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## Per violence in elementary school Urška Kužner Kačar

Primary School Hinka Smrekarja, Ljubljana, Slovenija  
kuzner.urska@guest.arnes.si

**Abstract.** In the article, we discuss peer violence as a current problem that we face in regular elementary schools. First, we will define the concept of violence and what types of violence we know. We will pay special attention to one type of violence; we will elaborate on peer violence. The topic of peer violence has been particularly relevant in recent years, as the study of peer violence is changing due to the increased sensitivity of people to this issue, and there is also an increasing interest in researching peer violence, which enables more appropriate detection and prevention of violence. Being informed when dealing with this kind of violence is essential if we want to provide students with a safe and pleasant school environment. That's why we decided to check which types of peer violence are most common in regular primary schools. We were interested in who most often perpetrates violence, who are the most frequent victims, and when and where peer violence is most common. We will present the results of the structured interviews and the results of the survey we conducted among the students. The research is based on a sample of 449 pupils of the city's primary school in Ljubljana. All sections from 1st to 9th grade were covered. Class teachers helped the first-grade students understand the survey, while the rest of the students completed the survey electronically. The conducted research led to the results that various forms of peer violence occur at all ages, most often among students of the same class, when the teacher is not present.

**Key words:** peer violence, elementary school, students, teaching staff, parents

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, we can see more and more articles about violence between children and between peers in our, as well as foreign, media. Much peer-to-peer violence originates or is transmitted to primary school, where children are supposed to feel safe and respected. Unfortunately, the opposite is often the case. Often certain groups of children are exposed to violence perpetrated against them by other students. We talk about victims of peer violence when children become victims of violence by children of the same age. Due to the wide access to the world wide web and multimedia services, the public is informed about such events today. Elementary school students have mobile phones with them, with which they can easily connect to the Internet and post information about teasing or beating a classmate. We find that these kinds of situations are happening more and more often. Violence is not only present in schools, it also occurs outside their walls, it can happen anywhere and at any time. It happens on the way to school and home, on the playground, behind school, in the park, on the street... We chose the topic of peer violence because we encounter it almost every day due to our work in the school counseling service. Our aim was to investigate the issue of peer violence in a city primary school. The research covered students between the ages of ten and fourteen, i.e. students from the 6th to the 9th grade.

The aim of the research was to determine differences in peer violence by gender. We were interested in who most often perpetrates violence and who is most often the victim. As a school, we were interested in where and when violence is most often carried out and what

types of violence students are most often exposed to. The elementary school is located in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, with almost 280,000 inhabitants. 568 children attend the school. In the empirical work, I investigated peer violence with the help of a structured interview. I got the answers from the students and their parents.

## **2. VIOLENCE**

The word violence has several different definitions. The Dictionary of the Slovenian Literary Language (SSKJ) defines violence as "an active attitude towards someone, characterized by the use of force, pressure". There are other terms derived from the word that contain the root or the word violence itself. These are, for example, violence, bully, violence... In short, everything related to violence. This word is unequivocally associated with the use of force or power. In other words, violence can also be named with the word aggression, which according to the SSKJ means "aggressiveness, violence". Violence can thus be defined as a gross attack on another person or on other persons. The result of this gross attack is significant physical harm or injury to these persons (Žužul v Bučar-Ručman, 2004).

Kristančič (2002) understands violence "as a symptom of aggressive and hostile activities of individual groups and their members" and "only one of the levels of expression of aggression and hatred". According to Pušnik (1999), aggressiveness is "a behavioral characteristic that manifests itself in dominance, violent or aggressive words or actions towards other people". Berkowitz (Ule, 2005) defines violence as "behavior intended to harm or injure someone mentally or physically." Aggression therefore knows the actors responsible for it, while violence can be anonymous (for example, media violence). Violence is said to be an external expression of aggression (Ule, 2005).

### **2.1. Types of violence**

The most recognizable type of violence in school is peer violence. In a broader sense, it means violence between students. There is a difference here: violence between peers assumes that the subjects involved are approximately the same age, while violence between students can be violence between students of different ages (Lešnik Mugnaioni et al., 2009).

