

VERBAL ABUSE IN UPBRINGING AS THE CAUSE OF LOW SELF-ESTEEM IN CHILDREN

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Abstract

In this article I would like to raise the issue of verbal child abuse in relationships between children and people important to them. Parents and teachers are the first role models in a child's life, therefore their messages have a causative power as they create the image of the "self" in a child, as well as the way of perceiving and valuing themselves. The starting point of my article is the issue of abuse in upbringing, then I discuss the problems of self-esteem and the occurrence of verbal abuse by parents and teachers. In the last part, I present consequences of such experience for the development and life of children.

Keywords: Verbal abuse, self-esteem, children

Introduction

Child abuse in upbringing consists in doing mental and physical harm. The purpose of such abuse is to change the behavior of a child for better. According to Irena Obuchowska, abuse in upbringing is used in order to force children to obey their parents or teachers (Obuchowska, 1989). Therefore, it functions as a specific upbringing tool and parents are motivated by educational purposes only. The most frequent reasons of using violence in child upbringing by parents are contradictory. Considering the fact that upbringing is a process of versatile personality development, including protection of a child against various hazards and limiting the risk of development of negative traits, as well as impartation of values and behavior patterns by personal example, abuse in upbringing seems to be an antinomy. According to Marian Nowak, upbringing must bestow values, the hierarchy of which is built on the basis of children's experience (Nowak, 2008).

Self-esteem as an attitude towards oneself

Self-esteem is an attitude towards oneself, especially towards one's capabilities. It is an important part of self-awareness; it is a set of judgments and opinions concerning one's "self" (W. Szewczuk 1985, p. 275). People shape their self-esteem for their whole life, however, the first attempts of shaping the image of the „self” appear as early as in the pre-school period.

Self-esteem has been discussed in various aspects, I am going to focus on some aspects only, selected for the purposes of this article. As far as the relation between one's capabilities and self-esteem is concerned, we may distinguish adequate self-esteem (accurate assessment of one's capabilities) and inadequate self-esteem. Inadequate self-esteem does not reflect the actual, real capabilities of a given person. There are two types of such inadequate self-esteem:

a) too high,

when someone overestimates their capabilities and takes up tasks surpassing their abilities or goals that they are not able to achieve;

b) too low,

when someone underestimates their capabilities and takes up tasks too easy for them.

Another aspect relevant for my article is the positive and negative self-esteem. Positive, adequate self-esteem is mainly about being aware of one's strengths, talents and traits motivating people to undertake various tasks while also being aware of one's weaknesses, deficits and limitations. Negative self-esteem is the feeling of inferiority, focusing on one's flaws and shortcomings while ignoring or belittling one's abilities and achievements;

The most important factors affecting self-esteem include: opinions and judgments expressed on a given person, achieved successes and failures, as well as comparing oneself with others.

Opinions and judgments children hear about themselves are considered most important while shaping the image of one's "self". They may come from various sources, however, I am going to focus on the most important ones – parents and teachers.

Parental psychological abuse

Psychological (emotional) abuse manifests mainly in name-calling, insulting, mocking or humiliating criticism and its degree may vary. When children hear negative opinions on themselves from their closest relatives, especially in the early childhood, they think of themselves in a negative way and develop low self-esteem. On such basis, children start to create their own image and identify with the opinions they hear. According to the studies by Irena Jundziłł, obedience is the quality that parents desire most in their children and try to enforce it through inadequate and even harmful behavior, such as yelling, threatening or frightening. While criticizing their children, they always refer to a person and express generalizations, saying that children always do something wrong or never do anything well. Such criticism very often has a form of humiliation, mocking children's weaknesses or other forms of verbal degradation.

According to P. Mellody, an American psychotherapist, newborn children exhibit five traits: preciousness, helplessness, imperfection, codependence and immaturity and it is the parents' job to develop a child's personality in the right direction. Parents who distort those beautiful traits in children not only fail to fulfill their educational role, they are not only dysfunctional parents, but even toxic ones. As S. Kawula points out, a child is precious right from the moment of its birth and simply because of the fact that its life is most important to their parents. Children's awareness of its importance becomes the foundation for building their self-esteem. Dysfunctional families fail to show their children that they are precious, on the contrary, they belittle their value.

