
The Socio-Ecological Model of Risk and Protective Factors in Violence Against Children

Boro Merdović¹ and Biljana Jovanović²

¹Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, Belgrade, Serbia

²Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Serbia, Belgrade, Serbia

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Author Note

Boro Merdović  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6619-5934>

Biljana Jovanović  <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-0952-8978>

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Corresponding author: Boro Merdović

E-mail: boro.merdovic@gmail.com

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Abstract

Protecting children from abuse and neglect is one of the fundamental principles of every society. Any form of violence against children leads to numerous consequences that affect all aspects of their lives and influence their functioning in later developmental stages. The aim of this paper is to provide a literature review explaining the risk and protective factors of violence against children, with a particular focus on the socio-ecological model. This model offers a multidimensional framework for understanding child abuse by analyzing how individual, family, community, and structural factors contribute to the risk of maltreatment. It emphasizes that violence against children is not merely the result of individual characteristics of parents or children but rather the outcome of interactions between multiple systems in which the child grows up. The model particularly highlights the importance of examining community and societal factors in shaping a child's environment. Through document analysis, comparative methods, induction and deduction, historical analysis, and synthesis, this paper presents research findings demonstrating the significance and interconnection of these factors. The results indicate that risk and protective factors at the community and societal levels play a crucial role in developing effective measures for the prevention of violence against children.

Keywords: violence against children, abuse and neglect, risk and protective factors, socio-ecological model

Introduction

Violence against children is a serious problem in every society, causing significant consequences for the body, mind, and future of each child. In addition to personal consequences, there are also significant effects on society and the family. For many years, the issue of violence against children was considered a family matter in which society and individuals should not interfere. Historically, child abuse was viewed as a matter of legal definition. Through the lens of twenty-first-century sensitivity, actions that would today be considered outrageous examples of child abuse were, at various times, legally sanctioned and culturally accepted (Hilarski, 2012). However, despite the prevalence of child abuse throughout history, it has long been recognized as unacceptable behavior. The Code of Hammurabi, around 1750 BCE, attempted to stop the practice of exposing children to violence or selling them into slavery. During the Christian era, Constantine prohibited the exposure of infants, and Justinian's laws banned the sale or enslavement of children and their abandonment, making these acts punishable by death (Wienclaw, 2023). Contemporary perspectives have nevertheless shifted the view on this significant health, social, criminological, and criminal law issue. At the international level, significant steps have been taken to prevent violence against children, improve legal regulations, and mitigate the consequences of violence on children's health.

The study of violence against children is an extremely complex issue as it is a multi-causal problem that must be examined from the perspective of various scientific disciplines. One of the primary difficulties in researching this topic is terminological confusion. What is considered abuse, neglect, or mistreatment of children? What falls under physical, psychological, or sexual abuse, and what are the forms of

manifestation and consequences? Is it possible to separate different types of abuse, or are they interwoven?

With the advancement of technology, digital violence has become increasingly prevalent, making children particularly vulnerable to cyberbullying, online exploitation, and psychological manipulation (Bjelajac & Filipović, 2020). In addition to individual perpetrators, terrorist groups can also engage in the abuse and exploitation of children, using them for recruitment, radicalization, and criminal activities (Zirojević & Bjelajac, 2013). Furthermore, the availability and easy access to drugs represent another serious form of violence against children, as it not only exposes them to the abuse of psychoactive substances but also makes them easier targets for exploitation, human trafficking, and organized crime networks (Bjelajac, Matijašević & Počuča, 2012). Given these widespread threats, it is essential to approach child protection systematically by integrating knowledge from criminology, psychology, sociology, law, and digital forensics. Only through a multidisciplinary approach is it possible to develop effective prevention and intervention measures that will reduce risks and protect the most vulnerable.

Numerous studies have shown the prevalence of this phenomenon in the general population. What should be noted immediately is that there is no research in our country that indicates the scale and severity of this problem. There are studies that have shown the prevalence of certain forms of child abuse and neglect, but no comprehensive studies or meta-analyses exist. Many international studies have attempted to gather data on the prevalence of violence against children in the general population, but due to certain methodological shortcomings, they have not been fully accepted. The results vary significantly and are often contradictory. While some studies suggest that violence is almost nonexistent (Sibert et al., 2002), others indicate that 90 percent of the surveyed population has experienced some form of violence (Meston et al., 1999).

