

Capacity of the Family System for Peer Violence Prevention

DOI: 10.15804/tner.2019.56.2.13

Abstract

The paper presents research findings concerning desired parental activities for peer violence prevention. An instrument was created for the purpose of this research, and study sample comprised 480 participants, including 170 parents, 94 teachers and 206 students. Activities perceived as more important were open communication and greater control of children's behavior, while parents' participation in school was assessed as less important. The "School without violence" program was recognized as a significant resource for empowering family activities in peer violence prevention. This implies that it is important to implement family support programs and to develop parents' skills.

Keywords: family, prevention, pro-social behavior, school, peer violence

Introduction

One of society's main responsibilities must be aimed at the pro-social development of an individual, which includes the domain of peer violence prevention. In that sense, it is necessary to continuously analyze factors that could improve the quality of peer violence. Therefore, findings of scientific research into the influence of family system are particularly significant. According to some researchers (Olweus, 1993), negative home/family environment is one of the most common causes of peer violence. Also, studies show (Azaola, 2011; Dishion, 1990; Rubin et al., 1998) that aggressive students are more likely to come from families with

low educational and socioeconomic status, as well as dysfunctional families (Eriksen & Jensen, 2006). On the other hand, practice shows that peer violence prevention is mainly conducted through isolated activities in school, while family system prevention is neglected. Therefore, this prevention should focus on the examination of strengths and potentials within family processes which could influence children's social adaptation and their capacities for establishing adequate relationships (Pederson & Revenson, 2005; Sanson & Lewis, 2001). Also, the importance of improving the quality of the relationship between the family and social environment (especially school) is emphasized (Benbenishty & Astor, 2005). These relationships are expected to determine overall development and ways of building peer relationships (Vanderwater & Lansford, 2005). Accordingly, the risk and protective factors in the family for the development of peer relationships are discussed in the theoretical part of this paper, while the empirical part presents the results of research on the significance of parental activities in peer violence prevention.

Family risk and protective factors for the development of peer relationships

Specific relationships formed within the family system determine its life dynamics, which affects the child's socio-emotional development, and thus the development of peer relationships (Kaloudi et al., 2017; Khoury-Kassabri, 2004; Spera, 2005). Democratic parenting style, warm family relationships and consistent discipline practices contribute to the development of self-confidence in children, encourages their independence in decision-making and creates a good basis for establishing efficient communication with peers (Bretherton, 1990; Rubin et al., 1998). Research on the transfer of family relationships to peer relationships (Chaux et al. 2009; Hill, 2001) shows that children who have less conflict with parents are more oriented towards their peers. The presence of positive parental behavior (warmth, encouragement, affection, approval, attachment, moderate parental control) contributes to the development of children's social skills necessary for establishing and maintaining positive peer relationships (Rubin et al., 1998).

On the other hand, the variables from family context that are emphasized in the literature (Bowes et al., 2009) as being specifically risky predictors of peer violence are overworked parents, low socioeconomic status, alcohol abuse, exposure to domestic violence, etc. Also, poor interpersonal relations in family environment can influence the occurrence of peer violence (Batsche, 1997; Kaloudi et al., 2017). It is emphasized that the key risk is an inadequate parent-child relationship, more specifically the type of parental support and responsiveness to children's needs. By

showing a high level of correlation between the quality of children's relationship with parents on the one hand and with peers on the other, some authors (Dishion, 1990) postulate a connection between family dysfunctionality along with inadequate parenting practices and the child's inadequate functioning in a peer environment. Thus, e.g., strict discipline in the family can cause the child's hostile attitude towards their environment. Inconsistency in parents' behavior, lack of control and child neglect can cause children to develop insecurities and reduce the ability to control their behavior. On the other hand, parents' excessive criticism, punishment and cold and rejecting behavior can cause aggressive behavior in children (Rubin et al., 1998).

Generally speaking, disrupted family stability could lead to the deterioration of children's motivation for learning, to weaker academic achievements and a number of other problems primarily visible in the area of socio-emotional development (Denmark et al. 2005; Rutter et al., 1998).

