

Received: 01.11.2022  
doi: 10.46763/JESPT22172056c  
UDC: 373.3.064.3:364.632(497.4)  
Revised: 09.12.2022  
Accepted: 16.12.2022

## »YOU ARE NOT MY FRIEND ANYMORE AND I WILL NOT PLAY WITH YOU«

### Violence among first graders Andreja Cerkvenik

Primary School Hinka Smrekarja, Ljubljana, Slovenia  
[andreja.cerkvenik@hinko-smrekar.si](mailto:andreja.cerkvenik@hinko-smrekar.si)

**Abstract.** At school, we encounter different types of violence, but most often it is peer violence. In this paper, we present the definition of peer-to-peer violence and its most common forms. In the theoretical part of the paper, we focus on peer violence in the first grade, which as a long-term teacher of the first grade I encounter the most. In a practical example, we present the methods and forms of work that we used in the 1st grade and that proved to be successful in our work. The successful prevention of violence requires creation of positive bonds between students and creation of a sense of co-responsibility in resolving conflicts, as well as cooperation of the entire team, knowledge of professional guidelines and good support from the counseling service. We can help each other with advice, protocols, literature, and general laws. It is important that we all realize that violence exists and that when we detect it, we deal with it effectively.

**Key words:** peer violence, elementary school, first grade, prevention, action.

#### Introduction

No teacher wants to hear the phrase "You're not my friend and I won't play with you!" in the classroom. Not only the implementation of the pedagogical process, but also the acquisition of knowledge is much easier in classes where students are connected to each other, and disputes are resolved constructively and without exclusions.

Unfortunately, peer violence is something that teachers deal with in all grades of primary school, even if it can take very different forms in different age groups. But it is not just a wish - it is also the purpose of all education workers to teach in a stimulating, friendly and healthy environment, so it is their job to recognize violence and confront it openly.

In the first part of the article, we give and discuss the definition of peer violence, describe its most common forms, talk about victims and perpetrators of violence, and the Protocol for the detection and treatment of peer violence in educational institutions.

In the second part, we describe a practical example of dealing with peer conflicts and violence within the framework of our pedagogical work at Hinko Smrekar Elementary School. We highlight the specifics of preventing violence among first graders and good examples of positive practices.

#### Theoretical starting points

Zabukovec Kerin (2002) says that peer violence is the intentional, repeated use of physical, psychological, or economic violence by the perpetrator against another child or youth of a similar or the same age.

In the Handbook on the detection and treatment of peer violence in educational institutions, bullying is defined as the intentional, repeated use of physical, psychological, sexual, material, or online violence against another peer. When it is a single incident of violent behavior and there is a marked difference in physical or psychological strength between the perpetrator and the victim, we also speak of peer violence (Mugnaioni Lešnik et al., 2022).

Sullivan (2011) defines peer violence as:

- conscious and repetitive behavior,
- aggressive behavior,
- manipulative behavior,
- exclusionary behavior,
- violence by one or more persons against one or more persons who are weaker (physically, psychologically, or socially) than the perpetrator.

Peer-to-peer violence mostly involves whole groups of children and young people: some as victims of violence, others as perpetrators and observers, who are just as involved in the cycle of events. This kind of behavior and the resulting climate affects all the children involved, directly and indirectly.

Most peer violence occurs in and around school, on the way to and from school. Various forms of violence can occur between peers. The most common forms are (Mugnaioni Lešnik et al., 2022):

- **physical violence** (biting, kicking, pushing, pulling hair, spitting, scratching, boxing, punching, slapping and other forms of physical attacks, physical damage...),
- **psychological violence**, which can be verbal (insulting, mocking, belittling, insulting on the phone, name-calling insults, racist remarks, gossiping, spreading false and malicious rumors, teasing, threats...) or non-verbal (direct: facial expressions, rude gestures, contemptuous gestures, indirect: manipulating/destroying friendship, systematic exclusion, ignoring, isolation...),
- **sexual violence** (allusions to sexuality, jokes with sexual content, obscene gesturing and speaking, harassment due to gender affiliation, incitement to sexuality, showing pornographic material, groping, stalking, sexual assault...),
- **material violence** (extortion or violent taking of money and other property, damage or destruction of personal property, school supplies, confiscation, and use of a telephone...),
- **cyberbullying** (intentional and repeated harassment and/or intimidation via the Internet, mobile phones and other information and communication technologies, such as sending offensive messages, sending, or publishing harmful, untrue or cruel statements, publishing sensitive, private information, sending threatening messages with the intention of intimidation and extortion...).