According to research conducted in the United States, approximately 3 million children are recorded as victims of abuse or neglect each year, with 1,200 children losing their lives at the hands of one of their parents. Neglect of the youngest children is the most common form of child abuse, accounting for 62.8%. Physical abuse occurs in 16.6% of documented cases, sexual abuse in 9.3%, and emotional and psychological abuse in 7.1%. A study from 2005 and 2006 showed that in the United States, there were 30.6 cases of neglect and 11.3 cases of abuse per 1,000 children (Child Welfare, 2019). According to the World Health Organization, around one billion children have experienced some form of sexual abuse, while the Council of Europe reported that in 2022, one in five children in Europe was a victim of abuse, with one in four girls and one in thirteen boys experiencing some form of violence.

Most research relies on data collected from relevant state institutions, such as courts, prosecutors' offices, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and social welfare centers, where children appear as victims or witnesses of certain criminal offenses, including domestic violence, violent behavior, and crimes against life and bodily integrity. Prevalence studies on pedophilia in the general population indicate its presence at 2.13% (Bjelajac, Merdović & Banović, 2020). Data from research on violence against women show that in 76.5% of cases, children were present when violence was committed against their mothers. Additionally, 45.9% of children were directly exposed to violence by their fathers (Ignjatović, 2015). One of the most significant studies in the field of child abuse and neglect is the Balkan Epidemiological Study on Child Abuse and Neglect (BECAN), conducted in nine Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, and Turkey) on a sample of children aged

11, 13, and 16 years. The study results show that nearly 70% of children experienced at least one form of psychological or physical violence during their upbringing. More than a quarter of respondents believe they were neglected at least once, while over 8% of children experienced sexual abuse. Furthermore, 38% of children witnessed violence between adult household members (Hanak et al., 2013).

What is evident is that there is no single isolated factor that causes or prevents abuse. Instead, a combination of factors increases the likelihood that a particular child will become a victim of maltreatment (McCoy & Keen, 2013). According to Bronfenbrenner, any attempt to understand and explain human behavior must consider multiple levels of influence, and we cannot look solely at the child or even just the family if we truly want to understand the problem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In this context, the goal of this paper is to highlight the factors that contribute to the occurrence of various forms of child abuse and neglect, as well as the factors that protect children from becoming victims. By researching risk and protective factors of violence against children in both domestic and international literature, we have concluded that one of the most comprehensive models for explaining child abuse is the socio-ecological model, which will be the subject of this study and will be further presented in the following sections.

Terminological uncertainties and definitions

Terminological confusion and imprecision in the field of child violence are common obstacles to conducting adequate research in this area and, consequently, to creating meaningful policies aimed at protecting children. In the literature, various terms are encountered, such as violence against children, abuse, neglect, maltreatment, and child harm. Each of these terms has definitions that often overlap with the definition of another term. The reason for this inconsistency lies in different scientific approaches, cultural characteristics, social circumstances, and legal qualifications. The same applies to the definitions of specific forms of abuse, meaning that what one author considers sexual abuse may differ entirely from another's interpretation of the same term. The World Health Organization has provided a definition of violence that is operational in most countries and accepted by many theorists and practitioners. It defines violence as the intentional use of physical force or power, whether threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, developmental deficiency, or deprivation (WHO). From this definition, other definitions of violence have emerged, including those related to violence against children. Violence against children, as well as abuse and maltreatment, represents a specific form of interpersonal violence (Merdović & Vujović, 2022). When discussing violence against children, it encompasses all forms of violence, including sexual, physical, and psychological abuse, as well as maltreatment and neglect.

The most commonly encountered terms in the literature are abuse and neglect. Newer paradigms emphasize the term maltreatment as encompassing both abuse and neglect. Abuse refers to inappropriate actions by parents or guardians, such as physical, sexual, or verbal violence, while neglect involves the failure to meet a child's basic needs. Although the terms "abuse" and "maltreatment" are often used synonymously, neglect does not include abuse (McCoy & Keen, 2013). Child abuse and neglect (or child maltreatment) consist of any act of commission or omission by a parent, guardian, or another adult that results in harm, potential harm, or the threat of harm to a child (0-18 years), even if the harm was unintentional (Gilbert et al., 2009). The first association with abuse is often physical harm to the child, as it is considered the most easily identifiable form of violence due to the visibility of injuries on the victim's