Connecting the family and school system for peer violence prevention

Evident increase in peer violence requires a systematic approach in its prevention, i.e., a connected and integrated microsystems of the child's environment. In this regard, the family and school system stand out as particularly important environments because their intertwined roles create a key mesosystem environment for the child's pro-social development. The effects of parenting and school practices as microsystems for child development can hardly be seen and analyzed separately (Darling & College 2007; Huitt, 2003), so it is necessary to emphasize their interdependent activity.

The first step in this process is the timely gaining of parents' cooperation, which can be done through different activities: providing them with expert support in improving their competences (Bonnet et al., 2009; Powell & Cassidy, 2001), including them in school activities (McConell & Kerig, 2002), and creating various programs that include parents' active participation. The results of this approach have proven particularly effective in the area of peer violence prevention, which is confirmed by the effects of the implemented program for peer violence prevention *Škola bez nasilja*¹ (*School without violence*). This program, which emerged from the foundation of Olweus' program (Olweus, 1999), promotes, among other things, cooperative relations between family and school, as well as various school

¹ *School without violence* is a peer violence prevention program, which, among other countries, was implemented in 250 schools in Serbia, under the auspices of UNICEF https://www.unicef.hr/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/%C5%A0kole-bez-nasilja_pitanja_i_odgovori.pdf

activities involving parent participation. Although analysis of individual program activities has shown that the parental participation segment has lowest rating, the final evaluation of this program has shown a higher level of cooperation between school and parents compared to the initial conditions (Marušić et al., 2005). Therefore, empowering the family as a whole and recognizing the importance of parental activities should be an imperative in planning peer violence prevention. This is also supported by the results of the presented research.

Research Methodology

General Background of Research

The goal of the research was to examine parents' desirable activities for peer violence prevention. This goal was operationalized through: examining the perceptions of parents, teachers and students about parents' activities that can be used to prevent peer violence; analyzing differences in responses depending on the respondents' socio-demographic characteristics or on the groups of respondents. Also, in order to look at the benefits of the peer violence prevention program in schools, the research draft included examining the differences between the respondents from schools that are involved in the School without violence program and those that are not.

Research Sample

The research was conducted in six primary schools in Serbia (three schools that implement the School without violence program and three that do not). The sample included a total of 480 respondents, divided into the following subsamples: students (N=206), parents (N=170), and teachers (N=94). This was a convenience sample and its structure is shown in Tables 1, 2, and 3.

Table 1. Structure of the sample – parents.

Parents	“School without violence” program		The questionnaire filled out		Level of education		Family's material status		
	Yes	No	Mother	Father	Lower level	Higher level	Good	Medium	Bad
	91	79	118	52	113	57	39	126	5

Table 2. Structure of the sample - teachers.

Teachers	“School without violence” program		Subject area they teach			Length of service		
	Yes	No	Natural science and mathematics	Social science and linguistic	Arts and crafts	–15 years	15–30 years	30– years
	49	45	31	45	18	48	35	11

Table 3. Structure of the sample - students.

Students	“School without violence” program		Gender		Age		Family type	
	Yes	No	M	F	12–13 years	14–15 years	Single-parent family	Two parent family
	111	95	88	118	102	104	36	170

Instrument and procedures

An instrument on various factors and desirable activities for peer violence prevention was constructed for the needs of research of broader scope. For this paper a part of the instrument, related to the activities in the family context, was selected aiming to examine the assessment of parents’ desirable activities – open communication, greater control of children behavior, more frequent parent visitation, and parents’ greater participation in schools. The questions were identically formulated for all the three groups of respondents, and responses included the ranking of the significance of the offered activities (from 1 – the most important to 4 – the least important). In addition to the question of (non)involvement in the School without violence program, the instrument also included questions concerning the respondents’ relevant sociodemographic characteristics.

Data analysis

Data collection was carried out using the survey technique, and data was processed using SPSS program, through following statistical measures and procedures: arithmetic mean (M), standard deviation (SD), variance analysis (F), and significance of means difference (t-test).

Research Results

Parents' answers. This group highly assessed the importance of greater control of children behavior and open communication. The parents gave somewhat lower scores to the importance of the frequency of parent visitation to schools, while the lowest ranked activity is parents' active participation in school (Table 4).

Table 4. The importance of parental activities – parents' answers.

