

## The perception of violence in children's drawings

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### ABSTRACT

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The aim of the paper is to evaluate the perception of violence held by children and adolescents aged 8 to 16 years based on their artworks. 163 children's drawings submitted from across Poland on "Children against violence." were analyzed. These pictures were analysed according to their contents. The artworks were made using various techniques: torn paper collage, collage, wax scratch, coloring pages, painting using poster paints and watercolors. Drawings have been classified in twelve thematic groups: "aggression against things", "peer violence",

"violence and addiction", "family violence", "workplace violence", "on-line violence," verbal violence", the continuity of violence", difficult choices", and " help ". Children and adolescents are good observers and they see various forms of violence, especially signs of bullying, and the impact of addictions on their development. Children know how to avoid and reduce violence.

**Key words:** Violence, drawings, children, adolescents

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Globally, violence takes the lives of more than 1.5 million people annually: just over 50% due to suicide, some 35% due to homicide, and just over 12% as a direct result of war or some other form of conflict. For each single death due to violence, there are dozens of hospitalizations, hundreds of emergency department visits, and thousands of doctors' appointments [1]. Furthermore, violence especially against children often has lifelong consequences for victims' physical and mental health and social functioning.

Domestic violence is a pattern of assaultive and coercive behaviors—including physical, sexual, and psychological attacks, and economic coercion—that an adult uses against an intimate partner. This pattern of serious assault is most typically exercised by men against a female partner and sometimes against their children [2, 3].

Children frequently experience violence directly as victims and witnesses of drive-by shootings, gang activities, robberies, and assaults, and indirectly through reports of violent encounters provided by their family, peers, and members of their community [4,5]. Prevalence studies on child abuse and neglect involving victim surveys indicate that the number of people who have been maltreated in childhood is ten times greater than reported [6].

An international overview of the prevalence of child sexual abuse in 21 countries worldwide indicates that between 7% and 36% of women and between 3% and 29% of men report childhood sexual victimization [1].

The differences in prevalence rates among countries can be explained partly by variations in methods, samples used and response rates. Violence in school can also be regarded as aggressive behavior based on the interaction among teachers, students, or other related staff within the school grounds and during school hours [7]. Children are affected by exposure to violence at all ages; very little is known about the consequences of exposure at younger ages, especially any long-term consequences [8].

The fact that domestic violence occurs in Poland is undisputed, but unfortunately stereotypes still exist in our society that cause violence to be perceived as occurring only in families on the margins of society, and the perpetrators operate through the influence of alcohol or are mentally ill and treated; it is treated as a private matter of each family, in which no one should interfere.

Thanks to social programs and the increased interest in the scientific world, there has been an extension of knowledge on the subject of violence. There are five main sources of family violence: biological, psychological, environmental, alcohol, and social factors [9]. Due to the encountered violence in social relations resulting from negligence and economic violence, these forms

are often cited in the main classification with the physical, psychological and sexual.

In Poland, child abuse was first defined in 1981 at a scientific symposium organized by the Section of Pediatric Surgery of Trauma, Polish Association of Surgeons of Children [10]. It was found that one in 1,000 children hospitalized in Poland were treated because of physical abuse. The problem concerned girls more often than boys. In 2012, according to the police statistics at least 20,000 children experienced domestic violence [11].

Children's drawings often are used to provide access to a child's mental representations of self and others, and his or her relationships with others, as well as to mark change in those representations with intervention [12,13].

Drawing a picture is one of the effective methods of one's self-expression. It is a stronger and simpler communication tool than children's words and expressions, which they have already learned [14-17].

According to Popek [18], drawing has a layered structure: realistic (naive realism and intellectual), symbolic (naive symbolism and intellectual), and abstract (primitive, illusory, and intellectual). The first layer, representational content, answers the questions: What does it represent? What does it express? The second layer demonstrates the formal content and answers the question: What does artistic expression mean? Included here are shape (realistic proportions, miniaturization or deformation); color (color temperature, color relationships, harmony or disharmony, and symbolism); value (light or shadow, chromatic or achromatic); composition (compact or fragmented, open or closed, central or peripheral, flat space, static, or dynamic); the nature of the means of expression (dots, commas, rigid lines, extended lines); texture (smooth, glazed, rough); solid (compact or fragmented); and form and content (harmonious, discordant). The third layer describes the value of quality and represents novelty and originality.

