

Aggression in children and adolescents in rural Poland - where to look for the cause?

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to analyze the causes of aggressive behaviors among children from rural areas, including the role of the environment. We used Pub Med and Google Scholar electronic databases for a literature review. Publications written in English and Polish were included in the analysis. The following keywords were used: aggression, children and adolescents, rural areas. Aggression is a type of negative behavior with the intent to harm or destroy. It usually arises as a direct or delayed effect of frustration or deprivation. The place of residence strongly affects the determinants of risky behaviors in children and adolescents. The most common risk factors for violence among rural children and

adolescents include improper parental conduct, failures at school, health-threatening behaviors, violent scenes seen by young people in television programs and films. The changes currently transpiring in rural areas to the traditional family model and increased access to media determine the adoption of behaviors with elements of aggression; although it seems that in rural areas, these phenomena occur much more slowly than in cities. Thus far only a few studies indicated that aggression occurred more frequently among children and adolescents from rural areas. This phenomenon requires further research. **Key words:** aggression, child, adolescent, rural population

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INTRODUCTION

In the current times of an unrestrained flow of news, we are bombarded by the mass media with muggings, homicides, assaults, and thefts, which are not limited to large urban areas around the world, but occur also in seemingly peaceful rural areas and frequently involve children and adolescents.

Aggression is a type of negative behavior with the intent to harm or destroy. It may be a sign of difficulty controlling negative instincts and impulses directed towards other people, situations, or beliefs. It usually arises as a direct or delayed effect of frustration or deprivation [1].

There are several theories explaining the development of aggressive behaviors in children and adolescents. One of them is Dollard's frustration theory that assumes aggression is always a consequence of frustration. Other theories include Freud's drive theory of aggression, a theory of aggression as a socially learned phenomenon based on imitation, as well as a system theory based on socially negative adaptation processes [1].

As indicated by numerous literature data, we have inherited the tendency towards aggressive behaviors from our ancestors. Nature has equipped us in defense mechanisms, which are activated when faced with threatening situations. Originally, the mechanisms underlying aggression were necessary for obtaining food and defending against the aggression of others. Some of the mechanisms underlying the development of aggression have survived to date, which is reflected by its continuous presence in everyday life.

Recent studies on the genetic background of aggressiveness, i.e. the tendency towards aggressive behaviors, have shown that, as in the case of intelligence, aggression is genetically determined, and its inheritance depends on a number of genes. Aggression in the developmental age period, like in adults, results from genetic and environmental factors. According to some authors, the origins of a child's aggression could be in the fetal period, when anxiety at home, maternal diseases, and stress significantly affect the emotional balance of the developing fetus [2].

The development of aggressive behaviors may be divided into three periods, depending on age. The first period is characterized by rebellion against adult authorities, truancy, and emotional instability. The second period mainly involves lies, theft, and vagrancy. Aggression in the third period may take the form of hooliganism, crime, moral derailment, as well as advanced neurosis.

The forms of aggression vary significantly and are age and gender dependent. According to the simplest classification, we distinguish verbal and nonverbal aggression. Physical aggression is

definitely more common among boys, whereas verbal aggression dominates among girls.

Following the examples of aggressive reactions observed in the environment plays an important role in the genesis of aggressive behaviors [3]. Emotional ties between family members have significant effects on children's development and may affect the development of their personality, both in a motivational and destructive way, depending on the upbringing style used by the parents. The increase in aggressive behaviors among children and adolescents frequently results not only from observing abnormal behaviors of adults (parents, teachers) or peers, but is also associated with information from the media or the Internet, which are also widely available in rural areas.

The aim of the study was to analyze the causes of aggressive behaviors among children from rural areas, including the role of the environment.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

We used Pub Med and Google Scholar electronic databases for a literature review. Publications written in English and Polish were included in the analysis. The following keywords were used: aggression, children and adolescents, rural population.

RESULTS

Causes of aggression among children and adolescents in rural areas

As a settlement unit, villages differ from cities in terms of housing type and density, economic and administrative functions, as well as the professional structure of the population.

Strong territorial differences in the living conditions in rural areas have become a characteristic feature of the last decade. Rural areas close to large urban agglomerations develop very rapidly, and their attractiveness in terms of potential investments, settlement as well as the development of technical infrastructure is very high.