Activity:	Min	Max	M	SD	Rank
Open communication	1 (10.7 %)	4 (47.8 %)	3.09	1.4	2
Greater control of children behavior	1 (6.3 %)	4 (43.4 %)	3.18	0.88	1
Frequency of parent visitation to school	1 (15.1 %)	4 (3.8 %)	2.18	0.73	3
Active parental participation in school	1 (67.9 %)	4 (4.4 %)	1.53	0.88	4

Statistical significance of differences, depending on measured variables, was tested only for the question about parents' active participation ($F=5.06$; $t=2.25$, $p=0.03$). Namely, the parents from the schools that implement the School without violence program tend to perceive open communication as a more important contributor to peer violence prevention ($M=3.26$) than the parents from the schools where this program is not implemented ($M=2.89$). In other measured variables, statistically significant differences in responses were not found.

Teachers' answers. The teachers' responses showed that parents' active participation is valued the least. The frequency of parent visitation to school got slightly higher rating, following open communication, and ending with the greater parental control, which was assessed as the most important activity (Table 5).

Table 5. The importance of parental activities – teachers' answers.

Activity:	Min	Max	M	SD	Rank
Open communication	1 (26.9 %)	4 (35.5%)	2.65	1.22	2
Greater control of children behavior	1 (12.9 %)	4 (36.6%)	2.94	1.03	1
Frequency of parent visitation to school	1 (18.3 %)	4 (8.6%)	2.24	0.85	3
Active parental participation in school	1 (57.0 %)	4 (10.8%)	1.78	1.05	4

The results of the analysis of variance ($F=3.02$, $p=0.05$), and the t-test ($M1:M2=> t=2.28$, $p=0.03$; $M1:M3=> t=2.10$, $p=0.04$) showed that there were differences in answers between the teachers according to their subject area. The teachers who

teach subjects from the science and mathematics area ($M_1=2.00$) tend to give a higher rank to the active participation of parents in school activities than the teachers from the social science and linguistic area ($M_2=1.41$), and from the arts and crafts area ($M=1.43$). In the other measured variables, there were no statistically significant differences in the teachers' responses.

Students' answers. Students tend to perceive open communication and greater parental control as the parents' most significant activities for peer violence prevention (Table 6).

Table 6. The importance of parental activities – students' answers.

Activity:	Min	Max	M	SD	Rank
Open communication	1 (23.4 %)	4 (43.9%)	2.78	1.23	1-2
Greater control of children behavior	1 (16.6 %)	4 (30.2%)	2.78	1.06	1-2
Frequency of parent visitation to school	1 (31.7 %)	4 (11.7%)	2.22	1.02	3
Active parental participation in school	1 (29.3 %)	4 (14.1%)	2.18	1.01	4

Analysis of variance (One way ANOVA) and calculation of difference between means showed a statistically significant difference ($F=9.23$; $t=3.05$, $p=0.01$), indicating that the students from the schools that implements the School without violence program find active participation of parents more important ($M=2.40$), compared to the students from the schools that do not implement it ($M=1.98$). Testing of other measured variables showed that statistically significant differences occur on the question about the parents' control ($F = 4.22$; $t = 2.06$, $p = 0.04$) only in relation to the age of the students. The younger students perceive it as more important ($M=2.94$) than the older students ($M=2.64$).

Differences in responses among groups of respondents. A differences among the groups of respondents in the assessment of the importance of open communication was found ($F=5.08$, $p=0.01$). The significance of this activity for the prevention of peer violence is more emphasized by the parents ($M=3.09$) than the students ($M=2.78$) and the teachers ($M=2.6$). T-test also showed that the parents' answers significantly differ from the students' answers ($t=2.25$; $p=0.02$) and the teachers' answers ($t=3.06$; $p=0.01$). On the other hand, there was no statistically significant difference in the responses between the teachers and the students.

Statistically significant differences were also found in the question regarding the importance of parents' greater control ($F=7.34$, $p=0.01$), where the parents assessed this activity as more significant ($M=3.18$), compared to the teachers ($M=2.94$) and the students ($M=2.78$). T-test showed that there are differences between the

parents and the teachers ($t=2.01, p=0.05$), and the parents and the students ($t=3.86, p=0.01$), while differences in responses between the teachers and the students are not statistically significant.