Looking at the drawings, we should pay attention to sequencing the appearance of items and noting the frequency with which certain items or colors appear. It is not enough to interpret the content of a drawing according to its topic. Analyses of the content of a child's or teenager's drawings created over a longer period will allow us to draw in-depth conclusions about the personality and emotional state as well as the needs of the young artist [19].

Drawings allow children to express their feelings - both positive and negative emotions [16, 18,20]. Children's drawings depict not only situations they encounter within their families or schools but also how children perceive themselves. Their drawings show an object, character, or situation in the way that the child perceives it, and this differs from how an adult would perceive these.

By analysing drawings, we can learn many interesting things about children, their characters, and how they think about themselves, their family members, and their own position in the family [16].

There are several reports on the perception of violence in children's drawings [21]. Most typically, drawings have been used in assessing children's emotional responses to sexual abuse and parental alcoholism [22].

The aim of this study was to present different forms of violence depicted in the drawings of children and adolescents.

Their artworks were analysed in terms of how violent the incidents were and how the victims were depicted and were evaluated according to (1) the violent themes, (2) the places of violent incidents, and (2) age of children and adolescents.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The framework for this study was grounded in descriptive way. In this research, we were interested how children and adolescents present different forms of violence in their drawings. Use of pictorial data in research emerged from anthropological studies, and while drawn pictures as a source of data are not often used in qualitative researches.

Drawings are a way to encourage nonverbal communication and the data are considered "richer and more insightful than those obtained through writing alone" [23]. Drawings are valuable to evaluate psychosocial and emotional responses and change over time [24]. Visual methodologies are becoming more evident in social research. These methodologies encompass media such as film, video, still photography, electronic visual media, and drawings.

163 children's drawings were analysed. These were submitted to a contest "Children against violence" organized by Department of Integrated Medical Care of the Medical University of Białystok, Poland. The competition concerned issues related to the dangers of drug addiction, alcoholism, aggression and violence. The artworks were submitted from all over Poland from hospital recreation centers, schools, art studios, from 10 cities and 13 villages. The artworks were made using various techniques: torn paper collage, collage, batik, wax scratch, coloring pages, painting using poster paints and watercolors.

Analyses of the children's drawings were based in terms of their meaning, on the interpretation of color, workmanship, dynamic lines, the human form (drawing order, size, aspect ratio), and composition (arrangement of elements to each other and on a sheet).

Consistent with previously conducted qualitative studies focusing on children's drawings [7,25]; the children's artworks were coded for type,

effect of violence, and places of violent incidents. Two researchers analyzed the children's drawings. One of the authors of this research is a paint artist and the other author is a psychologist with a doctorate degree at the University.

The ethics committee of the Medical University of Białystok, approved the study. Informed consent was obtained from participants' parents.

## **RESULTS**

The artworks were from children 11 to 12 years old (13.5%), from 13 to 15 years (14.7%), 10 years (9.2%), from 5 to 6 years (6.1%), from 8 to 9 years (4.3%), and from 16 years old (2.5%).

The artworks were made using various techniques: torn paper collage, collage, wax scratch, coloring pages, painting using poster paints and watercolors.

Drawings have been classified into twelve thirteen groups. Qualitative analysis was conducted on the children's artworks and narrations.

The findings were presented under the following two main headings: theme of violence and age of children and adolescents.

The findings related to the themes that the children mentioned in their drawings are shown in Table 1. Advice (35 artworks) and general (28 drawings) more often presented by the young artists. Advice drawings promote non-violence in relationships. Some of the topics presented might seem to demonstrate naive aspects, such as the timely donation of borrowed money. Much of the advice depicted includes recommendations not to smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, or use illegal drugs, all of which are potential sources of violence (Figure 1).

One drawing shows a pregnant woman who is smoking along with the advice: Do not smoke! You can kill your baby! It expresses empathy and understanding for the nature of the needs of the very-youngest human beings.

