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# The Role of Social Institutions in Protection of Children From Abuse and Neglect

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### **Abstract**

Child abuse is an age-old phenomenon, which is confirmed by the data from art, literature, and science from many parts of the world. There are reports on infanticide, mutilation, abandonment and other forms of violence found in many historical records of unkempt, weak, and malnourished children who were left by families to take care of themselves. Those records also make note of charity organisations and groups, as well as others that were involved in ensuring the welfare and providing protection for the children. Social institutions are institutions that ought to be the first link in the chain of providing help and care for children and minors, but at the same time, they are institutions that work on reducing the occurrences of abuse of minors in society in general. Today, there is clear evidence that child abuse is a global problem which comes in different forms and is, unfortunately, deeply-rooted in cultural, economic and social practices. Solving this global problem, however, requires a much better understanding of its occurrences in a range of environments, as well as its causes and effects in said environments. In this paper, by applying the method of quantitative and qualitative content analysis, we will review and analyse concepts of child abuse and neglect, the forms in which they come, as well as analyse the role of social institutions, with a special focus on Centres for Social Work. The creative aim of the paper is to recognise the problem of child neglect and abuse which demands an efficient response by the wider social community.

*Keywords:* social institutions, child abuse, healthcare, Centre for social work

## **The Attitude of Members of Certain Vulnerable Social Groups Towards Police Treatment**

In the modern society, the term “abuse” is gaining currency in various forms. The topic of abuse and neglect is difficult, especially when aimed at children. Lack of care for children and violence inflicted upon them are phenomena as old as humankind. In recent decades, experts, as well as public at large, have been very interested in the problem of violence which occurs in families, previously perceived as a private matter, but also in schools. However, modern forms of violence have also been appearing more frequently. On a global scale, during the entire history of humankind, there hasn't been a time when some kind of violence didn't exist, most often stemming from mistaken beliefs, feelings of threat, or greed for that which belongs to others (Bjelajac & Matijašević, 2013, p. 410).

Today, modern societies attempt to reduce the degree of violence present in all societies through the culture of behaviour. Culture of behaviour is a common fund of beliefs and behaviours of a society and its concepts about how people ought to behave (Bulatović, 2012, p. 211). These concepts include ideas on which acts of omission or commission may constitute abuse and neglect. In other words, culture helps to define widely accepted principles of child rearing and care.

One of the most heinous forms of abuse is domestic abuse, including violence against children, which is one of the most despicable forms of violation of all basic human rights and freedoms. Any global approach to child abuse must take into account different standards and expectations for parental behavior in different cultures around the world. In other words, all forms of violence, abuse or neglect of children, which threaten or damage the physical, psychological and moral integrity of the child's person, represent a violation of the child's right to life, survival and development. In this sense, the International Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect defined child abuse or maltreatment as "all forms of physical and/or emotional maltreatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, commercial or other exploitation, which leads to actual or potential harm to the health, survival, development or dignity of the child in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power" (Runyan, 2002, p. 59).

In the broadest sense, abuse and neglect includes all activities or circumstances that hinder or prevent the development of a child's innate potential (Begum, 1996, p. 288). Abuse of children and adolescents also includes failures to act and actions that are assessed as inappropriate or harmful for the child, in accordance with existing social rules, values and professional knowledge. In

other words, abuse is everything that individuals, institutions or processes do or do not do, which directly harms children and reduces their prospects for safe and healthy development towards adulthood.

A healthy nation is an idea and a goal of every society and country, and that entails taking care of children and their basic needs in every aspect. The creative aim of the paper is to recognise the problem of child neglect and abuse which demands an efficient response by the wider social community.

### **Forms of Child Abuse and Neglect**

Child abuse and neglect appear in different forms. In the broadest sense, acts of child abuse and neglect can be classified into: 1) physical, 2) psychological (emotional) and 3) sexual. Very often it is impossible to make a clear distinction between the three mentioned forms of abuse and neglect, thus one form of abuse and neglect often contains elements of one of the other two forms. For example, physical abuse is often manifested in association with psychological abuse, while neglect is most often manifested simultaneously in all three forms (Pejović et. al, 2001, p. 176).

Corporal punishment of children in the form of hitting, slapping, or beating is socially and legally accepted in most countries (Petrović, 2021, p. 191). In many countries, it's a notable phenomenon in schools and other institutions, including penal systems for young offenders, and it is accepted as an educational measure. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child requires states to protect children from "all forms of physical or psychological violence" while in the care of parents and others, and the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has underlined that corporal punishment is incompatible with the Convention. In particular, it should be underlined that, according to the ratified text of this convention, the term child refers to a "human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier" (International Treaties, 1997, Art. 1 ).