body. When discussing violence against children, the focus is usually on physical and sexual violence as the most extreme forms. However, other forms of violence also exist, such as psychological and economic violence, whose consequences may not be immediately visible but are nonetheless severe. The common characteristic of all these forms is the intent to establish power and control over the victim, often through the exploitation of the child's trust. Child neglect is a heterogeneous construct that covers various negative experiences, such as poor supervision quality, inadequate or insufficient food availability, failure to attend school, and lack of necessary medical care. Generally speaking, neglect refers to the omission of caregiving behaviors necessary for a child's healthy development, while other forms of abuse typically involve harmful actions committed against the child (Mennen et al., 2010). The literature describes different types of neglect, including physical, emotional, medical, educational, and mental health neglect, cognitive neglect, psychological neglect, environmental neglect, lack of supervision, and the denial of professional care and treatment (Mulder et al., 2018). Physical neglect is most commonly associated with the term "neglect." This type of neglect is defined as the failure to meet a child's minimal physical needs, such as food, shelter, clothing, and protection from harm or danger (McCoy & Keen, 2013, p.92). Child neglect has a relatively high prevalence rate compared to other forms of child maltreatment, such as physical and sexual abuse (Stoltenborgh et al., 2015), and its impact on children's health and development is among the least negative (Norman et al., 2012).

Definitions of physical abuse vary, but the general understanding of this form of maltreatment is that any act by a caregiver that results in a non-accidental physical injury to a child is classified as physical abuse (Healey, 2018). This definition emphasizes intent, meaning the non-accidental harm of a child. Physical abuse is not always the result of an intention to harm the child, but it can sometimes be justified as a form of discipline. However, when it is based on fear and involves unpredictability or outbursts of anger, it constitutes physical abuse. Physical abuse is the type of abuse most likely to be accompanied by another form, particularly emotional abuse or neglect. Adults who physically abuse children may have unrealistic expectations of their child, failing to understand the child's needs or how to interact with them. This can be influenced by their own health, relationships, histories of child abuse, or emotional and behavioral challenges, including anger management issues (Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2013). In domestic literature, there is also no unified definition, as authors provide their own perspectives on this form of violence against children. Milosavljević defines physical violence against children as acts, relationships, and behaviors of parents who, through the use of physical force, with or without objects, cause various injuries, wounds, and endanger the child's health or life, with injuries that can have tragic outcomes, including the child's death (Milosavljević, 1998). Žegarac states that "physical abuse includes acts such as hitting, shaking, throwing, strangling, suffocating, poisoning, burning, or scalding, which cause or may cause physical injuries or death to the child" (Žegarac, 2004, p.29). Behaviors and actions considered physical abuse include beating, hitting, pushing, shaking, throwing, pulling hair, biting, burning with a cigarette or other suitable object, choking, strangling, and inflicting severe physical injuries (Bjelajac & Merdović, 2019, p.195).

Psychological, emotional, or mental abuse is a distinct form of violence against children that usually does not occur in isolation but is linked to physical and sexual abuse. The World Health Organization defines emotional abuse as the failure to provide a developmentally appropriate, supportive environment, including the availability of a primary attachment figure so that the child can fully develop

stable emotional and social competencies in accordance with their personal potential within the societal context in which they grow up (WHO, 1999). Psychological abuse includes any attitude or behavior, as well as the omission of attitudes and behaviors by a caregiver, that disrupts a child's behavioral, cognitive, emotional, or mental well-being. These attitudes and behaviors include verbal abuse, mental abuse, and psychological abuse (McClennen, 2016, p. 26). Psychological and emotional abuse of children cannot be criminalized as a specific offense in criminal law, unlike physical and sexual violence, due to its invisibility and the difficulty of identification and proof. Psychological or emotional maltreatment includes both psychological neglect and psychological abuse. In cases of psychological neglect, parents fail to meet their children's emotional needs. Parents who ignore their children or fail to establish emotional contact with them may be guilty of psychological neglect, while in cases of psychological abuse, parents engage in behaviors that actively harm the child's mental health (McCoy & Keen, 2013, p. 123). Emotional abuse most commonly manifests through various forms of parental behavior. Among them, the following stand out (Garbarino, 1989):

- **Rejection** – The child feels worthless and unaccepted.
- **Degradation and devaluation** – Continuous criticism, stigmatization, humiliation, and denial of dignity, creating a sense of inferiority in the child.
- **Terrorizing** – Verbal intimidation, slander, frightening, and discouraging the child.
- **Isolation** – Depriving the child of normal social experiences, leading to feelings of loneliness.
- **Encouraging delinquent behavior** – Leading the child toward antisocial and destructive behavior.
- **Exploitation** - Instrumentalizing the child to satisfy the needs of the parent or guardian.
- **Deprivation of emotional support and stimulation** – Lack of love, sensitive care, and support, negatively affecting the child's emotional and intellectual development.
- **Unreliable and inconsistent parenting** – Contradictory and ambivalent demands, unstable parental support, and disruption of the sense of family security.