**Bodily or physical violence:** Is any use of physical force or serious threat of use of force. It is aimed at a person's body or his life. The physical pain and consequences caused by the bully are always accompanied by psychological consequences for the victims: pushing, kicking, boxing, slapping, spitting, restriction of movement etc. (Kuhar et al., 1999).

**Verbal:** Insults, offensive nicknames, spreading false rumors, writing offensive messages on walls, etc. (Aničić and others, 2002).

**Mental or Psychic:** Denotes any actions (most often verbal) that touch a person's psyche in an unwanted and gross way. Psychological violence undermines the self-esteem, self-image and self-confidence of the victim - exclusion, isolation, threats, offensive gestures, intimidation, torture, etc. (Habbe, 2000).

**Extortion or economic violence:** Demanding money or other material goods. The perpetrator demands that the victim write his homework, help cheat on knowledge tests, not tell about vandalism, etc. (Aničić and others, 2002).

**Sexual violence:** It is an unwanted intervention in an individual's sexual integrity. This is any action with which one of the partners does not agree (Lešnik Mugnaioni, 2006).

### **2.2. Peer violence**

Peer violence is only one of the types of violence that occurs in school and which we will deal with in the paper. Different experts use the definition of Dan Olweus, which says that we can talk about peer violence when a student is repeatedly exposed to aggressive behavior or negative actions by a peer or group of peers over a long period of time (Olweus, 1993). Later definitions include some other elements, but they all have in common that this type of

violence is repeated, intentional and not the result of a game, and that it involves an imbalance of power between the participants (Pečjak, 2014).

Peer violence is an old phenomenon, but it did not receive research attention until the 1970s. Greater importance began to be attached to it after the event in 1982, when three students in Norway, aged between 10 and 14, committed suicide due to severe bullying by their peers. Therefore, in 1983, the Ministry of Education introduced a national program to prevent peer violence among students in Norwegian primary schools (Pečjak, 2014). At first, England, the USA and the Scandinavian countries mostly dealt with the issue of peer violence. In the English language, we often encounter the term bullying, which is translated into Slovenian as torture, intimidation, tyrannization or as peer and interpeer violence (Lešnik Mugnaioni et al., 2009).

### **2.2.1. The difference between conflict and violence**

Peer-to-peer violence can be perpetrated by an individual or a group, and it is also not always directed at an individual, the target can also be a group. This type of violence is often hidden in schools, because bullies and victims keep silent about it, and adults do not even notice the phenomenon. First, we must distinguish between certain undesirable behavior, peer conflict, and true violent behavior. With students, especially boys, we often see various games of jostling, where they tease each other and "measure" their physical abilities, but this cannot be called violence. Violence is always intentional behavior that aims to cause pain and harm to another. This behavior usually lasts for a long time and is repeated, and there is always an imbalance of physical or psychological strength between the participants (Pečjak, 2014).

Most children are abused at school, and some are also abused on the way to or from school, so it is important that the school discovers the places and circumstances where violence takes place and establishes appropriate control. Olweus (1995) states that peer violence occurs about equally in large and small cities; in some cities even less than in some villages, which he explains by the fact that in the urban environment awareness of the problem is at a higher level and they cope with it better. Lukežič (2005), who in her research compared the amount of peer violence in rural and urban schools, also came to the conclusion that there are no significant differences between the two environments. Olweus's (1995) research confirmed that the size of the school or class is an insignificant factor for the occurrence of peer violence. The results showed that there was no significant difference in the occurrence of peer violence between large and small schools and between small and large departments. It is important to note, however, that the number of abused students was slightly higher in larger schools and larger classes. In their research, Mugnaioni Lešnik and colleagues (2009) observed that violence was perceived more often in schools with the largest number of students than in schools with a smaller number of students. In his extensive research, Habbe (2000) found that the prevalence of peer violence declines with age. He also confirmed that the most violence occurs at school itself and not on the way to and from school, which was also previously established by Olweus (1995). Most of the violence occurred during school breaks and extended stays, and the perpetrators were usually students from the same class as the victims. There were more boys than girls among the victims of violence. Students believed that peer violence also takes place in the presence of teachers, and the latter often reacted inappropriately to the observed violence or did not react at all. It was also found that victims rarely sought help from teachers and school counselors (Habbe, 2000). Olweus (1995) points out that a school that denies the existence of the problem of peer violence cannot deal with it effectively, which can lead to an escalation of violence. Supervision during school breaks and during meals can significantly help to reduce the possibility of violent behavior, so it is desirable that even when classes are not in session, adults are present to ensure safety and intervene in the event of violence (Olweus, 1995).