Most children encounter peer violence soon after entering school. Whether or not the violence will soon be repeated depends a lot on the reaction to the first experience. It is very likely that violence against a child who does not defend itself, who begins to cry and shows fear of the perpetrator, will soon be repeated. Most of the victims are sensitive, intelligent, and gentle children. They often come from families where conflicts are resolved peacefully, constructively, without yelling and fighting. Such children are not used to violence, they do not know how to respond to it. The results of research, mainly carried out by Dekleva and Pušnik in Slovenia in the second half of the 1990s, showed that more than 20% of children in

elementary schools are victims of peer violence, and about 12% are perpetrators (Zabukovec Kerin, 2002).

Another survey was conducted between November 2011 and March 2013, with the aim of proving whether the proportion of students who experienced peer violence as victims had increased in the meantime (Cvek, Pšunder, 2013). The results of this research are the introduction of more recent data into the Slovenian space. The research was conducted among students of the 5th, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 9th grades of various primary schools in Slovenia. It showed that as many as 24.1% of pupils had already been victims of peer violence, among them statistically more often pupils of the 9th and 7th grades. The victims of violent behavior, regardless of gender, most often confide in their parents, among them significantly more often 5th graders. A fairly high proportion of students (12.6%), regardless of gender, do not talk to anyone about being victims of violence; among them a significant number is of 9th grade students. Respondents experience violence most often in the corridors, more often by 7th graders, in the dressing room (9th graders), followed by playgrounds, classrooms, toilets and the dining hall. Violence most often occurs during breaks, regardless of class, and is more often experienced by students. The most common forms of violence experienced by respondents, regardless of class, are verbal violence - name-calling, psychological violence - ridicule, and physical violence - beating, pushing, and kicking. The victims of verbal and psychological violence are statistically more often female students, while the victims of physical violence are male students (Cvek, Pšunder, 2013).

The results of the research confirm the results of previously conducted research, but also show that peer violence increases with age: the highest number of victims of violence are among 9th graders.

We must be aware that both boys and girls are perpetrators of violence. Maybe girls use physical force less often, prefer to isolate the victim socially, spread false rumors about the victim, but this is not the rule (Zabukovec Kerin, 2002).

We must recognize the signs and behaviors of victims of peer violence so that we can take action against this type of occurrence. Most often, the victims change their attitude towards school, their academic performance deteriorates, their involvement in the group is no longer the same, they change their behavior towards classmates, peers, and teachers. The victim withdraws into himself/herself, communicates less, seems absent, is cautious, feels lonely and rejected or becomes aggressive, disrupts classes, becomes teasing and rude. Physical injuries may be visible, health condition deteriorates, psychosomatic problems appear (bruises, abrasions, exacerbation of chronic diseases, tics, stuttering, fluctuations in body weight, frequent illness and suicidal thoughts, actions). The victim may have damaged personal property (school supplies, phone, or other personal items).

However, we can also highlight some general behaviors that can be attributed to the perpetrator of violence: aggressiveness (not only towards peers, but also towards teachers), impulsiveness, a strong need to control others, positive attitudes towards violence, difficulties in obeying rules, frequent involvement into fights, truancy. Most often, these children have certain patterns from home (Mugnaioni Lešnik et al., 2022).

A meta-analysis of published studies on violence in schools (Karakus, 2022) determined that the most frequent reasons for violence are gender inequalities, cultural and personal differences, while the most commonly proposed solutions stress the importance of community-building, co-creating the rules and establishing an open and safe dialogue within the classroom (Karakus, 2022).

Employees in education must adhere to a certain procedure when taking action in the case of peer violence.

According to the Protocol on the detection and treatment of peer violence in educational institutions, prepared by the working group of the Institute of Education of the Republic of Slovenia, the tasks of a teacher who has detected violence are as follows (Mugnaioni Lešnik et al., 2022):

1. Immediately ensure the safety and health of children by:

- implementing all necessary measures to protect the victim-child,
- if necessary, calling emergency medical help and informing the child's parents about the injury,
- talking to a child who has been a victim of violence and offer them emotional support,

2. the same day, exceptionally, if the circumstances do not allow it, the next day after the perception of violence:

- informing the principal, the class teacher of all children involved, the school counseling service and parents about the incident,
- making a record of the event and forwarding it to the school counseling service.

In the procedural intervention that follows, the school counseling service plays a key role. It leads a team in which each individual has a role. The school counseling service is also the body that reports serious violations to the police and the Center for Social Work.