Frequency of violence and neglect of children and youth ought to become a more commonly discussed topic in the public if we want to greatly reduce reduce the phenomenon, which should no longer be seen as a private, but rather a general matter that concerns every one of us. The vital importance of suppressing it is in the interest of the entire society in general, because it endangers the health of the child, which is by no means in the interest of the state. Family is a space where a child ought to feel safe and loved, although it can sometimes be the

opposite, the source of the greatest peril for the child. A child can be directly endangered and exposed to risks in its family if it is a victim of physical, psychological or other forms of violence, or if it witnesses violence in the family environment, being indirectly endangered by violence inflicted against another family member.

With the term abuse we usually refer to those events, situations, conditions or behaviors that injure the integrity and damage the development of the child (Milosavljević & Tankosić, 2018, p. 68). Certain forms of domestic violence include the denial of physical or emotional support and can have devastating long-term consequences for the victim, in this case a child. Violence in this context includes physical or mental acts and omissions that result in injury to the victim. The concept of domestic violence includes several subthemes, such as child abuse, intimate partner abuse, and elder abuse.

Given the importance of the topic, the Republic of Serbia adopted the Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence, which regulates, among other things, the actions of state bodies and institutions in the prevention of domestic violence, but also that it itself does not apply to minors who commit domestic violence (Narodna skupština Republike Srbije [Narodna skupština], 2016, Art. 1 & 2). The legislator's idea when enacting the aforementioned provision was to regulate the organization and actions of state bodies and institutions in a general and uniform manner and thereby enable effective prevention of domestic violence, as well as timely protection and support for victims of domestic violence. What should certainly be kept in mind is that domestic violence is a multi-causal phenomenon and we can not talk about a single factor that causes it, but most often it is a combination of numerous negative factors that favors its occurrence (Merdović & Bjelajac, 2021, p. 188).

Thus, parents have a basic right to raise their children as they want, and the society assumes that the parents will act in the best interests of their children (Crosson-Tower, 2003, p.1). When parents fail to protect their children from harm or meet their basic needs – as in cases of child abuse and neglect – the society has a responsibility to intervene in order to protect the health and well-being of these children. Children are often exposed to a great degree of risk of both direct and indirect violence within the family. By indirect violence, it is assumed that the child is not a direct victim of violence, but indirectly via a family member (Marković & Zirojević, 2021, p. 314), while direct violence means that violence is inflicted upon the child itself, whether it is physical, psychological or sexual. Although one ought to keep in mind that it is very common in practice for the mentioned types of violence to be closely related, and for one type of violent

child victimisation to include elements of the other two.

In addition to being affected by physical abuse, children may also be affected by non-physical domestic violence based on coercive control, such as isolation, continuous monitoring, financial abuse, and verbal and psychological abuse (Katz, 2016, p. 49). In the developed countries of the world, the state and its institutions work to protect children from domestic violence, namely by working to maintain the responsibility of professionals, organizations, and by promoting a child-centered approach founded on the needs and attitudes of children (Holt, 2014, p. 24).

Emotional abuse is a form of interpersonal violence that includes all forms of non-physical violence and distress caused by non-verbal and verbal actions. Emotional abuse is intentional and manipulative and it is a method of control. It often occurs in combination with other types of abuse, but it can also occur in isolation. Like other types of abuse, emotional abuse most often affects those with the least amount of power and resources (Stark, 2015, p. 648). Emotional abusers have a need to dominate and they feel responsible for their victims. Although emotional abuse can hurt as much as physical abuse, it can be more difficult to identify because the marks, the psychological consequences, are left inside the child and aren't visible from the outside (Royse, 2015, p. 190).

Children who suffer from emotional abuse are often extremely loyal to the parent, afraid of punishment if they report the abuse or think that this type of abuse is the normal course of life (Mršević, 1997, p. 97). Behavioural indicators of an emotionally abused child include inappropriate behaviour that is either immature or excessively mature for the child's age, dramatic changes in behavior (disruption of activity, clinging or compulsive seeking of affection and attention), aggression, uncooperativeness, bedwetting or loss of bowel control (after the child has been trained) and destructive or antisocial behavior (constant withdrawal and sadness). Furthermore, poor peer relationships, lack of self-confidence, unusual fears for the child's age (fear of going home, being left alone, specific objects), inability to react emotionally and develop an emotional bond with others are also indicators. Realistically, any of the above behaviors can be seen in ordinary children, but a change in pattern of these behaviours is a strong indicator of emotional abuse.

