. Parents who expressed cruelty to children, were themselves in a state of psychological discomfort due to various reasons: loss of "taste" of life, feeling no difference between "I want" and "I can", a feeling of helplessness, rigid or excessive demands on themselves, conflicts between husband and wife, unresolved conflicts or dissatisfaction with relationships with significant relatives of the same sex as the child (husband, father or mother, sister). Emotional outbursts could be due to the existence of some urgent need, which could not be satisfied for a long time.

We found that almost all parents prone to abuse wished mental and physical well-being for their children, good social adaptation in the society, the correction of behavior. Most parents begin to apply cruelty spontaneously.

When there is lack of specialized psychological and educational support, such behavior becomes usual. Afterwards, there is formed a strong defensive behavior in children, so it becomes increasingly harder for parents to achieve educational goals. In response, they reinforce the cruelty on their child. Finally, there forms a complex closed system that requires professional intervention of doctors, psychologists, social workers and the public. To reach success, professionals must take into account the biological, social and psychological factors of predisposition of people to cruelty:

- Biological – presence of mental, neurological disease, a hereditary predisposition to this kind of behavior [9-13];
- Social – lack of an emotionally rich, warm relationships with relatives, a total lack of success in social relationships, unformed or destroyed system of life values, lack of successes in life (lack of activity that brings joy), etc. [14];
- Psychological – chronic emotional discomfort, profound experience of stress; imitative actions [15].

It is possible to halt the growth of violence and cruelty against children in Russia through the development and implementation of prevention programs built noting the above risk factors.

### **Proposals for organizing a comprehensive family and child support**

In modern society, there are built all the necessary conditions for the design and

development of an integrated system to counter child abuse. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child came into force on the territory of this country on September 15, 1989. In 18 countries of the Council of Europe (Russia is a member of this organization) it is prohibited to physically punish children. The position of the State in this matter is determined, but the specific actions and mechanisms of interaction between experts from different departments are not defined and are not fixed by law.

The problem of child abuse is complex. It should be addressed carefully, avoiding sudden, extreme action. It is much more effective to prevent the phenomenon, and track it out at an early stage. Preventive measures for the prevention of negative social and psychological conditions of life must be carried out at an early age and throughout the entire period of childhood; they should include various types of medical, psychological, social and community support for the family to improve the quality of children's life.

To develop the algorithm and the content of medical and psycho-pedagogical monitoring of family with a child of early, preschool and school age during pediatric care, including health care, it would be of use to perform the following steps:

- Determining the sequence and methods of examination of the family by pediatrician, neurologist and psychologist at the annual preventive examinations of the child in the district hospital and children's hospital;
- Interviewing the families at the district pediatrician's;
- The development of arrangements for regular preventive examinations, including a mandatory survey of children aged 5-16 years by a psychiatrist.

Consultation of psychologist and assessment of living conditions of children in the family by members of social services (social workers) could play a positive role.

These measures will not only help to get more information about the social situation of the child growth and the system of child-parent relationship, but also to timely start professional support. It will be easier for school psychologists, specialists of the guardianship and custody to arrange care for children in families where there were the facts of psychological distress and ill-treatment were noted; it would become easier to carry out education and training for parents on the most effective ways of interaction between the children at their homes and educational institutions, to determine the pedagogical and the psychological route to the child, to control needs of children and adolescents in interpersonal communication, personal and creative potential, development of skills, to provide the opportunity to attend extra classes, sections, art and music studios.

To increase the effectiveness of the taken measures it is necessary to create a management model to establish mechanisms for sharing information and coordinating the efforts of physicians, social workers, school and clinical psychologists, teachers and other professionals.

As a rule, child abuse is most often detected in either pre-school educational institutions (as long as children can openly discuss the subject), or in children's hospitals (clinics). Pediatric Service of Russia has the necessary human resources potential and unique conditions for the detection of child maltreatment. Trust of family members in specialists of medical institutions and in professionals, as well as readiness to share their problems and concerns with a doctor or clinical psychologist, help to identify potential risks at an early stage, and to provide comprehensive preventive measures to eliminate them.

Employees of health care facilities should conduct a medical assessment of state of children who are victims of abuse, to hold a special medical record, and if necessary to hospitalize a child subjected to cruelty. Educational professionals and medical facilities were entitled to inform law enforcement authorities, child welfare authorities and the Commission on Minors in case of abuse detection.

However, effective assistance to children, affected by domestic violence, is not always compatible with the only use of enforcement measures in respect of their parents. Effective support and advice from qualified professionals - child and family psychologists, social workers, etc. often becomes more valuable. [16]

Timely detection of domestic abuse during psychological examination will provide parents and children with first psychological aid. Advising parents by the family psychologist is necessary to improve emotional stability in the family, and to reduce intrapersonal conflict. Individual advice of child psychologists helps to select the optimal style of relationship with the child, and motivate the families further for the psychological work.

For example, psychological studies (3 to 5) were conducted for each family, where child abuse was discovered. Most parents (85%) showed their desire to work, and later noted the positive dynamics in relations with their child: children's psychological condition began to improve.

It should be noted that working with such families should be prolonged and sometimes permanent (until the child reaches the age of majority). That's why such parents were targeted for further assistance in various psychological centers.

Combining the efforts of health professionals, education and social protection, changes to the system of legal control of child abuse, revision of the general violence ideology presented by mass media altogether will protect the rights of the child in a timely manner to support the family, help children's parents in the emotionally difficult situations, and thus to prevent



escalation of violence, to implement measures on preventing child abandonment, and to lower rates of child and teenage suicide.

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