In addition, with his drawing, this child shows adults a model of responsible motherhood as one that respects the basic rights and needs of the unborn.

The artists of works of the topic "general" did not limit themselves to showing the negative consequences of aggression, lack of respect, or the use of physical domination. One of the works refers to the pattern of aggressive behavior that may be instigated by all sorts of computer games.

The second shows the problem of the violation of children's personal boundaries by a "bad touch," that is, one that was not in the interest of the child (Figure 2).

In addition, the artworks presented the value of the following words: love, estimate, friendship, kindness, and empathy.

**Table 1.** Themes of violence presented by children and adolescents

Theme	Number of artworks	Age (Mean: years/ SD)
Advice	35 (21.5%)	12.0 ± 2.9.
General	28 (17.2%)	11.6 ± 3.5
Bullying	18 (11%)	9.3. ± 2.2
Addiction	16 (9.8%)	12.7 ± 3.4
Happy world	16 (9.8%)	7.1 ± 2.3
Difficult choices	14 (8.6%)	13.2 ± 3.5
Domestic violence	12 (7.4%)	11.6 ± 3.6
Verbal violence	10 (6.1%)	13.8 ± 3.3
Helping	8 (5%)	9.3 ± 2.8
Violence/ things	3 (1.8%)	7.5 ± 2.3
On-line violence	2 (1.25%)	9.5 ± 4.9
Continuity violence	2 (1.25%)	15.5 ± 0.7
Workplace violence	1 (0.62%)	13.0 ± 0

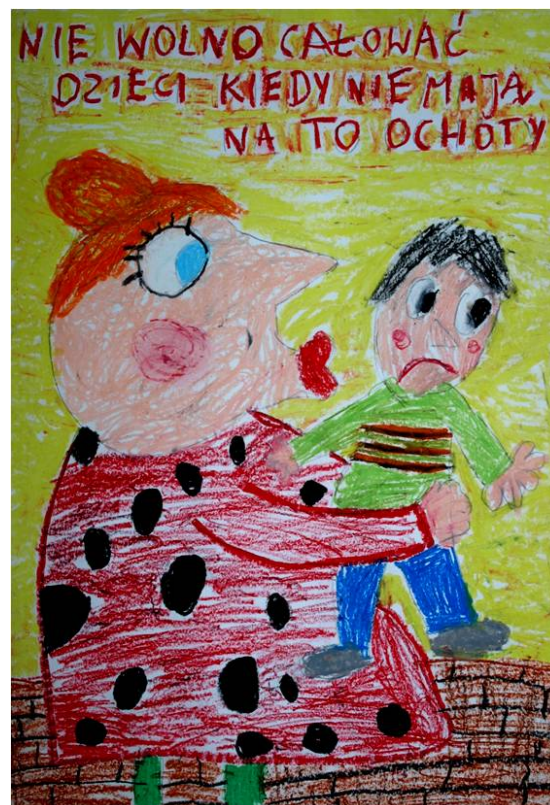


**Figure 1.** Stop Violence, 13 year old author

Others appeal to the prevention of violence and addiction, stressing that “violence does not solve anything” and that “it is always bad.”

As seen in Table 1, bullying (18 artworks) and abuse and addiction (16 drawings) were the types of violence that the children mostly experienced. A series representing “bullying,” 18 drawings (11%) were made by younger participants from 7 to 13 years old. Children clearly expressed disagreement with the humiliation and violation of the dignity of those who are weak. Older children were involved in verbal abuse, and they fully understand this phenomenon and its negative effects. Children used more details and color to present a victim of violence. The settings where aggression took place were different: at a school, on the street, in a backyard, at a park, and at a playground; the tools used to display aggression also differed: fists, sticks, a knife, legs, and a cage (Figure 3).

Sixteen of the artworks represented “abuse and addiction” and were created by children and adolescents from age 8 to age 16 (12.7 ± 3.4 years).



