Moral sensitivity and peer violence: the role of empathy and caring

Vesna Bilić

Summary:
Since the significance and role of moral has recently been increasingly emphasized in explaining the nature of violent behavior among peers, in order to better understand this phenomenon, this paper examines the relationship between different forms (physical, verbal, relational, electronic) of violent behavior among peers together with empathy and caring (support) as indicators of connection with others, therefore the important components of moral sensitivity.

The study included 481 students of primary schools in Republic of Croatia (average age: 13,8). Respondents have stated that they are more violent to their peers directly (verbally and physically), that indirect forms of violence (relational and electronic) are less frequent, and that there is a propensity to multiple forms of violence.

The results of correlation analysis showed that greater empathy and caring are associated with less frequent violent behavior toward peers.

Multiple regression analysis has shown the support of adults as a predictor of all types of violence. In other words, students who have less caring in their environment are more prone to violent behavior toward their peers.

The study suggests the need to foster empathy and support of adults as protective factors, as well as the ethics of caring as an important prevention activity in schools.

Keywords: violence, empathy, support, moral sensitivity, ethics of caring

Introduction

Although violence is not an uncommon occurrence in society, that among peers, due to its frequency, prevailing cruelty and the threat it is for a healthy development, is recognized as a major, global problem that causes serious concern among parents and teachers, and intrigues a large number of scientists (Tokunaga, 2010; Bilić et al., 2012).

Since every form of violence, including the type which occurs among children, is in contrary to moral norms and conventions (such as children’s rights), there have been imposed some issues whether we raise and guide our children to judge the correctness of their actions, i.e. do we dedicate enough attention to morality and moral education, and theoretical explanation of the meaning of moral and systematization of knowledge, i.e. the ethics. The ethics of caring, in comparison to traditional ethical theories based on rational approach, duty and justice, devotes much more attention to feelings and related virtues such as empathy, sensitivity and charity, and emphasizes the importance of interpersonal relations and cooperation (Petterson, 2011), so therefore in this paper it is used as a theoretical framework.

Only recently has the importance of morality and explaining the nature of violence among peers started to be emphasized (Menesini, Nocetini and Camodeca, 2011; Gini, Pozzol and Hauser, 2011). The importance of knowing the ethical principles (intellectual component) has been neglected, but it has been noted that it does not always result in the willingness to make the decision and act in accordance with them (conative component), so the meaning of motivation, “moral emotions” and empathy (emotional component) for moral behavior has been questioned. Some authors suggest that the perpetrators of violence have the knowledge about morality and are competent for moral judgment, but not for sympathy, i.e. they do not have moral sensibility or sensitivity (Gini, Pozzol and Hauser, 2011), so this is a possible reason for their incorrect behavior toward peers. Moral sensitivity involves empathy and sense of connection to others (Crowell, Narvaez and Gomberg, 2005). Steffgen et al. (2011) referring to Hoffman, claim that empathy is what makes social life possible, i.e. empathy acts as an intermediary between moral standards and moral behavior and influences moral judgement and moral motivation (Perren and Gutzwiller- Helfenfinger, 2012). A very significant role in the development of empathy has the support and caring of adults (Miklikowska, Duriez and Soenens, 2011). Therefore, the starting point of this paper is that children who experience connection, caring and support of adults, learn to behave similarly to
their peers, and through understanding their emotions and positions, they connect with them and help them, show care, and treat them in a more fair and moral way.

Because the number of studies on the role of moral in peer violence is small, the purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between different forms (physical, verbal, relational, electronic) of violent behavior among peers and empathy and caring as indicators of connection with others, therefore the important components of moral sensitivity.