A caregiver may use one or more of these behaviors either briefly or over a prolonged period. Exposure to psychological abuse occurs if the caregiver's behavior causes harm or places the child at risk of injury. Examples of emotional abuse and neglect include a child engaging in maladaptive behavior or feeling unloved, unwanted, or worthless, serving merely as a means to fulfill the caregiver's needs, desires, and goals (Kimber & MacMillan, 2017).

Child sexual abuse refers to sexual activities between a child and an adult or an older child. This is criminalized in almost all countries worldwide, with very strict criminal sanctions prescribed for such offenses. It includes physical contacts such as unwanted touching, fondling, masturbation, oral-genital contact, penetration, and vaginal and anal intercourse (Merdović & Vujović, 2022, p. 66).

Child sexual abuse involves engaging children in sexual activities that are inappropriate for their age and developmental stage and for which they are neither emotionally nor physically prepared (Chiesa & Goldson, 2017). Such abuse primarily serves to satisfy the sexual needs of an adult while neglecting the child's needs, developmental maturity, and cultural norms. Sexual abuse can include both physical and psychological violence, leaving severe and long-term consequences on a child's psychosocial development. In professional contexts, it is divided into contact and non-contact forms. Non-contact sexual abuse includes exposing a child to inappropriate sexual content, such as pornography and exhibitionism.

Contact abuse can be non-penetrative, involving inappropriate touching, fondling, or forced masturbation, as well as penetrative, which includes vaginal, anal, or oral penetration. According to the definition provided by Conte (1994), child sexual abuse refers to prohibited sexual contact between an adult and a sexually immature child to satisfy the sexual needs of the adult or to gain financial profit through child prostitution or pornography. Sexual abuse is an act that always and inevitably destroys and permanently damages the victim's sense of dignity, self-esteem, and trust in others, invariably causing feelings of sadness, helplessness, and disgust toward oneself and others (Milosavljević & Tankosić, 2018). According to the definition of the Council of Europe, sexual violence against children includes:

- Sexual intercourse with a child who has not reached the legal age for sexual activity.
- Sexual relations achieved through coercion, threats, abuse of trust, authority, or influence, particularly involving children in vulnerable situations (e.g., those with mental or physical disabilities).
- Child prostitution and pornography, including the involvement of a child in prostitution, exploitation for financial gain, production, distribution, and access to child pornography.

Child sexual abuse is criminalized in all legal systems through the prescription of specific criminal offenses or qualified forms of fundamental offenses against sexual freedom where children are the victims. Organized sexual abuse refers to various circumstances in which multiple children are subjected to sexual abuse by multiple perpetrators. In these situations, children are exposed to severe harm, which may include child prostitution, the production of child pornography, and bizarre and sadistic sexual practices, including ritual abuse and torture (Salter, 2012). The consequences of sexual abuse are not only immediate but also long-term, leaving deep trauma on the victim that persists throughout life and manifests in health, emotional, social, psychological, and other problems related to daily communication (Merdović, 2020). One of the most severe forms of child sexual abuse is incest.

Peer violence refers to any form of abuse and neglect among children of approximately the same age, most commonly occurring in schools. It is characterized by the presence of deliberate, repeated, and unjustified aggressive behavior by one child or a group of children toward another with the intent to inflict physical or emotional harm on the victim (Juárez-Olguín, 2018). In developed countries, prevalence is extremely high. Physical abuse is more common among boys and young men, while discrimination and psychological abuse are more frequent among girls. The consequences for the victim may include injuries of varying severity, changes in physical and emotional development, psychological harm, and even death (Martin & Harrod, 2015). According to Olweus (2013), one of the leading researchers on school violence, a student is considered a victim when exposed to negative behavior by an individual or a group. Negative behavior includes intentional actions aimed at causing physical or psychological harm to another person. Roland defines bullying as prolonged physical or mental violence by an individual or group directed at a person who is unable to defend themselves in the given situation (Roland, 1989, p.143). The World Health Organization defines violence as the intentional, threatened, or actual use of physical force or power against oneself or another person, or against a group or community, which results in, or has a high likelihood of resulting in, injury, death, psychological harm, underdevelopment, or deprivation (Krug, 2002). There are numerous and varied typologies of violence, including peer violence. Among them, there is no clear boundary or division due to the diversity of manifestations. In the literature, peer violence is most commonly categorized as direct and indirect violence (Merdović, 2019).