**Figure 2.** Do not Kiss ! When Child Does Not Want, 8 year old author



**Figure 3.** Stop Hitting Him, 11 year old author

Children and adolescents demonstrate that the use of various substances, especially alcohol and drugs, are very often a source of violence. It was clear that the addict is a source of hurtful behavior in the form of psychological, physical, sexual, and economic abuse. An addicted person lives on a swing caused by either his or her emotional state after using alcohol or drugs or withdrawal syndrome (Figure 4). Children’s drawings depicted cigarettes packaged like a time bomb, a mother and father as bottles of alcohol, a drunken fellow, solicitations by their peers to drink, and a mother coming out of the shadow of addictions (alcohol, cigarettes, drugs).



Figure 4. Dad Stop Drink, 7 year old author

Also, sixteen drawings created by artists from 5 to 13 years old ( $7.1 \pm 2.3$  years) represented a “happy world.” Children illustrated their worlds without addictions and violence. They depicted a happy world with smiling children, happiness, playing, a glowing sun, smiling clouds, and blooming flowers.

Fourteen drawings (8.6%) were painted by children and adolescents from 10 to 16 years old and represented the topic “difficult choices.” These drawings showed dilemmas such as whether or not to drink or to use drugs, and whether or not to help someone in need (Figure 5).

Twelve drawings (7.4%) illustrated the theme of “domestic violence.” The artists were children and adolescents from 6 to 16 years old ( $11.6 \pm 3.6$  years). Considering violence and relationships within the family, violence can be distinguished as being between partners, directed toward one partner, to the elderly, or to a disabled member of the family, or toward children. All of these drawings represented violence against children. Aggression was manifested as both physical and verbal forms (Figure 6).

Ten works (6.1%) illustrated the theme of “verbal violence” and were painted by young people from 11 to 16 years of age. Verbal abuse can include humiliation, name-calling, ridicule, pointing out errors and bad behavior, unfair generalizations, false accusations, threats, screaming, and anger. Such aggression may even lead to a loss of control over his or her own behavior by the victim. The young artists exposed the use of name-calling, taunting, screaming, and anger (Figure 7).

Eight (5%) artworks illustrated the subject of “helping.” They were done by children and adolescents from age 7 to 13 years old ( $9.3 \pm 2.8$  years). This subject was understood by the artists as a capacity to provide mutual help and support. The drawings are friendly and show for example, children holding hands. The second group of young artists presented problems in the context of assistance by the competent state bodies. The “heroes” of the drawings offered assistance in a

variety of dangerous situations. The artists are children in the early years of school; the presentation of problems demonstrates an adequate social education of children.

Only single children and adolescents presented violence as: against things, on-line violence, continuity of violence and workplace violence (Figures 5,8,9).

Most children under 10 years of age painted the following themes: bullying, happy world, helping, violence against things and on-line violence.



Figure 5. Your Choice, 10 year old author



Figure 6. Alcohol and Violence, 14 year old author



Figure 7. Bad Words Hurt, 11 year old author



Figure 8. On-line Violence, 6 year old author



Figure 9. Stop Violence – The first: victim of violence, the second: torturer mascots, the third: aggressor, 15 year old author

## DISCUSSION

In this study, children's and adolescents drawings represented different forms of violence. Most of the artworks depicted the topic of "advice". Advice drawings promoted non-violence in relationships. Bullying and abuse and addiction were the types of violence that the children mostly experienced. It is interesting, that only 12(7.4%) children presented domestic violence in their artworks. Through their art, children express their feelings including joy, delight, sadness, resentment, fear, and despair. These works also depict children's expectations and how they perceive themselves and the world. The results may help parents and teachers to broaden their current insights into violence. Our findings are in accordance with earlier reports [13,19,20].

The present findings supported existing theories. Contextual theories focus on the social and cultural context of children's development. According to Bronfenbrenner's [26] (ecological systems theory also called development in context or human ecology theory), a child is in the center of the multisocial systems that affect each other. The ecological theory emphasizes environmental factors as playing the major role to development. Children and adolescents learn from experiences and observations that can reflect on their behavior [27].