**Violence among peers**

In schools across the globe, there has been a growing concern about frequent and repeated, hostile behavior of a more powerful individual or group of students toward their peers who are unable to defend themselves and their aim is to intimidate, cause pain or harm (Olweus, 1998). Although the students are of equal physical strength, among them there is often a difference in psychological or social power (for example, children from wealthier families have a privileged position in the school), which allows them to reach their goals, desires and status in their peer group. Thus, an increasing number of children is exposed to direct forms of peer violence daily (Craig et al., 2009), which involves: a) physical (pulling, pushing, kicking, and other activities that may cause injuries); and b) verbal (shouting, insulting, speaking obscenities, etc. and the deliberate use of words in order to inflict psychological injuries). As they grow, children start turning to indirect, subtle and sophisticated forms of expressing hostility, aimed at destroying, destructing a relationship, sense of acceptance and belonging. This form of emotional manipulation in peer relationships is most often called relational violence (Orpinas, Horne, 2006). In addition to traditional forms (physical, verbal and relational) of violence (bullying), digital devices have recently been used for repetitive, malicious behavior toward peers, so this kind of violence is called electronic or online violence (cyberbullying). Modern technology, particularly mobile phones and Internet, have allowed the transfer of some form of violent behavior from real into virtual world, but have also contributed to creating of some new modalities of violent behavior. Thus, the most commonly used are text messages, sent by cell phone or e-mail and used for insulting (flaming) and online harassment or cyberstalking. Earlier popular blogs, forums, etc. have been suppressed by social networks which adolescents use for cyber denigration, outing, misinformation, exclusion and impersonation. However, it is believed that the most
devastating consequences are those of posting unpleasant content and uploading images on the Internet or videotaping an attack (happy slapping) and sexting (Wilard, 2008).

It is believed that boys are more prone to direct forms of violence, and girls to indirect and that violent behavior has its peak during early adolescence (Wang, Iannotti and Nansel, 2009).

The results of various studies indicate that a large number of children in schools are exposed to traditional and electronic peer violence. Thus Craig et al. (2009) have used a multinational sample, of children 11-15 years old from 40 countries in Europe, North America and Israel found that 8.6-45.2% of students are exposed to traditional forms of violence. While most estimate that the prevalence of electronic violence ranges from 20 to 40%, some point out at significantly higher rates, up to 70% (according to Tokunaga, 2010).

Victims of both traditional and electronic forms of violence have similar consequences: physical (headache, abdominal pain, etc.), emotional (feeling of inferiority, depression, suicidal thoughts), social (problems in functioning with others), and educational (difficulties in achieving academic success) (according to Bilić et al., 2013).

Parents and teachers have difficulties understanding how is it that their children or students are directly and indirectly involved in violent behavior in such a large number, sometimes are extremely cruel to their peers (offenders) or witness violence and do nothing to prevent it (observers).

Scientists (Essau and Conradt, 2009; Menesini, Nocentini and Camodeca 2011; Gini, 2006; Gini, Pozzoli and Hauser 2011; Hymel et al. 2010) explain such behavior toward peers with: a) deficits present in some components of social cognition, but recently also with b) deficits in moral domain.

Precisely because of their distorted, dysfunctional thought patterns, according to the theory of social information processing, perpetrators of violence are more prone to attribute hostile intent to others, misinterpret their thoughts and therefore oppose them by force (Essau and Conradt, 2009).

Other authors (e.g. Gini, 2006), warn that the offenders do not always have cognitive difficulties. They describe them as children with outstanding social and cognitive skills, but who use them for interpersonal domination and manipulation, believing that violent behavior pays off. It seems that bullies are competent for moral judgment and understanding, but not
for sympathy (Gini, Pozzol and Hauser, 2011). It is suggested that the perpetrators can have deficits associated with their moral (Hymel et al.2010) and it is encouraged to examine some aspects of morality in different types of peer violence (Perren and Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger 2012).

**Specific role of some components of moral sensitivity in peer violence**

It is known that moral activity is preceded by complex, interrelated, cognitive, behavioral and affective processes. Crowell, Narvaez and Gomberg (2005) have suggested four components of moral behavior: a) moral sensitivity, b) moral judgment, c) moral motivation, d) moral action. In this paper, we want to draw attention to the importance of moral sensitivity in understanding violent behavior toward peers.