With advancements in science and technology, another form of violence against children has emerged with significant consequences for all aspects of child development—cyberbullying. The effects of this form of violence can be extremely detrimental to a child's psycho-physical development, with the most severe consequence being when a child, due to continuous abuse and harassment, decides to take their own life (Merdović, 2019a). Cyber violence is a specific form of harassment that occurs through information and communication technologies, particularly mobile phones and personal computers (Bamford, 2004). One study on cyberbullying identified seven types of online bullying: text message bullying, mobile phone call harassment, image/video bullying (recorded via mobile phone camera), email bullying, chatroom bullying (instant messaging harassment), and website-based harassment (Smith et al., 2008).

In addition to these forms of violence, other classifications and distinctions exist depending on the dominant criteria used. The literature also references forms of violence against children in society, which include child trafficking, exploitation, violence in public spaces, structural violence, medical violence, cultural violence, spiritual violence, verbal abuse, financial violence, and others.

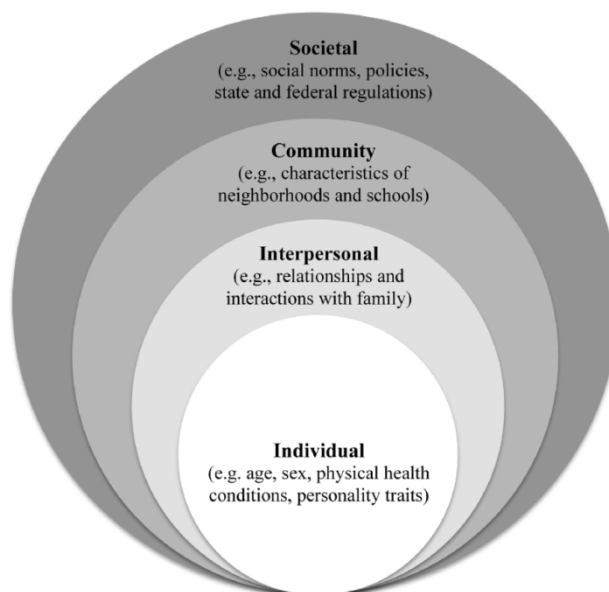
The Socio-Ecological Model of Risk and Protective Factors

Given the scale and severe consequences of child abuse, interdisciplinary, evidence-based approaches to primary prevention are essential. Effective prevention requires a comprehensive understanding of risk factors and protective factors. Risk factors refer to experiences, traits, behaviors, and circumstances that increase the likelihood of a child being subjected to abuse, while protective factors reduce this likelihood. It is important to emphasize that protective factors are not merely the absence of risk but also additional positive elements in a child's environment that diminish the possibility of abuse.

The causes of child maltreatment, which generally encompass both abuse and neglect, are numerous and interwoven, making it impossible to discuss them in isolation. Identifying risk and protective factors is crucial for developing effective prevention programs and ensuring child protection. The literature presents various explanations of violence against children, highlighting the influence of specific factors and their dominance over others. Consequently, numerous theoretical paradigms have emerged, similar to those explaining all forms of antisocial behavior, in an attempt to elucidate violence against children. However, scientific research has demonstrated that child abuse is a multi-causal phenomenon requiring a multidisciplinary approach. Without delving into specific theoretical explanations from classical schools of criminology and antisocial behavior, we will present the socio-ecological model, which, in our view, represents one of the most comprehensive frameworks for understanding the etiology of violence against children.

In Figure 1, four concentric circles represent the four levels of risk and protective factors: individual, interpersonal, community, and societal levels. The socio-ecological model consists of a set of interconnected and overlapping environments that constitute the proximal and distal contexts determining health and development. Each level is embedded within the next to illustrate that an individual's immediate environment (i.e., the individual and interpersonal levels) is influenced by broader surrounding conditions (i.e., the community and societal levels) (Austin, Lesak & Shanahan, 2020).

Figure 1. The Socio-Ecological Model of Risk and Protective Factors



(Austin, Lesak & Shanahan, 2020).