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

It is characteristic of all violence that the abuser wants to assert his interests in the victim. Research on violence around the world shows that the violent behavior of children and adolescents is largely influenced by upbringing in the individual's primary social environment, i.e. the family. School and friends also have a big influence; it is important that students perceive school as a safe environment where they can talk about violence without feeling bad. We checked to what extent the students of Hinko Smrekar Elementary School, a city elementary school in Ljubljana, encounter peer violence. Students often remain silent about violence against them or their peers, and we would like our survey to encourage them to report the situation of peer violence at school more often anonymously or by name. Students are often ashamed of their helplessness, on the other hand, bullies often go unrecognized, so it is necessary to detect violence in time.

The aim of the research is:

- where and when the most peer violence takes place in elementary school,
- which forms of peer violence are most common among students,
- who is most often the perpetrator of violence and who is the victim,
- what is the opinion of students regarding the level of peer violence at primary school, and
- as witnesses of peer violence, do they help stop the violence?

#### **Research methodology**

For research purposes, we used structured interviews and a survey that we created ourselves and conducted among students. The research is based on a sample of students from a primary school in Ljubljana. All sections from 1<sup>st</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade were covered. Class 1 and 2 students were helped by the class teachers to understand the survey, while the rest of the students completed the survey electronically. A total of 346 children completed the questionnaire online, while 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade students completed paper questionnaires with the help of teachers, a total of 103 children. In total, 449 children answered the questions about violence.

#### **The results**

We were interested in how many good friends students have at school and how they feel, since a wide social network and well-being are strong protective factors in peer violence. When asked how many good friends they have at school, the majority of students answered that they have more than 5 (43%) good friends at school, while 25% of children chose to have 2 or 3 good friends. 18% of children have 4 or 5 good friends, 10% of children have at least one friend, and 4% of children do not have any friends (that is 18 children based on all respondents). When asked how they generally feel at school, the majority of students answered that it was good (36%), 24% felt very good, 22% satisfied, 7% bad and 2% very bad. Still, 8% are children.

When we checked how many students were exposed to peer violence, over 60% answered that they had not been bullied. 25% of children were abused once or twice during the school year, and 7% once or twice a month. Once a week was chosen by 5% of children, and several times a week by 3% of children.

Students who were bullied chose the following methods in order of frequency:

Q	Which methods of bullying did students experience?	%
Q1a	Mocking and humiliating with nicknames and curses	22%
Q1b	Mocking because of external appearance	16%
Q1c	Tripping and pushing in the hallway	16%
Q1d	Expulsion from the game	15%
Q1e	Defamation and ridicule	14%
Q1f	Kicking and beating	12%
Q1g	Threats	10%
Q1h	Throwing things at the student	8%
Q1i	Persuading friends to avoid the student	8%
Q1j	Destruction of property	6%
Q1k	Talking badly about the student and spreading rumors	6%
Q1l	Spitting	5%
Q1m	Extortion	5%
Q1n	Groping	4%
Q1o	Anonymous threats	4%
Q1p	Forcing the student to do things they did not want to do	3%
Q1q	Locking the student in a locker	2%
Q1r	Secretly posting a recording on the Internet	2%
Q1s	Demanding money from the student	1%

### Most Common Types of Bullying Among Students in Grades 2–5

Q	Which types of bullying are most common among students in grades 2–5?	%
Q1a	Mocking and humiliating with nicknames and curses	22%
Q1b	Tripping and pushing in the hallway	16%
Q1c	Kicking and beating	12%
Q1d	Throwing things at the student	8%
Q1e	Spitting	5%
Q1f	Expulsion from the game	15%
Q1g	Persuading friends to avoid the student	8%
Q1h	Others forced the student to do things he did not want to do	3%
Q1i	They closed or locked the student in a locker	2%