For instance, only two decades ago sexual abuse of children was rarely recognised, yet now, as a society, we realize that sexual abuse is an enormous problem that affects our population at large. According to statistical data, in modern circumstances, it is estimated that up to one in three women and one in six men were sexually abused in childhood. Experts' estimates vary widely,

however, as childhood sexual abuse is believed to be drastically underreported, and most do not acknowledge the abuse until adulthood (Whealin, 2006, p. 4). In most cases, the abused child knows their abuser and it is someone who has access to the child – such as a family member, teacher or babysitter. Only one in ten cases of sexual abuse involves a stranger. Child sexual abusers are usually male, regardless of whether the victim is female or not (Tracy, 2021, p. 1).

Estimates of prevalence of sexual abuse vary widely depending on the definitions used and the manner in which the information is collected. Some research is conducted with children, other with adolescents and adults reporting on their childhood, while others survey parents about what their children may have experienced. These three different methods very often give different results. For example, in a study of Romanian families, it was found that 0.1% of parents admitted to sexually abusing their children, while 9.1% of children reported having suffered some form of sexual abuse (Browne et. al, 2002, p. 33).

In addition, certain authors point out the inadequacy of training on the topic of sexual abuse of children (Dove et. al, 2008, p. 44). Although ethical and legal mandates for reporting suspected abuse are commonly addressed in counselor education programs, issues of prevention and treatment are rarely examined. Additionally, neglect or damage caused by lack of care by parents or other guardians is often seen in literature as part of the definition of abuse. Conditions such as hunger and poverty are sometimes included in the definition of neglect. Because definitions vary and laws on abuse reporting do not always require mandatory reporting of neglect, it is difficult to assess the global dimensions of the problem or meaningfully compare the rates between countries. Little research, for example, has been done on how children and parents or other caregivers may differ in defining neglect. To take the example of research conducted in Canada, a national study of cases reported to child protective services found that, among confirmed cases of neglect, 19% involved physical neglect, 12% abandonment, 11% educational neglect, and 48% involved physical injury resulting from parents' failure to provide adequate supervision (Fuller-Thompson, 2016, p. 727).

### **The Role of the Center for Social Work in Child Protection**

Abuse and neglect of children is increasingly being recognized as a problem, both from the perspective of social policy and of healthcare in general. Getting to know the aforementioned problem from the aspect of social

policy is understood, the reason why this is a problem from the point of view of healthcare is precisely based on the past experiences of physical, sexual and emotional abuse and neglect during childhood, which are very widespread and as such are associated with numerous short-term and long-term consequences for health and development of children. However, what is surprising is the lack of international, comparable epidemiological data on experiences of violence against children, especially in low-income societies. However, researchers, state policy makers and social policy experts take an active interest in this field, especially in rural areas, where there is a lack of transparency about this problem, often being seen as a situation that concerns no one. In order for the problem of abuse and neglect of children to be discussed more and more, it is necessary to do extensive research on violence against children, which would require additional research, so as to obtain results that would help us update the data on prevalence, prevention and interventions, and thus to a solution.

The endangerment of children in the family leads to very serious consequences for both the development and the overall health of the child, which often ends very badly, with a lethal outcome. This sequence of events is precisely the reason why institutions need to intervene, this problem doesn't occur for a short time but lasts. And for this reason it is necessary to make a record of it at the very beginning if it happens in the family, so that the educators may notify the competent institutions that violence occurs in case they notice something as the first link in the chain of intervention. Consequently, if it is noticed in due time that violence occurs, it is possible to further inform the competent institutions, which need to react urgently and protect the child's interests in every respect.

The Center for social work is the next link in the protective chain after the healthcare system, within which the consequences and injuries sustained as a result of physical or psychological mistreatment and abuse are treated, it acts once the violence had already been committed and it must react to every report, take it into consideration, and assess the conditions and needs of the child who was subjected to violence, as well as the family itself. This process involves team work in which one of the persons involved is a professional medical worker, educated for this type of intervention.

The social welfare system plays a very important role, firstly in the prevention of violence against children in general, and then in the rehabilitation of victims of violence and family reintegration (Simić, 2009, p. 211). Within the Center for social work, public institutions for social protection have been established,



bodies that are authorized for guardianship and narrowly "specialized in providing legal protection for the family and all its members who are in a state of need for social and legal assistance" (Počuča & Šarkić, 2014, p. 123).