Children's helplessness requires the parents to protect their children against any hazards, which in turn means the ability to identify their needs. Helplessness in a dysfunctional family cannot develop in the right direction as children feel unprotected and cannot learn how to avoid various hazards. As a result of such experience, some children never develop the sense of security and become helpless and more prone to aggression from others even in their adult life.

Imperfection means that children should have the right to make mistakes and parents should instruct them what they are doing wrong. Misunderstood idea of imperfection manifests in oppressing the child, criticizing it for being imperfect and making it believe that it has no right to make any mistakes. As a result, the child is deprived of the opportunity to learn from its mistakes and becomes convinced that each mistake makes it worse. As a consequence, the child rejects the fact that mistakes are an inherent part of human nature and that being erroneous is an integral part of human life, as well as that people should learn and draw conclusions from such mistakes.

Co-dependency is a trait stemming from a child's nature. At some point of life, children are completely dependent on their parents who should satisfy their basic needs. In later life, if this trait was developed correctly, it transforms into independence and self-reliance. Otherwise, children fail to become independent and their right to be autonomous, so

important in the period of development, is limited.

Immaturity in proper upbringing means that parents should let their children be themselves without excessive expectations. In dysfunctional families, parents require their children to be overly mature or always let them be immature which, as a consequence, leads to extremity in both such cases – being too immature or too mature. S. Kawula emphasizes the fact that as a result of underdevelopment of the five above discussed traits, „children develop dysfunctional self-preservation qualities” (p. 131). With proper educational methods, immaturity should become maturity, co-dependency should turn into independence, helplessness – into self-confidence. Imperfection should teach children how to draw conclusions from mistakes and preciousness should be the basis for building one’s self-esteem. As H. Filipczuk points out „*children cannot oppose their parents’ judgment, their self-esteem is shaped on the basis of their opinions*” (p.73.). While being overwhelmed with criticism, children develop the sense of inferiority and focus on their weaknesses and limitations only. For a child, parents are not only the source of love and security, but also are the first important persons and infallible role models. “So if your all-knowing parents say bad things about you, it must be true. If your mother says you’re stupid, it means you’re stupid, if your father says you’re bad, you’re bad” (S. Forward 1994, p. 87). Such words – often said by people who mean much to a child – gradually affect the child’s perception of itself and its self-esteem.

Numerous studies show that parents quite commonly use offensive, humiliating names. Studies conducted among junior high school students show that half of them experience destructive criticism and humiliation in the form of name calling and mocking (J. Maćkiewicz 2007). According to the results of Polish studies conducted last year, one fifth of the students experience emotional abuse in various forms, parents being the perpetrators in half of the cases.²⁸⁸

Mariola Bardziejewska conducted studies on prevalence and type of name calling used by parents with regard to their children. It turned out that most of the bad names relate to a child’s intelligence, the most popular being: *moron, idiot and retard*. Moreover, early school children often hear such name calling as: *fool, smartass, dunce, twit, dummy or dumbbell*, and children aged 13-18 usually hear such words as: *nut, wimp, nitwit, smartass, jerk, dimwit, lunatic, cretin, loony, butthead, weirdo, nerd and imbecile*. However, the author stresses that name calling used by parents also relate to children’s behavior and appearance and parents are very creative in this respect. “Especially painful is the fact that children often hear bad names from someone they trust, believe and respect and above all, someone they love” (p. 17).

Verbally abusive teachers

Although parents have the right to be unaware of the effects of their actions (which of course does not justify their harmful deeds), the teachers, being professionals with psychological and pedagogical knowledge, must possess such awareness. On the one hand, they should educate parents in this respect, correct harmful habits in family settings and, on the other hand, be responsible for proper teaching methods and nothing can justify their toxic attitude towards children. In a contemporary school, dominated by the idea of subjective approach to students, teachers should respect and accept children in everything they do.

Thomas Gordon compares the importance of acceptance to a child’s development in the period upbringing to „fertile soil, in which a fragile seedling may become a flower in bloom” (p. 67- 68). Further in his book, the author says that “the soil that most of the teachers give their students is filled with judgments, moralization, orders and destructive criticism. They tell me I am so bad and my ideas are stupid or that I can’t be trusted so often that I started to do even more things they don’t like. If they believe I’m bad and stupid, I think I can

²⁸⁸ Studies conducted on a group of Polish children and youth aged 11-17; N=1005; FDN and Millward Brown 2013, <http://fdn.pl/badania-fdn> (7.09.2013)

push it even further” (p. 68). Criticism and emphasis put on failures and mistakes only with lack of praise has a negative effect on a developing personality, it distorts the image of one’s „self”, lowers child’s self-esteem and is destructive for its development as it prevents the child from reaching its full potential. A child cannot spread its wings as they had been clipped.