The existing differences in rural areas determine the development of children and adolescents. The significantly greater role of family in shaping the principles of social life in rural areas results from the norms and conditions specific in this environment. Greater attachment to family, respect for the work of parents, and, frequently, hard work from an early age instills in young people the principles of proper life and respect for the values achieved in life.

The most common risk factors for violence among rural children and adolescents include improper parental conduct, failures at school,

health-threatening behaviors, violent scenes seen by young people in television programs and films [4]. It seems essential to ask about the reasons why teenagers begin to use violence and derive satisfaction and pleasure from the suffering and humiliation of others.

Other factors that increase the risk of violence include individual characteristics of the persecutors, factors associated with the peer group, and with the victims themselves [5].

Social risk factors for violence in rural areas also include poverty, living in small crowded apartments, high unemployment, low level of education, easy access to drugs and alcohol, criminal activity of gangs in the neighborhood, as well as lack of interpersonal bonds, which perhaps is more pronounced in rural areas than in urban environments.

Other reasons leading to aggression include the desire to release tension in difficult situations at home or school, with which students are unable to cope (conflicts with other students or teachers). Aggression can also be the result of a child's need to release their internal emotional state.

Lack of ability to communicate with the people around them, difficulties in overcoming everyday problems, and a reluctance obey the adults in their lives can also trigger aggression in children and adolescents [1].

Failure to fulfill school tasks and obligations, negative peer relations, and lack of position and acceptance among classmates also affect the development of aggressive behavior in students [6,7].

In our study, which included 755 students from rural areas, we observed a higher percentage of aggressive behaviors among children and adolescents from poor families (70.2%). Aggressive behaviors among the evaluated children and adolescents were most common in the group of students who reported everyday conflicts at home (88.2%) [8].

Dodge et al. showed that frequently repeated quarrels, aggression, and hostility among family members had a negative impact on children at all stages of development. As a result of repeated domestic violence directed at children, these behaviors will be repeated by the abused child at school or, similarly as in the home, the child will become a victim of such behaviors in the peer group [9,10].

In addition to the home, the school environment is also the place of a child's socialization.

School violence frequently begins early, even in the first grade of elementary school. It may be physical or verbal or a combination of the two. The fact that children experiencing school violence at this age rarely talk about their problems with their parents, and that long-term functioning in a

violent environment leads to a number of mental and somatic disorders in a child is quite alarming. The perpetrators of violence develop and, with time, perpetuate negative behaviors, which can later result in conflicts with the law [11].

A rural community is usually characterized by more intense neighborly contacts as well as by stronger expression of values related to tradition. People from rural areas are more willing to offer assistance, and social control is also greater. This environment also has its negative sides, including higher unemployment, limited access to education and culture, as well as growing social helplessness.

Strong territorial differences in the living conditions in rural areas have become a characteristic feature of the last decade. Rural areas close to large urban agglomerations develop very rapidly, and their attractiveness in terms of potential investments, settlement as well as the development of technical infrastructure is very high. A large percentage of rural children attend urban schools.

Aggressive behaviors depending on the child's age

Aggression can occur in children as young as two years old, regardless of their environment. During this period, children have a natural tendency to explore the world, gradually become independent, and broaden their interests. This is associated with a child's increased physical and cognitive activity. Excessive control over the child and limiting the child's freedom induces rebellion and anger. The birth of younger siblings may make some children feel hurt and rejected. This induces aggression against both the newborn child and the mother.

Some children, wishing to attract attention or express their dissatisfaction and anger, repeat vulgarisms they had heard. Poor resilience to failure and difficult situations that a child cannot cope with can also lead to aggression. A child's abnormal behavior is frequently inadvertently reinforced by their parents, who fulfill the child's unreasonable demands, for example.

Aggressive behavior is more common and stronger in early-school-age children, i.e. aged 6-12 years, than in preschool children. This results from the fact that they face a new situation associated with starting school, and consequently, with increased requirements set by their parents and teachers, as well as with confronting their achievements with those of their peers, who frequently come from backgrounds with better development.

Due to the lack of extended families, currently also in rural regions, children have to cope with stress related to day care centers and preschools from an early age. This is very difficult for the vast majority of children. Frequently, 3-year old children are confronted with their peers in a

preschool setting for the first time. A new group with completely unknown children gives rise to the inevitable first verbal conflicts, pushing, and snatching each other's toys. Thus, the first aggressive behaviors are revealed. It is typical of children to direct aggression against substitute objects, which are more accessible and defenseless. These often include toys, animals, plants, and younger children.