Social welfare institutions, as part of the legal and institutional system in our country, are a public service whose competence lies primarily in the social protection of children in the narrower sense, such as care and prevention from further violence, and also the primary protection of persons whose integrity and possibility for normal growth and development have been jeopardised. The Rulebook on the Organization, Norms and Work Standards for the Center for social work regulates the performance of activities within the Center for social work in its exercise of public powers (Narodna skupština, 2022, Art. 1). The Center for social work and social institutions within the system have the task of protecting the family and providing support in order to ensure normal conditions for the development of children and all its members are present in the family. This actually implies that institutions in the social welfare system exist to help the family overcome all difficulties and to raise the damaged family relations to a normal level (Matijašević-Obradović & Stefanović, 2017, p. 25). The social protection system includes all types of assistance to the family, this in actuality means legal and healthcare assistance, but also financial, providing temporary conditions for life and work of family members, all with the aim of protecting the most vulnerable, namely preserving the health and ensuring the safety of children who live in it. A healthy family is the foundation of every society and precisely the goal and task of every state.

The Law on Welfare prescribes that the Center for social work shall be the initiator in the development of preventive and other programs intended to protect children from violence, with the aim of preserving family and familiar relationships (Narodna skupština, 2022, Art. 121, 122). Work on prevention in the field of social welfare contributes to the fulfillment of all common and individual needs of particular members of a society, in the territory of a local community, from which programs for prevention, ongoing protection, and suppression of violence are implemented, thereby also enforcing other types of social protection that are in accordance with the law and other legal regulations.

The Center for social work discovers cases of violence and abuse through reports by a family member, or extended family members who contact them to exercise their rights from one of the areas of social protection. They require some material assistance, or to be provided with temporary accommodation within social welfare institutions, but they also turn for help due to problems

they have with raising children or the inability to adequately care for children. They also appear in the reconciliation process for divorce litigation, and more frequently in cases of juvenile delinquency.

The activities of the Center for social work are carried out according to a specially adopted protocol for cases of domestic violence. After receiving a report or finding about domestic violence where children are directly or indirectly abused, but also when violence occurs in other places, such as street or school, the responsible team, professional service or an authorized professional, has the obligation and a task to further inform services, such as the police, and put at their disposal all knowledge and information about the reported case according to the tip or findings. A tip can be made in writing, orally, from institutions such as schools or health institutions, from family members, from an individual, but it can also be anonymous. Regardless of the content of the tip, the obligation of the social institutions is to investigate the case, i.e. to process it further, because their role is to protect children from violence, and for that reason they must thoroughly examine every notification and piece of information.

Further proceedings comprise all activities that lead to the initiation of the procedure conducted in the Center for social work. These activities include an immediate field visit by authorised persons or persons who are participants in domestic violence may alternatively be invited to the official premises of the center. Cooperation is established with institutions and individuals that are in charge of providing psychological assistance to victims of violence. Of utmost importance is that the victim, who is in a state of shock in these initial moments, is provided with adequate support and psychological empowerment. The role in the process of psychological preparation and referral to further activities belongs to professionals who are trained and educated to work with victims of violence. Their task is to prepare the victim, empower them to overcome the state of shock, after which they need to make certain decisions without fear. The victim should be informed about their rights established by law and legal possibilities, protection measures and sanctions that exist in order to punish the abuser and prevent them from repeating the same crime. In these circumstances, the victim, also with the help of the team that belongs to the social welfare system, should be able to freely and without any interference present all the information and circumstances under which the crime took place, because only real information can ensure that the victim receives appropriate assistance.

Often injuries inflicted during violence are physical in nature and it is

necessary to provide the victim with medical care, and then, if their safety is not guaranteed, it is necessary to provide them with accommodation in social welfare institutions, of course in case they have no other option for shelter. After observation and interventions attending to the victim's needs, the procedure starts with the court or the public prosecutor, where the act of violence needs to be determined based on facts and evidence. This procedure requires expert opinion and reports from a social worker, an expert team, findings and opinions of psychiatrists or psychologists, and other reports undertaken in order to protect the person who has experienced violence.

One might say that problem prevention is the ideal way to overcome the consequences of violence. However, very often, due to various reasons stemming from different domains and circumstances, prevention is neglected, problems arise, consequences occur, and then one has to engage them head on. This often isn't simple, because in those cases, the intervention must occur at the state level, when it becomes necessary to overcome conflicting relationships strictly in this manner in order to eliminate all the causes that led to the emergence of the problem. The model for the protection of children from abuse and neglect, from violence in general, consists of institutions and authorities, with a central focus on protection provided by family law and social welfare, within which there are "perspectives on justification, width and scope of state intervention in family life and parent-child relationships, in more serious cases of jeopardizing a child's development and integrity, the application of repressive state mechanisms is justified" (Sredojević, 2017, p. 257).