### Most Common Types of Bullying Among Students in Grades 6–9

Q	Which types of bullying are most common among students in grades 6–9?	%
Q2a	Mocking and humiliating with nicknames and curses	22%
Q2b	Mocking because of external appearance	16%
Q2c	Defamation and ridicule	14%
Q2d	Talking badly about the student and spreading rumors	6%
Q2e	Threats	10%
Q2f	Anonymous threats	4%
Q2g	Extortion	5%
Q2h	Groping	4%
Q2i	Secretly posted recording on the Internet	2%
Q2j	They demanded money from the student	1%

When asked if the students confided in anyone about the abuse, most of them answered that they told their parents (68%). The rest told a classmate, sibling, teacher or counselor. No one chose the principal, and 16% of the children did not tell anyone about the violence. Those who did not tell anyone about the violence mostly chose that they did not think it was important or thought that nothing would help. Five percent of the children chose the option of not telling because the other students threatened them.

When asked which class those who bullied the student came from, the majority of students chose that they were being bullied by students from the same class (73%). Twelve percent (12%) of the children chose that they were bullied by students from higher classes, while 4% of the children were bullied by their classmates. Two percent (2%) of children chose that they were bullied by children from lower classes, while 4% of children were exposed to bullying by students from another elementary school. The majority of students chose that they were bullied by several different boys. The students mostly chose that they were harassed by 1 student or by a group of 2 to 5 students.

When asked where the violence most often occurred, the students ranked the answers in order:

- in the school corridor (29%),
- in the school yard or playground (21%),
- in class when there was no teacher (16%),
- in the classroom in the presence of the teacher (8%),
- on the way home from school (8%),
- in the school canteen (7%),
- in the toilet (5%),
- on the way to school (5%), and
- in the school library (1%).

When asked if students personally know someone who was bullied in the previous school year, 27% of students answered that they did not know anyone. The majority (31%) know one or two pupils, while the rest (13, 13 and 12%) know several pupils who have been bullied. When asked how many times a student witnessed violence at school, most children (60%) answered that they had never. Thirty-four percent (34%) of students answered that once or twice during the school year, while the rest chose the answers several times a month/week.

When asked how students feel when they see or hear someone torturing another student, most of them (60%) answered that they don't like it at all, and 27% that they don't like it. Seven percent (7%) of children don't care, 1 student (less than 1%) likes it and 3 students (1%) like it very much. We were also interested in what they do when they see a student being bullied and most (42%) said they try to help by telling a teacher, school counselor or other adult. Twenty-eight percent (28%) of the students try to stop the bullying on their own with their friends, 10% of the children observe what is happening but do nothing, even though they think they should help, and 11% of the children walk away because the bullying does not concern them. One percent of children are amused by watching bullying and 2% of children join the bully.

When asked whether students would participate in bullying a male or female student, 77% of children answered that they definitely did not, 9% of children said that they probably did not and 6% of children said that they did not know. One percent (1%) of children think that they probably would and 1% of children that they definitely would.

The following answers are given in the table. The most common answers are that students rarely stop bullying.

<b>Q20 Do other students at school try to stop the bullying when they hear or see ...</b>						
<b>Sub questions</b>		<b>Answers</b>				
		never	rarely	often	always	Skupaj
Q20a	... to beat or kick a student?	35 (13%)	127 (48%)	78 (29%)	26 (10%)	266 (100%)
Q20b	... to take or hide things from the student?	53 (20%)	115 (44%)	63 (24%)	32 (12%)	263 (100%)
Q20c	... to abuse the student with insults?	58 (22%)	95 (36%)	66 (25%)	43 (16%)	262 (100%)
Q20d	... that the student is excluded from the group or game by classmates?	70 (27%)	102 (39%)	63 (24%)	26 (10%)	261 (100%)
Q20e	... that the student is being threatened or someone is extorting him/her?	43 (17%)	101 (39%)	77 (30%)	37 (14%)	258 (100%)
Q20f	... that false rumors are being spread about the student?	65 (26%)	99 (40%)	52 (21%)	34 (14%)	250 (100%)
Q20g	... that offensive content about a student appeared online?	101 (40%)	87 (34%)	43 (17%)	22 (9%)	253 (100%)