In order to even respond in a moral way, children need to be sensitive to situational signs, but also be able to perceive and interpret events which lead to moral behavior and predict outcomes or consequences of action or inaction. Moral sensitivity is defined as an awareness of how one’s behavior affects others or as a finding about someone’s specific rights being questioned (Crowell, Narvaez and Gomberg, 2005). Although it is emphasized that moral sensitivity is largely a process that we are aware of, i.e. the cognitive process is being pointed out, emotional concern for others is not neglected either. It is particularly emphasized that together with cognitive decoding of certain situations, in order to act morally, it is necessary to involve identification and the attempt to understand others’ feelings. Therefore, Crowell, Narvaez and Gomberg (2005) argue that moral sensitivity includes taking others’ perspective (empathy) and a sense of connection to others.

Results of some studies have confirmed- if the level of empathy or the ability to understand other’s feelings is lower, it is more likely that children and adolescents will involve in violent behavior toward their peers (Gini et al., 2008; Caravita, Di Blasio and Salmivalli, 2009), while high level of empathy is associated with pro-social behavior and diffusing violent tendencies (Jolliffe and Farrington, 2004).

In the introduction, we have emphasized that the role of support, care and acceptance from adults in everyday, and especially stressful life situations is significant.
Soenens et al. (2007, p.300) define parental care and support as the ability to respond to children’s needs, and their responsibility and willingness to help and serve as a secure base when a child is experiencing anxiety or stress.

With instrumental support (providing direct material support, giving favors and advice, etc.) emotional and moral support, and understanding their feelings and showing affection is also very important to children (Dobrotić, Laklija, 2012, p.43). Children and adolescents usually experience care from their parents and teachers, and even a perceived support has beneficial effects on their well-being (Haber et al.2007), thus it is associated with academic success (Jacobson, 2010). However, a few studies relate perceived support and care from adults with violent behavior toward peers.

**Empirical research**

Peer violence is a pervasive problem in schools across the world, is experienced by a large number of students, and causes serious concern among their parents and teachers. Peer violence has been increasingly determined as immoral behavior, and is explained by deficits in the moral domain, but there is a small number of studies that deal with this issue, particularly in the Republic of Croatia. This research was encouraged by the need for better understanding the role of moral and some of its components in peer violence. Therefore, the main objective of this study is to examine the relationship between violent behavior toward peers (physical, verbal, relational, electronic) and empathy and care from adults as components of moral sensitivity, and then to determine the predictors of violent behavior.

**Specific objectives**

According to the objective, and based on the earlier findings in references, the specific research objectives are:

- To determine the frequency and correlation between different forms of peer violence
- To determine the relationship between empathy and caring and incidence of violent behavior (physical, verbal, relational, electronic) toward peers
• To determine the anticipated incidence of different forms of violent behavior based on predicting variables (empathy, care, academic achievement together with gender and age).

Methodology

Participants
The research involved a total of 481 students from primary schools in Brod-Posavina, Split-Dalmatia and Varazdin County and the City of Zagreb. Schools that were chosen were big, from rural and urban areas, situated in different (north, central and south) parts of Croatia and all students were of seventh and eighth grade. The research included twenty classes, 49% of the participants were seventh grade students, 51% of them were eighth grade students, and the survey was taken by all the students who attended the classes the day when the study was conducted. The gender ratio was balanced (48.9% boys and 51.1% girls). The average age of participants was 13.84 (SD=0.68).

Procedure
Data were collected during spring of 2012, in a group testing by grades. All parents and the school principle have previously given the consent. The respondents were given general instructions on completing the form, participation was voluntary and anonymous, it was noted that they can withdraw from completing the form at any point, but there were no such situations during the research.

Instruments

1. General information questionnaire contained questions about gender, age, grade and school achievement.
2. Aggression-problem behavior frequency scale. Its authors are Farrel, Kung, White, Valois (2000), and it was first published in Dahlberg et al., 2005. The scale originally consists of 18 items and three scales measuring physical, non-physical and relational aggression. For the purpose of this study, the scale has been adapted so that it consisted four subscales and 20 particles, and the students have on the scale of one to 5 degrees evaluated (from 0= not at all to 4= more than once a week) how often during the school year have they been: a) physically violent toward their peers (5 particles; e.g. “I have pushed another student”); b)
verbally violent (5 particles; “I have offended someone’s family”); c) relationally violent (6 particles; “I have said something about another student so that others laughed at him”) and d) violent through electronic devices and their modalities: SMS, e-mail, forum, blog, etc., social networks and the Internet (4 particles; “How often have you exposed your peers to unpleasant situations on social networks?”). Since this adapted scale was used for the first time, we have checked its reliability. For the physical aggression scale, Cronbach’s alpha was 0.86; for the verbal aggression scale α= 0.83; for the relational aggression scale α= 0.87; for the electronic violence scale α= 0.84.

