

Violence against children and its repercussions

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Received: 08-03-2022

Accepted: 16-06-2022

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Violence against children is a complex and multifactorial phenomenon, with important consequences for child development, being considered a serious public health problem⁽¹⁾.

Aggressiveness and violence, although commonly used as synonyms, have different definitions. Aggressiveness is a part of our biological heritage and has a key factor in the survival of species. In its turn, violence is an exclusively human product that relates to the language, culture and societal symbols in which the individual is inserted⁽²⁾. It is heterogeneous in its etiology, quality and intensity, as well as the impact it has on its victims.

Violence can be defined as the use of physical strength or power, real or threatened, against oneself, anyone or a community, that can result or has any possibility to result in injuries, death, psychological damage, developmental deficiencies or deprivation⁽³⁾.

In the family context, it can be understood as “all actions or omissions that impairs the well-being, physical, psychological integrity or freedom and the right to full development of a family member. It can be done inside or outside the household, by any kin who has a power relationship with the assaulted person. It also includes people who are performing the role of father or mother, even without blood ties”⁽⁴⁾.

The World Health Organization⁽⁵⁾ classifies violence against children into four types: physical, sexual, psychological abuse and negligence, which can result in physical and/or psychological damage. It translates as a strong stressor in the normal process of growth and development of children. It must be considered and recognized, so that effective measures can be adopted for its resolution, thus avoiding greater damage to the child, his family and to the whole society.

Physical violence occurs when someone causes or attempts to cause harm through physical force or the use of some type of weapon or instrument that may cause internal, external or both injuries. Psychological violence includes any action or omission that causes or aims to cause damage to the person’s self-esteem, identity or development.

Sexual violence is any action in which one person, in a situation of power, forces another to perform sexual practices using physical force, psychological influence or the use of weapons or drugs. Sexual practice with individuals younger than 14 years, with or without consent, is considered presumed violence.

Negligence against the child, a subject that has been widely studied, is the omission of responsibility of one or more family members in relation to another,

especially those who need help due to age or some physical condition, permanent or temporary. This violence is difficult to define because it involves cultural, social and economic aspects of each family or social group⁽⁶⁾. It is configured when parents or guardians fail to provide health care, nutrition, personal hygiene, clothing, education, housing and emotional support, and when such failure is not a result of living conditions beyond their control. Currently, the term has been broadened to incorporate the so called dangerous supervision⁽⁷⁾.

In general, neglect is experienced with extreme anxiety by the child. Many of the symptoms and learning problems associated with neglected children are likely to arise as a result of changes in biological stress response systems⁽⁸⁾. Children seek interaction with their caregivers and wait to be answered. It is a “give and take” relationship. If responses from the environment are frequently inappropriate or non-

existent, neurodevelopmental changes may occur with various clinical repercussions.

Stress from child abuse can cause a deleterious effect on neurodevelopment, leading to cognitive, emotional and behavioral problems, compromising the physical and mental health of children and future adults. Neglect has the potential to generate neurological scars, which can be inferred by the difficulties that those who experience it have in their physical, cognitive, emotional, social and behavioral development. There is neuropsychological and psychosocial impairment in these children. Thus, children, their families and society as a whole suffer.

In view of the consequences of chronic stress on the child’s development, it is necessary to create strategies for prevention, monitoring and early intervention to reduce the damage of traumatic experiences in childhood.

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