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Research has shown that peer violence is also present at our primary school, so it is extremely important to raise awareness among children, teachers and parents about how we can limit violence and thereby mitigate its consequences. The research showed that the largest share of peer violence takes place in the school corridor and on the school playground, namely when there is no teacher in the classroom or nearby. The most common form of violence experienced by students is teasing and humiliation, followed by pushing, exclusion from play, ridicule, beatings and threats. Students are most often victims of physical violence, and the vast majority of problems are reported to their parents. It is important to emphasize that parents are the first to notice that something is happening to their child, because children who experience repeated violence tend to withdraw into themselves, become irritable, no longer want to go to school, etc.

The most frequent victims of violence are students from the same class, and the biggest surprise was that students rarely intervene when they witness peer violence. It is important to be aware that witnesses or observers play a major role in conflict intervention and prevention. Many modern researches in the field of peer violence emphasize the role of observers, as they can influence its frequency in the classroom and school with their response. Observers can therefore build different strategies for preventing violence, so the approach to treatment must be holistic and not only tied to the victim and the bully. However, since observers behave differently, we can talk about the following roles (Pečjak, 2014):

- observers as imitators of the bully, who join him in carrying out the violence,
- observers as supporters of the bully, who actively encourage the bully with various comments, while passive supporters laugh at the victims and thus give the bullies a hint,
- uninvolved observers who only observe the violence and do not interfere in it,
- observers as defenders of the victim, whereby passive defenders are silent witnesses who leave the scene of violence, deny the violence and do not stop it, while active defenders try to stop the violence, comfort and defend the victim or call adults for help.

The differences in bullying types between lower and upper grade levels can be attributed to developmental, social, and environmental factors:

**Developmental Stage:** Younger children in grades 2–5 are still developing their social and emotional skills. Their bullying behavior tends to be more physical (e.g. kicking, pushing, tripping) because they lack the advanced cognitive and verbal abilities required for more complex forms of aggression. Older students in grades 6–9, on the other hand, have greater verbal and cognitive skills, enabling them to engage in more psychologically and socially manipulative behaviors, such as spreading rumors, defamation, and online harassment.

**Social Awareness:** As children grow older, their social environment becomes more complex, and their focus shifts toward fitting in and gaining social status. This is why bullying among older students often involves humiliation, exclusion, and targeting someone's appearance or reputation.

**Access to Technology:** Older students are more likely to use technology and social media, which opens avenues for cyberbullying, such as anonymously posting harmful content online or sharing recordings without consent. Younger students typically do not have the same level of access to these tools, so their bullying remains face-to-face.

**Group Dynamics:** In lower grades, bullying often happens in more straightforward, physical forms, reflecting playground conflicts and group games. In contrast, bullying in higher grades often reflects power struggles and social hierarchies within peer groups, with students using more strategic forms of aggression to isolate or dominate their peers.

**Cultural and Environmental Influences:** School environments and societal expectations also play a role. Younger children are often supervised more closely by adults, which might limit opportunities for covert forms of bullying. Older students, who experience more independence, might feel emboldened to engage in subtler, less visible types of bullying.



These factors combine to create distinct patterns of bullying at different stages of education. Understanding these differences is crucial for designing effective prevention and intervention programs tailored to each age group.

It is also crucial that peer violence is talked about more and more. The development of peer violence techniques can thus be quickly followed by the development of various measures, models and projects to limit peer violence. The media, the police and, of course, the schools themselves, contribute a lot to raising awareness. All this does not achieve its purpose if the victim of peer violence does not speak about it, because the system (school, social workers, police, parents...) can only act appropriately if we are informed about peer violence. At the same time, it is necessary to be aware that peer violence does not only happen in primary schools, but can also continue in secondary school, where it can take on new dimensions with growing up. In order to prevent or at least limit this, it is crucial that parents, children and teachers are aware of all the options for action when peer violence occurs and that they discuss this topic at home and at school. In this way, it is possible to limit peer violence and to provide children with a safe and carefree childhood.

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