3. **Empathy – Teen Conflict** (Bosworth, Espelage, 1995; in Dahlberg et al., 2005). The respondents have on a scale from one to five (1= never to 5=always) assessed five statements concerning the individual’s ability to listen, their sensitivity to others, and if they can trust them (for example, “I am sensitive to other people’s feelings, even when they are not my friends”). Range of points was from 5 to 25, with a higher result indicating a higher degree of empathy. Reliability of the scale was satisfactory, Cronbach’s alpha α= 0.67.

4. **Presence of Caring- Individual Protective Factors Index** (authors: Phillips and Springer, 1992; in Dahlberg et al., 2005). This instrument measures an individual’s sense of support from adults, and students have on the scale of 4 degrees (1=completely false to 4=completely true) estimated the extent to which they agree with 9 offered items (for example “There are people whose help I can count on when I really need it”). The minimum score was 9 and the maximum was 36. A higher score indicated a higher level of caring and support from adults. This scale’s reliability was satisfactory, Cronbach’s alpha α= 0.791

**Statistical methods and data analysis**

The method used in the empirical part of the research was causal, non-experimental. The data we obtained using the instruments described above were analyzed using the SPSS statistical package. The process has involved the calculation of the degree of reliability (Cronbach’s alpha) of the instruments that were used and the calculation of basic descriptive indicators (M, SD). Correlation analysis, i.e. the Pearson correlation coefficient was used to calculate the degree of connection between analyzed variables. Multiple regression analysis was made in

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order to better understand the predictors of violent behavior among peers. The criterion variables were the prevalence of different forms of violence in schools and the predictors—empathy, caring, and school achievement.

**Results and discussion**

*The frequency and inter-correlation of different forms of violence among peers*

According to testimonies of respondents, they are most often verbally violent toward their peers (M=1.75; SD=0.92), and then physically violent (M=1.68; SD=0.63). Then follows the relational aggression (M=1.33; SD=0.63), and the least frequent is electronic aggression violence (M=1.19; SD=0.54). Other studies have also confirmed prevalence of verbal, followed by physical violence (Williams and Guerra, 2007). The results are not directly comparable due to methodological differences in collecting data; in other words, in this research students have confirmed their own participation in violence, while other research bring results based on the respondents’ exposure to violence, however, the obtained results on the prevalence of all forms of violence, especially verbal, match. Thus, for example, a UNICEF study conducted in Croatia (Pregrad et al., 2011) shows that during school years, primary school students are often exposed to verbal (80.3%), and then some forms of physical violence (45.4%). Although the prevalence of electronic violence ranges from 20 to 40% (Tokunaga, 2010), it is necessary to draw attention to a continuing growth of electronic violent behavior toward peers. It is possible that children and adolescents estimate that they participate in electronic and relational violence less because they do not perceive it as real violence since there is no direct contact with the victim, and the consequences are not visible. They usually consider electronic violence as joke or fun; although they are prone to moral justification of traditional forms of violence, they do not even justify the electronic form (Pomari and Wood, 2010).

It is necessary to mention that violence which started in the real world, often continues in the virtual, and even children who are physically weaker or victims of violence can become abusers because it is a convenient way for them to get revenge without the potential exposure and consequences (Tokunaga, 2010; Bilić et al., 2012; Willard, 2007; 2008). Attention should
particularly be drawn to the fact that children increasingly experience multiple forms of violence, which is confirmed by the results shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Inter-correlation among variables of violent behavior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Violent behavior toward peers (Pearson Correlation Coefficient)</th>
<th>Physical violence</th>
<th>Verbal violence</th>
<th>Relational violence</th>
<th>Electronic violence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical violence</td>
<td></td>
<td>.698**</td>
<td>.567**</td>
<td>.447**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal violence</td>
<td>.698**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.703**</td>
<td>.452**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational violence</td>
<td>.567**</td>
<td>.703**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.668**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic violence</td>
<td>.447**</td>
<td>.452**</td>
<td>.668**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: **p<.01; *<p<05.