Risk factors according to the socio-ecological model

As seen in the central circle of the graphical representation of the socio-ecological model, individual factors include biological determinants, age, personality traits, health status, character, temperament, and other attributes that may contribute to a child becoming a victim of abuse and neglect. According to some studies, children younger than one year are at a higher risk of abuse compared to older children (Wildeman et al., 2014). Similarly, children with health problems (Jaudes & Mackey-Bilaver, 2008), intellectual disabilities, or psychological impairments (Hibbard & Desch, 2007) are at greater risk.

The second level examines close interpersonal relationships that may contribute to the risk of experiencing violence, either as a victim or a perpetrator. An individual's closest social circle—peers, partners, and family members—affects their behavior and shapes their experiences. Risk factors at the interpersonal level, particularly within the family and among peers, are considered crucial for child maltreatment. Research has shown that maltreatment often occurs within families, where mothers are more likely to engage in physical abuse and neglect, while fathers are primarily responsible for sexually abusing daughters (Ljubojev, 2004). Parents with issues such as depression, low self-esteem, substance abuse, or poor impulse control are more prone to maltreatment, especially if they were victims of abuse themselves (McCoy & Keen, 2013). Although most parents do not abuse their children, some succumb to violent behavior due to personal and familial factors. Research findings indicate that demographic and social risk factors include non-biological parents, single parents, young parental age, lower levels of education, large numbers of children, unemployment, social isolation, and a history of parental victimization (i.e., whether parents experienced any form of abuse). Cognitive and affective risk factors for child abuse and neglect encompass traits such as weak ego strength, low self-esteem, negative perceptions of child behavior, and inadequate parental expectations. Affective factors include emotional instability, depression, frustration, and anger, with parental anger recognized as a significant predictor of physical child abuse

(Stith et al., 2009). While most parents who abuse their children do not have diagnosed mental disorders, certain personality disorders (borderline, narcissistic, bipolar) and antisocial disorders increase the risk of child abuse (Lee, Taylor & Bellamy, 2012). Maternal depression, particularly in the early stages of a child's development, is associated with reduced emotional availability, stricter punitive methods, and a lack of positive interactions (Zuravin et al., 2005). Studies indicate that approximately 30% of individuals who were victims of abuse in childhood replicate this pattern in parenting, with key factors including the adoption of violent behavioral patterns, difficulties in forming emotional bonds, and substance abuse (Dixon et al., 2005). Family risk factors for child abuse include economic hardships, unfavorable living conditions, family conflicts, and social isolation (Bjelajac & Merdović, 2019). Research shows that alcohol and drug abuse (Kepple, 2017) significantly increase the risk of neglect and physical violence against children. Parents who use psychoactive substances often have a diminished capacity to care for their children, leading to unsafe living conditions, poverty, and a lack of resources.

The connection between parental addiction and child neglect is particularly pronounced, with children in such families often experiencing emotional detachment, a lack of attention, and inadequate basic care. In addition to direct abuse, children can be indirect victims of domestic violence, witnessing conflicts and aggression (Cafferky et al., 2018). Studies confirm that partner alcoholism (Marčeta-Mladenović, 2013) contributes to domestic violence, exposing children to additional stress and traumatic experiences. Psychoactive substances lower inhibitions, increase impulsivity, and lead to loss of control, heightening the risk of violent parental reactions. Moreover, addiction often prioritizes substance use over a child's needs, further endangering their health and development. Violence against children within the family represents a severe form of interpersonal violence, disrupting their fundamental need for security and emotional support. Children raised in such environments may be direct victims of physical, emotional, or psychological abuse, as well as witnesses to violence between parents, which can have long-term negative consequences on their development (Merdović & Vujović, 2022). Research suggests that even if a child is not physically harmed, exposure to domestic violence can increase the risk of anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, aggressive behavior, and academic difficulties. Dysfunctional families are characterized by impaired communication patterns, emotional detachment, and disorganized family dynamics, where chronic conflicts become a common mode of functioning. Risk factors include parental separation, inadequate parenting skills, and weak parental control (Merdović, Počuča & Dragojlović, 2024). The presence of intimate partner violence increases the likelihood of child abuse. Verbal abuse is more commonly transmitted than physical neglect, and women who were sexually abused in childhood are more likely to engage in physical abuse of their children. Poverty is a key risk factor, as children from low socioeconomic backgrounds are five times more likely to experience abuse (Sedlak et al., 2010). Financial instability, unemployment, and stress reduce parental capacity, while impoverished families often live in unsafe environments, further increasing the risk.