The process of socialization of aggression in accordance with gender patterns develops between 3 and 10 years of age. Girls most often show verbal and indirect aggression, trying to restrain it. Physical aggression is more typical for boys due to their socially praised self-defense skills. The duration of anger in young children is very short as other stimuli divert their attention from unpleasant experiences. However, with age the unreleased anger lasts longer and the stimuli diverting attention become less effective. The process of adaptation of a small child to the world of prohibitions entails a lot of frustration. Anger, resentment, and tendencies towards aggression occur in children when they wish to do something they are not allowed to do.

Under the influence of educational processes at school age, a child starts to develop restraints that help inhibit and reduce aggressive behaviors typical for preschool children.

Targeted aggressive behaviors in the form of verbal and physical aggression against certain people or objects come to the fore. Screaming becomes a common form of communication, while kicking, pushing, etc. become ways of attracting attention. Continuous shoving, name calling, and teasing can be observed among teenagers. This phenomenon is known as collective unconscious aggression, which results from the impairment of normal peer contacts.

As children develop and gain life and social experience, they can store a lot of aggressive behaviors which they display in difficult situations.

During adolescence, violence and aggression are used to test oneself, frequently in combination with the desire to impress peers, gain their recognition of one's importance and strong position in the group. Typical aggressive behaviors during adolescence include criticism, name-calling, swearing, as well as destroying other people's property or limiting the activities and development opportunities of others.

Role of family in the development of aggressive behaviors in children from rural areas

Each environment in which a child is raised has its own unique educational specificity; however, family occupies a special place among these different environments as this is where so-called primary socialization takes place. The most important interactions between family members,

such as emotional tensions resulting from impaired communication and unsolved family conflicts or the lack of understanding or time to solve the growing family problems can lead to aggressive behavior [1].

Currently, the traditional family model has been changing both in urban and rural areas; however, the process is slower in the latter. These changes are reflected, among other things, by a reduced number of children per family, an increased number of divorces and extramarital births, and an increase in the average maternal age at childbirth [12]. Most city dwellers adopt the European family model, i.e. parents plus one child, which is associated with continuous haste and professional career aspirations. A large family model is typical for rural areas and this type of model is significantly impacted by religious education and the fact that rural women are less professionally active, therefore they can focus on the upbringing of children. Furthermore, grandparents, who due to retirement are able to devote more time to their grandchildren than their busy parents, play a significant role in the upbringing of children and adolescents. Most often, grandparents have an important role in multigenerational families by passing knowledge about customs, national history and culture to their grandchildren.

Each child is greatly influenced by their family, therefore all types of relationships with parents can either enhance or minimize aggressive behaviors. Parental inhibitions, an improper emotional atmosphere, a highly directive approach, increased severity of verbal and physical punishment in response to a child's social and cognitive immaturity have a significant impact on increasing aggression [13].

The occurrence of domestic aggression usually results from a feeling of insecurity and lack of parental engagement in issues concerning children and adolescents. Lack of closeness and emotional coldness in the parent-child relationship often affect a child's future contacts with peers, which are characterized by a lack of empathy.

Parental behavior towards children very frequently has significant, if not decisive, impact on the expression of aggressive behaviors. Frequent use of punishment, lack of emotional support, and an overbearing attitude towards children may disturb their cognitive and social development. Another issue is abnormalities in interpersonal communication between family members, which when accumulated could cause an increase in destructive feelings in children and adolescents. Positive parental behaviors, support of their child, acceptance, and the warmth of the family home promote the development of cognitive processes in children, as well as influence their acceptance by the peer group [14].

Adolescents use different ways to cope with stressful situations, and the mechanisms underlying the adaptive processes may vary depending on gender. Emotional disturbances may manifest in the form of aggression in boys, and in the form of various ailments in girls [15,16]. Girls become the victims of indirect violence (emotional violence, such as exclusion from a group, or verbal violence, such as slander) as opposed to direct physical violence, which is more common for boys [17]. According to Van der Wal, indirect violence promotes depression more than direct violence, which applies to both sexes [18]. Cooperation with aggressive children requires knowledge of their family-related conditions, their environment, and their modification in order to achieve results.