Since correlation between committing violent acts was moderately high (between 0.40 and 0.70) and statistically significant, in further analysis we have created a variable of total committed violence. Positive correlations indicate that a student who is prone to one form of violent behavior is also prone to its other forms.

The connection of empathy and caring with violent behavior toward peers

According to the results obtained in this study, there is a positive and significant correlation between empathy (M=3.15; SD=0.90) and caring (support) from adults (M=3.27; SD=0.61), although it is not high.

Table 2 Correlation of empathy and caring with violent behavior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exposure to different forms of violence</th>
<th>Empathy</th>
<th>Caring, support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical violence</td>
<td>-.10*</td>
<td>-.18**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal violence</td>
<td>-.12**</td>
<td>-.21**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational violence</td>
<td>-.11*</td>
<td>-.25**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic violence</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.22**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total violent behavior</td>
<td>-.12**</td>
<td>-.25**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: **p<.01; *<p<05.
As it can be seen in Table 2, greater empathy is associated with less frequent violent behavior toward peers.

The results have shown- if students have higher empathy, i.e. are more sensitive to others and more likely to listen to them and trust them, they are less violent to their peers in general ($r=-0.12$), and verbally ($r=-0.12$), relationally ($r=-0.11$) and physically ($r=-0.10$). Although the correlations are low, they are statistically significant and very indicative. However, the correlation between empathy and electronic violence has not been found, which can be explained with the lack of face-to-face contact and disability to observe the victim’s reaction, their suffering, all of which reduces the possibility for empathy. Therefore, the results show that, if students have higher empathy, i.e. are more sensitive to others and more likely to listen to them and trust them, they are less violent to their peers in general, as well as physically, verbally and relationally. Therefore we can conclude that lower is the empathy or the ability to understand others’ feelings and perspective, higher is the likelihood that children and adolescents will engage in violent behavior toward their peers, as it has been confirmed in other studies (Gini et al., 2008; Caravita, Di Blasio and Salmivalli, 2009).

For the purpose of this study, we have observed empathy as a one-dimensional construct, and we did not part its emotional and cognitive component because the results of some research show that both components can be significant in relation to behavior, and that both reduce aggressive and violent behavior (Jolliffe and Farrington, 2004). However, the results suggest that there is a weak connection of empathy and involving in violent behavior, which is in accordance with the results of some studies that have also reported that there is a low to moderate relationship between these variables (Correia and Dalbert, 2008). Empathy most likely helps in understanding others and contributes to more quality or less conflictual relationships with peers, and it is possible that it encourages solidarity and caring. The results also support Oxley’s view (2011) that empathy has the potential to enrich and strengthen moral sensitivity, but does not always lead to moral actions. However, based on the above, empathy, as a component of moral sensitivity, can be seen as a protective factor for violent behavior. Madarević (2009) even points out that action based on compassion and empathy can lead to moral conduct.
**Caring (support) from adults and violence**

The results of correlation analysis presented in Table 2, show that greater care and support of adults is connected to less frequent violent behavior toward peers. Therefore, the less the adults care (support), higher is the frequency of total \( r = -0.25 \) and relational \( r = -0.25 \), and electronic \( r = 0.22 \), verbal \( r = -0.21 \) and physical \( r = -0.18 \) violence toward peers.

However, in this study we have observed overall caring (support) from adults, but have not parted parental caring from caring of others, such as teachers.

In other studies, insufficient parental support is associated with poor relationships with peers (Mesch and Talmud, 2006), and negative interactions with parents are associated with more frequent conflicts with peers (Shoemaker and Furman, 2009). Most likely, the support from adults regarding caring, accepting and helping can have an impact on adolescents’ relationships with others, and may encourage different relational processes of support and result in more positive interactions (Hamre and Pianta, 2006). The obtained results can be explained in the light of attachment theories, according to which a relationship with parents has a significant impact on the adolescents’ ability to form connections with other people outside the family circle. It is possible that those who do not feel care and support, or do not feel a connection with the important adults, fail to develop emotional resources and social competences which they need in order to develop positive interactions with their peers, and therefore have a larger number of bad relationships with them and experience conflicts that often grow into violence. Many studies have confirmed that caring and supporting relationships, primarily with parents, but also teachers, can give a child a sense of security (Hughes, 2011) and serve as a secure base (Hamre and Pianta, 2006), which has a positive effect to their relationships with peers (Hughes, 2011).