When discussing factors at the level of the immediate community where children live, spend their free time with peers, and engage in extracurricular activities, it is essential to highlight two highly significant risk factors that have shown a strong correlation with child abuse and neglect in research. These are, above all, a criminal environment (Thurston et al., 2017) and a higher number of adverse circumstances, such as poverty, unemployment, and lack of housing (Daley et al., 2016).

Social factors, economic trends, and norms are increasingly recognized as key risk factors for child maltreatment. Research indicates that certain economic policies, such as regressive taxation during economic crises, can increase the risk of maltreatment. Additionally, social norms related to gender equality influence the shaping of an environment that may contribute to higher rates of violence. The connection between economic insecurity, declining household income, and the rise in child abuse has been confirmed in numerous studies (Austin, Lesak & Shanahan, 2020). Media, culture, and the internet play a crucial role in shaping attitudes toward violence, parenting methods, and socially acceptable behavior. Societies that tolerate or glorify violence in media, music, and films often have higher rates of violence.

Protective factors against child violence

Socio-ecological models indicate that protective factors are distributed across the same spheres as risk factors for child violence. Preventing child abuse requires an understanding of protective factors that enhance resilience. No child is to blame for the violence they have experienced nor are they responsible for preventing maltreatment.

Individual characteristics, such as self-regulation skills, social competence, adaptive functioning, and self-esteem, can mitigate the negative consequences of violence (Yoon et al., 2021). Children with well-developed social skills are more likely to achieve academic success and avoid risky behaviors. One of the most important factors in preventing child violence at the individual level is the attachment children form with their parents.

Interpersonal relationships play a crucial role in protecting children from violence by fostering a safe and supportive environment. A stable and warm relationship with parents or guardians provides a child with emotional security and reduces the likelihood of exposure to negative experiences. In addition to family attachment, strong relationships with peers and support from extended family strengthen a child's resilience and enable the development of healthy coping mechanisms for stress. Social inclusion through school and extracurricular activities further enhances social skills, while significant adults, such as teachers and coaches, can provide additional protection and support. Beyond its impact on children, strong social support for parents is a vital factor in preventing violence. Stable partnerships positively influence parenting roles and reduce the risk of intergenerational transmission of violence (Schofield et al., 2017). Support from family and close friends strengthens parents' sense of security, helping them better cope with parenting challenges. Parents with well-developed social connections are less likely to use violent disciplinary methods and tend to be less authoritarian and rigid, contributing to a reduced risk of child abuse. Strengthening interpersonal relationships and developing social support are key steps in preventing violence and creating a safe environment for children.

Protective factors at the community level play a significant role in preventing child abuse, as they contribute to creating a safe and supportive environment that reduces the risk of violence and promotes positive parenting. One of the most critical aspects of these factors is access to healthcare, social, and educational services, which can significantly reduce the prevalence of child abuse by providing adequate support to at-risk families (Freisthler & Maguire-Jack, 2015). In addition to institutional support, the physical and social environment of a community has a significant impact on the well-being of children and parents. Investments in public spaces, such as playgrounds and parks, contribute to the development of a safe environment where children can play freely while parents build social connections and share experiences.

Such spaces not only provide opportunities for children to engage in play and socialization but also strengthen the sense of community and social cohesion among adults. The connection between socioeconomic status and community-level protective factors is also crucial. Economically stable communities often have better infrastructural and institutional resources, ensuring greater access to services and increased social support for families. Conversely, communities with lower socioeconomic status face numerous challenges, including a lack of resources, poorer access to services, and a higher risk of social isolation, which can increase the likelihood of child abuse. Strengthening social cohesion, improving infrastructure, and increasing the availability of various community services are key strategies in preventing child violence. By creating an environment where families receive support and have access to resources, it is possible to reduce risk factors and provide children with a safe and nurturing upbringing.

Protective factors at the societal level are crucial for preventing child violence, particularly through policies and programs aimed at supporting families. Contemporary research increasingly highlights that social and economic measures that improve family stability can significantly reduce the risk of child abuse and neglect. Providing financial support to parents through instruments such as employment opportunities, paid parental leave, tax incentives, minimum wage increases, and adequate social benefits can create a more secure family environment and reduce stress factors that contribute to violent behavioral patterns. Empirical data (Klevens, 2016) suggest that even the slightest improvement in economic security can positively impact reducing cases of child maltreatment. These findings emphasize the importance of well-designed social policies that enable parents to raise children in more stable conditions, contributing to the long-term prevention of violence and ensuring a healthier development of children within their families and the broader society. The state, through appropriate legal frameworks and the proper functioning of governmental institutions responsible for child protection, can create an atmosphere in which both parents and children feel more comfortable and secure.