Lack of emotional bonds between parents and their children results in a lack of a child's identification with the system of norms and values presented by the parents. The presence of an aggressive person, i.e. a person showing a constant tendency towards severely aggressive behavior, can be another cause of the development of aggression. Such a person frequently becomes a role model for a child, especially when they hold a high position in the family, have some power, and are considered competent. Tolerance of aggressive behaviors by parents is another factor likely to influence the development of such behaviors in children. This may be in the form of acquiescence to such behavior or even encouragement of aggression or a lack of condemnation of negative behaviors.

There is a common belief that aggression mainly originates from an inadequate family environment as well as the child's personality. It seems that parental interest shown to children by spending time with them and caring about good relationships are the best ways to prevent aggression among children and adolescents. The significantly greater role of family in shaping the principles of social life in rural areas is a result of the norms and conditions specific in this environment.

Role of school in the development of aggressive behaviors in children from rural areas

School is another environment important in shaping the attitudes of children due to its long-term impact on their development. It is an educational environment that consciously directs a child's development and shapes their personality. It is also possible that school can have disturbing effects on a child's personality, enhancing anxiety and aggression against school or anything that is connected with this institution. Such aggression can be directed towards teachers, school subjects, or peers, with a clear intention to harm [19].

By being distant from the family environment, school loosens the relationship with the local community. Large schools themselves

trigger students' aggressions. School premises and its surroundings often become a place for drug trafficking. Naturally, schools are trying to protect students from unwanted visitors by means of monitoring, intercom, magnetic cards, or security guards.

It should be emphasized that school is the basic link in the educational system as well as an important element of the local social environment in rural areas.

There are multiple school-related sources of violence: they can be the result of teacher-student relationships; they can cause failure to do well in school; they can be the result of marks, teachers' punishment systems, behaviors that harm students' dignity and humiliate them, a teacher's lack of acceptance of students, undervaluing students' work, haste, and excessive requirements for students [20].

Peer violence may result from the atmosphere at school, when teachers do not take into account a student's personality, an environment without friends, and no one with whom to overcome the daily hardships of school [20].

Deliberate teasing of schoolmates is the most common form of violence. A number of studies indicate that teasing schoolmates can have serious consequences for both sides later in adult life. According to Donaldson, people involved in intimidation are most often isolated (irrespective of the side they were on). Furthermore, the cycle of intimidation and being intimidated is replicated later in life [21].

School violence is frequently of an organized nature. The groups set their own secret rules, laws, and ways of acting and communicating. They divide themselves into perpetrators and guards. Identifying perpetrators is difficult. Groups of older aggressors pressure younger students to persuade them to take their side [22].

Interest in this issue grows occasionally, usually when tragic cases such as suicides of students unable to cope with their increasing problems are revealed by the mass media. Violence at school is usually hidden, and long-term exposure to violence has negative effects on students and can lead to impaired psychosocial development in the future [22,23].

Bullying is one of the most common forms of violence among students. It involves a conscious, intentional act to cause others distress or pain. If repeated systematically in the absence of the balance of power, these activities can cause the victim to gradually become weaker than the bullying person or group [24,25].

Violence and aggression at school can also be the result of inappropriate relationships between teachers and students. According to Poraj, this includes an improper assessment process of the

students' knowledge as well as limiting their independence. This process is further affected by overcrowded classrooms, students' anonymity, strong focus on the curriculum, students' overload with schoolwork, and as well as limiting the natural activity of adolescents [3]. The dignity of a student is the least respected by teachers. It is quite common for students to become an object of scorn, excessive criticism, humiliation, etc. Furthermore, lack of recognition of their achievements is also common [3].

Other causes of increased violence among adolescents include a sense of the perpetrators' impunity, the presence of violence in the socio-political and economic sphere of life as well as in the immediate surroundings, destructive peer groups, transfer of the patterns of domestic violence, improper parental behavior, negative behavioral patterns shown in the mass media, a sense of alienation, and parental unemployment and poverty [26].

Among our respondents from rural areas in Podlaskie Province, the highest percentage of students who showed aggressive behaviors was observed in grade III of gymnasium (53.0%). In the study group of 755 rural students, aggressive behaviors were shown by 28.1% of girls and 73.1% of boys. There was also a correlation between students' aggressive behaviors and their marks. The conducted study indicates that the highest proportion of respondents declaring aggressive behaviors (75.0%) was observed among students with poor marks. There was also a correlation between aggressive behavior among respondents and their attitude towards school. Other authors found that 77.3% of rural students with a negative attitude to school showed aggressive behaviors [8].