There is a very fine line between destructive criticism and emotional violence – it is often one and the same thing. Wrong, toxic methods used by teachers usually include screaming, humiliating remarks, criticism, mocking or ignoring students’ achievements. If such situation lasts for an extended period, it ingrains in a child’s mind and affects its whole adult life. Studies conducted by the Helsinki Committees for Human Rights among over three thousand students show that almost 60% of them experienced such abuse as name calling, humiliating, exerting pressure etc. personally from their teachers and 70% know a colleague who has been a victim of such abuse. (E. Czyż, 2003)

A child internalizes such negative opinions, distorts the image of its own abilities and itself as a human being and as a consequence, starts to believe that such opinions are true, which lowers its self-esteem even more.

Too low self-esteem hampers child’s activity and creativity. A child does not believe in itself, is constantly afraid of failing, therefore it does not take up any tasks as they seem impossible to complete. Students with low self-esteem are especially sensitive to failures, criticism and judgments. They are deeply affected by each failure and do not want to try again in fear of failing again, as further failures confirm their conviction of being worthless and further criticism and lack of acceptance from teachers and parents only strengthen their already low self-esteem.

Nathaniel Branden expressed the following opinion on self-esteem: “Of all the judgments we pass in life, none is more important than the judgment we pass on ourselves. (...) The core of such self-esteem has a deep impact on human thinking process, emotions, desires, values and goals. It is one of the most important factors shaping our behavior“ (Faber, Mazlish 1993, s. 149). Therefore, self-esteem is the drive force of all our actions and plays a key role in everyone’s life. Using destructive criticism while criticizing a child, we deprive it of the right to perceive itself as a valuable human being. Failing to satisfy the need for positive self-esteem is one of the most common emotional barriers in mental development of a child and in the Maslov’s hierarchy of needs, the need for recognition and prestige, on which one builds self-esteem and self-respect, is just below the most important emotional need of a human being. Its position in the ladder of needs is a striking evidence of its importance in human life.

The effect of self-esteem on behavior has many aspects. Type of challenges taken up in life and methods of facing them, evaluating and foreseeing one’s chances in various situations, as well as establishing social contacts depend on the way a child perceives itself.

Summary

The primary value in upbringing should be building a positive and adequate self-esteem and the „basic job of teachers and parents (...) is to find a way to make their children/students think positively about themselves, believe in their competences and value” (Chomczyńska - Miliszkiewicz 2001, p. 53). Therefore, it is necessary to use the approach based on positive reinforcement and constructive criticism, motivating students to work on themselves and achieve their goals, as teachers cannot give up on pointing mistakes and aspects that may be difficult for a child, but at the same time necessary for its development. This is the job of a teacher – to create conditions for, allow for, stimulate and support the development of a child. The crucial thing is that student’s mistakes, lack of ability or predispositions in some fields cannot be used to lower their dignity or personal value.

According to Rogers, „the ability to think positively of oneself depends on the quality and consequences of recognition by others” (B. Thorne 2006, p. 54). In order for a child to

feel valuable, it must experience recognition from persons important to it. Teachers, being aware of the importance of positive self-esteem, should organize the teaching process so that children have the opportunity to feel successful, to know their strengths and abilities – they will be the source of positive experience and foundation for further development, be the basis of self-assurance and the courage to take up challenging tasks and educational institutions are responsible for preparing the young generation to take up challenges in a new and ambiguous environment (B. Majerek, p. 69).

Emotional abuse is described as the abuse „in velvet gloves”. It is a hidden form of abuse, very difficult to recognize and prove. The only effective way is to change social attitude towards psychological abuse by showing negative – both direct and future – consequences of such abuse for a child’s development, by overcoming stereotypes, as well as by developing and implementing prevention schemes. According to world organizations (World Health Organization, International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect) education schemes for parents are highly effective in prevention of emotional abuse. They are the first step towards elimination of abusive behavior (www.ispcan.org, accessed on 11.04.2011).

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