Generally, the respondents did not perceive the frequency of parent visitation and active participation in school as important for peer violence prevention. This is especially evident in the responses of the parents, who assessed participation in schools with the lowest scores. Nevertheless, the analysis of variance confirmed that there are differences in the assessments of the higher involvement of parents in school activities ($F = 19.86, p = 0.01$), whereby the students assessed this activity as more significant ($M = 2.18$), compared to the teachers ($M = 1.78$) and the parents ($M = 1.53$). Significant differences were found between the teachers and parents ($t = 2.03, p = 0.04$), the teachers and students ($t = 3.06, p = 0.01$), and the parents and students ($t = 6.36, p = 0.01$).

Discussion

The research findings on the overall sample indicate that the parents' activities perceived as valuable for peer violence prevention are open communication and increased level of control of children's behavior. This is emphasized the most by the subsample of parents. On the contrary, activities that involve parents' active participation in schools were perceived less important by all the respondents, which can be interpreted as an insufficient understanding of how significant it is that family and school work together towards the same goals. However, the differences in responses depending on whether the respondents' school is or is not implementing the School without violence program is an optimistic finding. This is relevant because the program activities of School without violence include parents' active participation. Moreover, the students from the schools that implement this program acknowledge the parents' participation in school activities as an important segment of peer violence prevention, which could be an effect of positive experiences from the parents' engagement. Also, the finding that indicates that the parents from the schools that implement this program emphasize the importance of open communication with children, can be associated with the influences of the Program activities on the parents' recognition of their own role. Similar benefits of the School without violence program were also pointed out in the research (Marušić et al., 2005) which examined the overall effects of it.

It is possible to conclude that the teachers assessed the activities that the parents dominantly apply within the family system as more important, whereas parent

engagement in school activities was recognized as least important. This finding is coherent with some research (Azaola, 2011), which showed that teachers do not recognize parents as partners sufficiently, which surely leads to lack of activities aiming at improvement of peer violence prevention in schools. It is interesting that the teachers from the natural science and mathematics area valued parental participation in school activities as more important than the other two groups of teachers. This could be interpreted in the light of the fact that the more complex curriculum content of these subjects requires more frequent cooperation between teachers and parents, which is then reflected in their assessment of parental role significance in other segments. Similarly, the students' assessed open communication and parental control as the most significant activities, which potentially indicates that they understand the importance of family upbringing and the parents' protective role in this matter. Finally, the younger students deemed greater parental control as more important than their older peers. This finding is not unexpected since as children grow older so does their need for bigger autonomy. Consequently, it shows the need for careful implementation of this control in a way that makes it perceived as support and not as punitive measure (Pedersen & Revenson, 2005).

Although the research results lead to valuable conclusions, it is important to point out the research limitations. First of all, the use of the convenience sample, which prevents generalization of the findings. Also, the application of quantitative methodology limits the possibility of acknowledging the socio-cultural context and the phenomenological aspects that determine the respondents' personal experiences. It would therefore be desirable that the next research include different sampling strategies, as well as a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods.

Conclusions

The general finding that the respondents assessed the parental activities which do not require active participation in school as more important, leads to the conclusion that the traditional paradigm, which neglects the aspect of school-family partnership and shared responsibility, is still dominant (Benbenishty & Astor, 2005; Bonnet et al., 2009; Denmark et al., 2005). This implies the need for raising awareness of the importance of combining the interests and activities of family and school, as well as the need to correspond their attitudes about the most effective ways of preventing peer violence. On the other hand, the finding that parenting practices were assessed as very important, leads to the conclusion that

it is necessary to maximize the potential of the family system for implementation of peer violence prevention activities. In this regard, the obtained results suggest that it would be very important to create various family support programs and to aim at developing parents' competences (Darling, College, 2007), which would be implemented both in the school context and in the wider community.

Acknowledgements

The paper was written within the project *Pedagogical Pluralism as the Basis of Education Strategy* (179036) and *Digital media technologies, social and educational changes* (47020), financed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia. Results from the doctoral thesis "The Importance of Family-School Cooperation in Peer Violence Prevention", defended at the Faculty of Philosophy – University of Novi Sad, were used in the paper.

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