School measures aimed at preventing violence among students should be multidirectional. Proven and effective early prevention programs should be promoted, starting from older elementary school grades and continuing in subsequent grades in gymnasium. These programs should be targeted to reduce violence and unlawful behaviors.

Role of the media in shaping aggressive behaviors in children and adolescents from rural areas

Aggressive behaviors in children and adolescents are significantly impacted by the mass media, which are a reflection of global culture and socio-political processes. The media are also a source of knowledge, information, and behavior patterns for children and adolescents. They influence the psychology of young audiences, often by presenting explicit scenes from life, as well as by showing and commenting on negative facts from around the world. Violence has become a commodity that sells well in movies, books, and computer games.

There seem to be two possible mechanisms underlying the development of educational difficulties resulting from watching aggression on television: behaviors within the scope of the perspective sphere or the incidental sphere. Behaviors within the scope of the perspective sphere shape or release undesirable social behavioral patterns, e.g. acceptance of aggression or brutality. Behaviors within the scope of the incidental sphere, on the other hand, suggest ways and circumstances to repeat aggressive behaviors [27].

According to Clarke, there are as many as five consequences of watching violence on television or computer screen, and these include imitation, desensitization, agitation, and new cognitive elements (e.g. exposure to violence can result in scenarios of aggressive behaviors). Therefore, watching TV intensely and for long periods of time plays a significant role in the process of shaping the attitudes, accepted norms, and life values of children and adolescents [28].

The number of children and adolescents, including those from rural areas, that use the Internet and play computer games has been increasing continuously due to the rapid development of multimedia technologies.

The materialistic lifestyle promoted by the media, which escalates the immoral behavior of adolescents, also seems important. Furthermore, advertisements of alcoholic beverages, beer in particular, which are present during each commercial break, increase alcohol consumption among adolescents. The mass media considerably affect the consciousness of adolescents by shaping their behaviors and decisions. Manipulation techniques that target the young generation are developed by the best specialists, especially since children and adolescents often have their own money, which they spend as suggested by someone who seems to have authority [29].

CONCLUSIONS

The phenomenon of aggression among children and adolescents is one of the threats of modern times. This phenomenon is increasing. There has been a decline in the age of juvenile offenders and aggressors, who outdo each other in search of different methods and forms of action.

Aggression spreads rapidly and has become a concern for a number of elementary educators. Although it is present in all schools, not all teachers are able to properly identify aggressive behaviors or their causes among students. They are often unaware of risks associated with such behaviors. Unfortunately, aggression is perceived as a behavior arising through a modeling process, i.e. imitation of behaviors from the immediate surroundings.

Supporting families, promoting the strongest possible bonds with children, and spending time together with family are of great importance for the prevention of violence among children and adolescents. This is particularly important as the family environment has a decisive influence on the development of children, by shaping their self-esteem and teaching them how to cope in difficult situations. A properly functioning family is still a child's basic protective factor against aggressive behaviors.

It should be emphasized that school is the basic link in the educational system as well as an important element of the local social environment in rural areas. Factors related to the functioning of the education system in rural areas, such as limited access to preschools, kindergartens or the Internet, have major effects on significantly lower educational opportunities for children and adolescents from the rural environment. Greater differentiation in the qualifications of rural teachers, and possibly lower standards of education, is also an important factor.

However, since rural school is a relatively small environment, all students, teachers, and parents know each other, which is definitely an advantage. Teachers' familiarity with students and their homes is incomparably greater than in cities, where teachers only meet their students at school, and see their parents during school meetings.

School is also a place where children and adolescents encounter a number of problems they have to face. These often include homework, problems with acceptance in the peer environment, and, frequently, lack of proper support from teachers. At the same time, school is a place where children can start to fulfill their life aspirations, achieve their first goals, and take further actions aimed at self-realization.

The increasing liberalism in everyday life, a sense of meaningless existence, distrust, and lack of motivation to learn or work are all disturbing phenomena that promote aggressive behaviors among rural children and adolescents. A shift of attention towards acquiring material goods, and consequently pushing moral or spiritual values into the background, may also be observed in some adolescents. Therefore, a close relationship between children and adolescents and their parents as well as their school teachers is very important. It allows for an accurate and rapid diagnosis of the existing problems of everyday life. A correct diagnosis allows to take the appropriate measures to eliminate aggressive behaviors both inside as well as outside the school environment in modern rural areas.

Conflicts of interest

None declared.

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