### **A practical example of dealing with peer violence: A case of Hinko Smrekar Primary School**

The leap between kindergarten and primary school is a big and stressful event for children. They are placed in a completely new environment, surrounded by new rules, and burdened with many obligations.

All these factors affect the fact that children are more subject to stress and, as a result, more irritable, open to conflict situations. When we add to this the interaction of students who spend practically the whole day together, these circumstances can lead to violent contacts. Mostly in the first grade, we encounter physical and psychological violence, sometimes also material violence (stealing school supplies, toys).

In the first case, pinching, spitting, thrusting, boxing, tugging, pushing, as well as strangulation and scratching are most common.

In the second case, it is mainly elimination from the game, insults due to physical appearance, clothes, ridicule in the event of a certain failure (e.g., in physical education, difficulties in learning material, underestimation...)

According to our experience, the perpetrators of physical violence are mostly boys, while psychological violence is caused by children of both sexes.

In first grade, children are quite attached to their teacher and express their distress, but not always. It is important that teachers observe the children and their interaction, that we cooperate well with parents and communicate with them on an ongoing basis. In cases where the child does not trust us or when we ourselves do not notice its distress, they may expose their problems to the parents at home. It is right that they share their information with the teachers, who are more attentive to the events in question and can also take action. It is important that we as teachers react to every act of violence, that we do everything in our power and act in the direction of preventing these acts in the first place. We think that school students, school employees and parents should be made aware of violence, and that teachers deal with absolutely every case of peer violence. Our task is to try to establish a climate of zero tolerance for violence and to develop a good self-image and a sense of belonging to the school among students and employees.

I, the author of this paper, work in this direction myself. In the classroom, I have pictorial displays of the rules of behavior (what is allowed and what is not acceptable at school), the children know that any form of violence in the classroom is unacceptable and forbidden (of course, I clearly define the term violence for them and teach them what we mean by this term).



As part of the art lesson, the children draw on the topic of violence and discuss it in groups.



Every morning, if necessary also during the day, we sit down with the students in the "morning circle", where we talk about everyday incidents, problems, and our well-being. For this purpose, we also have a "well-being house" in the classroom. Depending on how they feel, the children place their own figure in the section for good or bad feeling.

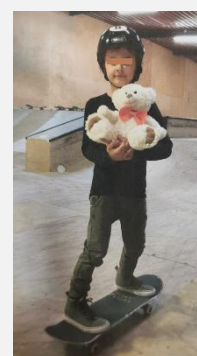
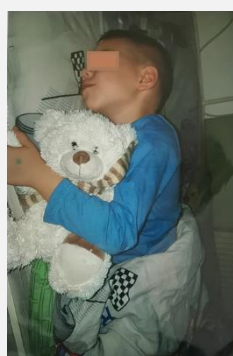
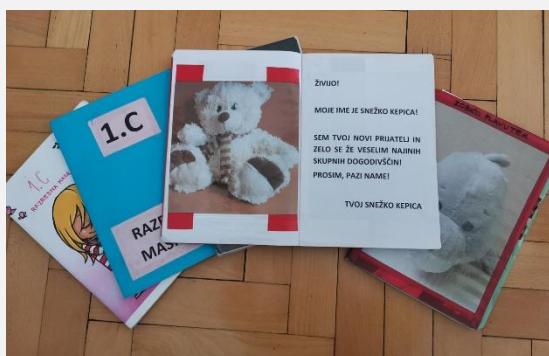
Whenever one of the students points out that he/she is not feeling well, we all talk about it. The same is true when violent behavior occurs. It is important for children to understand why these behaviors are unacceptable, to be able to describe and explain to others how they feel about it, whether they are victims or perpetrators. It is important that they are aware of the consequences of these actions. I teach them to solve conflicts in a calm way, through conversation, to expose their problems, not to hide them.

During conversations, we also regularly use mood cards, with the help of which we learn to recognize and express our thoughts and feelings, and in this way we also deepen our interpersonal relationships.



I make a lot of use of social games that bring us closer, because I think the most important thing is to work in the direction of bringing the group together as much as possible. In this case, the children will act as a community, help each other and stick together, even stand up for each other. In my experience, children who bond with each other do not have frequent and severe violent outbursts.

One of the things I bond with is the class mascot - a stuffed toy that travels to someone's home every weekend. On Monday, the student in question describes to his classmates what he/she did with it, what they experienced together, who he/she introduced it to... The students describe or draw their experiences in a notebook intended for this purpose. The class mascot is a common property that we must all take good care of.