Child abuse often remains hidden as it usually occurs in the privacy of the home, with both parents and children motivated to keep it a secret. While parents fear the consequences, children may remain silent due to threats, shame, or a lack of awareness that their experience differs from what is considered normal. Therefore, it is crucial to develop strategies for recognizing abuse and providing support to children who suffer from it. Through the socio-ecological model of explaining prevention, protection, and risk factors for child violence, we see a broad spectrum of indicators that can signal potential abuse or reveal the consequences of already manifested violence. At each of these levels, attention must be given primarily to prevent violence from occurring and, if it has already manifested, to minimize its impact on the child as much as possible.

Conclusion

Child maltreatment, encompassing all forms of abuse and neglect, is a complex phenomenon with multiple causes and unpredictable consequences. The socio-ecological model of abuse, which is the most widely accepted, examines the interaction between risk and protective factors, including stressful situations in children, interpersonal relationships, parental predispositions, situational challenges, and societal conditions. Abuse often arises or is perpetuated through social norms that tolerate violence, while children remain victims in environments burdened by financial and emotional difficulties. Understanding the impact of abuse on children has evolved over time, shifting from the view that maltreated children are

destined to develop psychopathological issues to recognizing that abuse, like other significant childhood stressors, can provoke various adaptive responses, ranging from psychological resilience to severe psychiatric disorders. Research has shown that certain children, despite extreme stress, develop resilience. In this context, studies are increasingly focusing on internal factors, such as coping strategies, and external factors, such as social support, which can act as protection against negative consequences.

Understanding and identifying the factors that contribute to child abuse is essential for the creators of preventive programs and social policies, as it allows for the timely recognition and prevention of potential stressful and violent situations. While treatment for abused children and their caregivers remains crucial, preventing abuse has become a priority. Understanding the protective factors that shield families from violent behavior has led to the development of preventive programs that encourage the development of skills, resources, and coping strategies, thereby reducing the risk of future abuse cases. Child abuse is often linked to other serious social issues, such as poverty, lack of access to adequate healthcare, poor childcare, and unequal educational resources. These issues, along with abuse, can be effectively prevented and eliminated through appropriate preventive interventions.

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Socio-ekološki model rizičnih i zaštitnih faktora u nasilju nad decom

Boro Merdović¹ i Biljana Jovanović²

¹Ministarstvo unutrašnjih poslova Republike Srbije, Beograd, Srbija

²Ministarstvo odbrane Republike Srbije, Beograd, Srbija

Sažetak

Zaštita dece od zlostavljanja i zanemarivanja jedan je od osnovnih principa svakog društva. Svaki oblik nasilja nad decom dovodi do brojnih posledica koje utiču na sve aspekte njihovog života i određuju njihovo funkcionisanje u kasnijim fazama razvoja. Cilj ovog rada je da pruži pregled literature koja objašnjava rizične i zaštitne faktore nasilja nad decom, sa posebnim fokusom na socio-ekološki model. Ovaj model nudi multidimenzionalni okvir za razumevanje zlostavljanja dece, analizirajući kako individualni, porodični, zajednički i strukturalni faktori doprinose riziku od maltretiranja. Naglašava se da nasilje nad decom nije isključivo rezultat individualnih karakteristika roditelja ili dece, već posledica međusobne interakcije različitih sistema u kojima dete odrasta. Model posebno ističe značaj ispitivanja faktora zajednice i društva u oblikovanju detetovog okruženja. Kroz analizu dokumenata, komparativne metode, indukciju i dedukciju, istorijsku analizu i sintezu, rad prikazuje rezultate istraživanja koji demonstriraju značaj i međusobnu povezanost ovih faktora. Rezultati ukazuju na to da rizični i zaštitni faktori na nivou zajednice i društva igraju ključnu ulogu u razvoju efikasnih mera za prevenciju nasilja nad decom.

Ključne reči: nasilje nad decom, zlostavljanje i zanemarivanje, rizični i zaštitni faktori, socio-ekološki model