A long-term use of violence by the perpetrator creates a threat to the physical and mental health of the victim. The learned helplessness phenomenon is often observed in violence victims. This phenomenon is a condition in which a person learns to behave helplessly, failing to respond even though there are opportunities for him or her to avoid unpleasant circumstances or gain positive rewards. The theory of learned helplessness may explain domestic violence. The learned helplessness theory is the view that clinical depression and related mental illnesses may result from a perceived absence of control over the outcome of a situation. People that have been ineffective and less sensitive in determining the consequences of their behaviour are defined as having acquired learned helplessness [28]. The learned helplessness theory was accompanied by a resurgence of the psychopathology; theorists argued that women stayed in abusive relationships because they suffered from a personality disorder that caused them to seek out abusive relationships as a means of self-punishment, or were addicted to abusive relationships. Many also maintained that women were co-alcoholics with their spouses and thus could be "treated" through alcohol addiction programs. These theories were inconsistent with the fact that women had very rational reasons for staying in relationships. In addition, while battered women may be subject to an increased risk of substance

abuse, this is a consequence, not a cause, of the abuse.

Child abuse by neglect can be a manifestation of learned helplessness: when parents believe they are incapable of stopping an infant's crying, they may simply give up trying to do anything for the child [29]. According to Tyszkiewicz [30] violence generates suffering in children and is sometimes a

source of their artistic creativity. In the present study, illustrations and other forms of artwork created by children and adolescents were used to present different forms of violence. Children were asked to create artwork that showed how they see the problem of violence, as well as its causes and how they can fight it.

Color analysis has often been a means of determining a child's emotional state. Large amounts of black or red that recur in a child's drawings, especially over time, may be a troublesome sign. Black is often considered an indication of depression or feeling hopeless or restricted. Red may indicate intense anger. Blues and greens are usually considered to be colors that indicate calmness, and yellows and oranges often indicate cheerfulness. Too light, faint, or barely visible colors may mean that a child is trying to hide his or her real experiences and emotions. Tentative and blurred lines are often seen in the work of shy, timid, and introverted children [16,20]. These colors were also presented in the artworks of current study.

The present results are in accordance with previous reports [18,19] analysed 100 artworks submitted to an art contest title "Thirty Years of the Gdansk Hotline, Anonymous Friend." More than half (58) of the works illustrated some problem: 12 presented addictions (smoking, alcohol, drugs), 21 presented images of death (including suicide); 24 involved a threat to life due to disasters such as war, tornado, flood, or fire; 6 represented loneliness; 5 involved family problems; and other pictures illustrated other kinds of problems or difficulties. In 68 drawings, children used several colors, and others used only black. In the present study, only 12 drawings were done in gray and black colors.

Yurtal and Artut [13] investigated Turkish children's perception of violence in school. Children mostly drew pictures of violent events among children. Also, there were pictures of violent incidents perpetrated by teachers and directors against children. It was observed that violence influenced children. Violence was mostly depicted in school gardens, but there were violent incidents everywhere, such as in classrooms, corridors, and school stores as well.

Analyses of the contents of these drawings allow us to draw conclusions about the dynamics and the functioning of the systems in which the child is functioning, primarily in the context of satisfying his or her needs for security and love. Satisfying these

needs allows a child to take on developmental tasks appropriate for his or her age, allowing the child to function properly in the home, at school, and in his or her social life. It is important to note that the family is the primary and most important educational environment for a young child.

Adults looking at children's drawings tend to evaluate them automatically according to the criteria of beauty, that is, pretty or ugly. However, every child has the right to free expression in his or her art, and each of his or her works is equally important. It is worth noting the value of analysing children's drawings and considering the results as a source of information for the preparation of educational programs.

In conclusion, children and adolescents are careful and watchful observers of their surroundings, both in their families and beyond. They see around them various forms of violence, especially signs of bullying and the negative impacts of addiction on their own lives and development. Children and adolescents are aware of the strategies needed to avoid and reduce violence in their lives. They are also aware of the need to help and support people who are the victims of violence. We hope that these drawings will help to reduce antisocial behaviors in children and adolescents, create empathic attitudes, and show other children ways to respond to physical and verbal violence. We trust that the artworks help depict how children see the role of parents and other adults in creating victims, perpetrators, and observers of violence. We hope that these drawings will help children to build positive contacts and good relationships with friends, and sensitize their parents and teachers to the problems of violence as seen by their children and students.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare with respect to this paper.

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