Of course, we cannot avoid all conflict situations, and that is right, because various trials await us in life. It is good that children know from a young age that their actions have consequences. In cases where children violate class and school rules or commit violence against classmates or peers, they must also accept the consequences, i.e., the punishment. They need to realize that their violent way of solving conflicts does not benefit them and that it is better to change it.

## Conclusion

Both employees in education and professional institutions note that peer violence has been on the rise in recent years. I also notice from personal experience that there are more and more conflict situations at school due to the different origins of the students, family situations, speaking a foreign language and, as a result, misunderstanding of the language, as well as different attitudes towards measures against the epidemic. Society is changing, and especially the last two years of the epidemic have left a strong impression on children as well.

I believe that all educational professionals must accept the principle of zero tolerance for violence without any hesitation. Their task is to use different forms of work and different approaches to create a healthy environment to the best of their ability, to prevent conflicts

from arising and to react in the way that is expected of them when they arise. Therefore, they must be well aware of the Protocol for detecting and dealing with peer violence in education, which sets out clear steps for action. Professional workers must actively cooperate with the school management, counseling service, parents, and external institutions.

We note that with various appeals to schools, publication of guidelines, aids and tools that will help professionals in education and training in identifying and preventing peer violence, offering training for professionals and, last but not least, supplementing the Protocol implemented this year by the Institute for education, in recent years external institutions have also placed increasing emphasis on zero-tolerance awareness.

Even at our school, problems and difficulties do not remain hidden, but we devote a lot of time and energy to the topic. With regular work meetings and the support of management and the advisory service, all employees actively cooperate with each other. However, it still happens that our evaluations of a certain conflict act sometimes differ, and that is precisely why we believe that additional training in this area would be very useful both for employees and for the harmonious and coordinated functioning of the collective. As already mentioned, at our school, we have a lot of support from counselors who are available for any help and advice in implementing measures and cooperating with parents. We notice, however, that the two counselors employed at our school are not enough to be able to help promptly and quickly wherever it is needed. Considering the described trends, which show that the number of violent acts, difficult children, learning difficulties and conflict situations, which sometimes lead to violence, is increasing over the years, I believe that it would be necessary to increase the number of female counselors in primary schools.

Regardless of the cooperation of the collective and the support of external institutions, each teacher must first trust himself/herself. By creating positive bonds and encouraging constructive dialogue between classmates, we can contribute to resolving differences and conflicts amicably and without unnecessary envy and competition. Experience shows that well-connected and harmonious classes are those in which the sentence "You are no longer my friend and I will not play with you" is heard the least often.

## References

- Mugnaioni Lešnik idr., (2022). Protokol ob zaznavi in obravnavi medvrstniškega nasilja v vzgojno-izobraževalnih zavodih, dopolnjena izdaja. Pridobljeno s spletne strani dne 10. 10. 2022: <https://www.zrss.si/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Protokol-ob-zaznavi-in-za-obravnavo-medvrstniškega-nasilja-v-VIZ-1.pdf>
- Zabukovec Kerin, K. (2002). Vrstniško nasilje v šoli. V: Nasilje – nenasilje, priročnik za učiteljice, učitelje, svetovalne službe in vodstva šol, ur. D. Lešnik Mugnaioni. Pridobljeno s spletne strani dne, 10. 10. 2022: <http://www.zrss.si/digitalnaknjiznica/navodila-medvrstniško-nasilje-viz-2016/>.
- Pušnik, M. (1999). Vrstniško nasilje v šolah. Ljubljana: Zavod Republike Slovenije za šolstvo.
- Sullivan, K. (2011). The Anti-bullying handbook. London: Oxford University Press.
- Lešnik Mugnaioni, D. in Klemenčič, I. (2012). »Smernice za obravnavo medvrstniškega nasilja v šoli.« V: Vodenje v vzgoji in izobraževanju. 1/2014. 33-57. Kranj: Šola za ravnatelje.
- Helmut, H. (2004). Nasilje v šoli in kako se mu lahko zoperstaviš. Radovljica: Didakta.
- Cvek, M., Pšunder, M. (2013). Učenci, žrtve medvrstniškega nasilja. v: Revija za elementarno izobraževanje. 4/2013, str 105-116.
- Karakus , G. (2022). Literature Review of Studies about Violence at School and Recommendations for Teachers. v: Acta Educationis Generalis, 3/2022. str. 62-84.