## Conclusion

Child abuse is an increasingly common phenomenon all over the world and in all societies, regardless of economic development or the development of social awareness. The current data on social circumstances in the world, but also in Serbia and other countries in the region, are devastating, showing an increase in the number of children who suffer some form of domestic violence. It is precisely for this reason that it is necessary to strengthen the capacity of the social welfare system in order to solve the problem as adequately as possible. On the basis of the existing legal regulations in the Republic of Serbia, it is necessary to strengthen and improve the work through additional education and to engage additional experts within the system of social institutions. The goal is to support children with continuous improvement of all activities within

social institutions that are at all times able to fulfil all necessary conditions for adequate care of children, but also simultaneously working to remove the causes of violence. The emphasis is on staff, experts, professionals, working conditions and capacities that correspond to the required goal. The professionals who, within social institutions, work with children who have been subjected to violence, adjust their activities and approach to the specific experiences that the children have gone through. It is precisely for this reason that the importance of continuous education is emphasized for improving skills and knowledge, so that children who suffer certain forms of violence can be provided with support and the best conditions for recovery in the most accessible way. Practice shows that, despite multiple systemic reforms, the social welfare system in Serbia is currently in a very bad state.

This topic is of great interest for analysis and investigation precisely because of its importance, reflected in the importance of preserving a healthy nation. Previous research presents data that contain devastating statistics on the neglect and abuse of children of different ages, showing that violence against children in Serbia is widespread in various forms. It occurs as direct, interpersonal, physical, psychological or sexual violence, as neglect that denies the child the satisfaction of its needs and prevents its development, but it also occurs in less direct and complex forms, such as structural violence manifesting in different phenomena – for example, in child marriage, child labour or other types of exploitation, or through manifold social exclusion. Manifestations of violence also differ by other characteristics: who is the perpetrator, how seriously the child is injured, what are the short-term and long-term consequences, what context it occurs in and how institutions can react to protect the child. Different working conditions, types of work, as well as rights and responsibilities of employees in these institutions have an enormous responsibility and a task to reduce the threat to children from within the family and the environment in which they live. It is of utmost importance in working with children who are victims of violence to get to the causes of violence, while the consequences that are mainly manifested by children are very often the focus of intervention, which is a bad direction for creating targeted activities.

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## Uloga socijalnih ustanova u zaštiti dece od zlostavljanja i zanemarivanja

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### Sažetak

Socijalne ustanove su institucije koje trebaju biti prva karika u lancu pružanja pomoći i zbrinjavanja dece i maloletnih lica, ali istovremeno i institucije koje rade na smanjenju pojave zlostavljanja maloletne dece u društvu uopšte. Zdrava nacija jeste ideja i cilj svakog društva i države, a to podrazumeva brigu o deci i njihovim osnovnim potrebama u svakom smislu. Zlostavljanje dece jeste pojava koja datira od davnina, a to potvrđuju i podaci zabeleženi u umetnosti, književnosti, i nauci u mnogim delovima sveta. Izveštaji o čedomorstvu, sakaćenju, napuštanju i drugim oblicima nasilja nalaze se u mnogim istojskim zapisima o neuređenoj, slaboj i neuhranjenoj deci koju su porodice izbacivale da se brinu za sebe. Takođe, u okviru tih zapisa pominju se i dobrotvorne organizacije i grupe, kao i drugi koji su se bavili obezbeđivanjem dobrobiti i zaštiti dece. Danas, postoje jasni dokazi da je zlostavljanje dece globalni problem koji sejavlja u različitim oblicima i koji je, nažalost, duboko ukorenjen u kulturnoj, ekonomskoj i društvenoj praksi. Rešavanje ovog globalnog problema, međutim, zahteva mnogo bolje razumevanje njegovog pojavljivanja u nizu okruženja, kao i njegovih uzroka i posledica u pomenutim okruženjima. U okviru ovog rada sagledaćemo i analizirati, pojmove zlostavljanja i zanemarivanja dece, negove ojavne oblike, kao i analizirati ulogu socijalnih ustanova, sa posebnim osvrtom na Centre za socijalni rad.

*Ključne reči:* postupanje policije, nacionalne manjine, raseljena lica, socijalno ugrožena lica, žene, lica sa invaliditetom