**Prediction of frequency of different forms of violent behavior based on empathy, caring and school achievement**

Among numerous studies on peer violence, those that dominate are studies on prevalence and correlation, and only a few of them deal with predictors of violent behavior.

To better understand violent behavior of students in schools, we have conducted multiple regression analysis. In this analysis, the criterion variable was the prevalence of different forms of violence in schools, and the predictors were empathy, caring and school
achievement. These variables were added to age and gender, as their basic socio-demographic characteristics. Altogether, we have conducted five regression analysis, four for different forms of violent behavior and the fifth for total aggressive behavior.

Prediction of physical violence toward peers

Table 3 Prediction of physical violent behavior toward peers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PREDICTORS</th>
<th>Standardized partial regression coefficients (β)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.30**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.10*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Point average</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>-.10*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model summary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>.36**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R2</td>
<td>.12**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: **p<.01; *p<.05.

The predictors in the regression analysis have explained 12% of the difference in physical violent behavior. Gender, age and caring were indicated to be important predictors. Older male students with less caring in their environment are more prone to physical violent behavior.
### Prediction of verbal violence toward peers

**Table 4 Prediction of verbal violence toward peers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PREDICTORS</th>
<th>Standardized partial regression coefficients (β)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.12*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Point average</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>-.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>-.18**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Model summary**

- \( R = .28** \)
- Adjusted \( R^2 = .07** \)

*Note: **p<.01; *<p<.05.*

Predictors in the regression analysis have explained 7% of differences in verbal violence. Gender and caring were indicated to be important predictors. Male students with less caring in their environment are more prone to verbal violent behavior.
Prediction of relational violence toward peers

Table 5 Prediction of relational violence toward peers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PREDICTORS</th>
<th>Standardized partial regression coefficients (β)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Point average</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>-.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>-.25**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model summary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>.29**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.07**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: **p<.01; *p<.05.

Predictors in the regression analysis have explained 7% of differences in verbal violence. Caring is the only predictor proven to be important. Students with less caring in their environment are more prone to relational violent behavior.
Prediction of electronic violence toward peers

Table 6 Prediction of electronic violence toward peers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PREDICTORS</th>
<th>Standardized partial regression coefficients (β)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Point average</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>-.21**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Model summary

| R            | .23**                                           |
| Adjusted R²  | .04                                             |

Note: **p<.01; *<p<.05.

Predictors in the regression analysis have explained 4% of differences in verbal violence. Caring is the only predictor proven to be important. Students with less caring in their environment are more prone to relational violent behavior.
Prediction of overall propensity to violence

Table 7 Prediction of overall propensity to violence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PREDICTORS</th>
<th>Standardized partial regression coefficients (β)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.17**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Point average</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>-.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>-.21**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model summary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>.33**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.09**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: **p<.01; *<p<05.

Predictors in the regression analysis have explained 9% of differences in verbal violence. Gender and caring are the predictors shown to be important. Male students with less caring in their environment are more prone to relational violent behavior.

According to the results of the conducted multiple regression analysis, a lack of caring, i.e. support of adults, is a predictor of all forms (physical, verbal, relational, electronic) of violent behavior toward peers.

On one hand, parental neglect of where and how children spend their free time, objectively leaves them with the option to be more involved in inappropriate activities, and according to these results, also into violence toward peers. It is possible that “premature autonomy” (Fosco et al., 2012), excessive freedom and inadequate supervision can lead adolescents into risky behavior. This is particularly symptomatic for electronic violence over which parents have
almost no control because they think that children know more about digital devices than they do, and that they cannot control it. In addition, parents think that since children are at home, they are not exposed to any danger, but they are not aware of the dangers that occur in virtual streets.

On the other hand, at a deeper level, no expression of caring and support forms an unfavorable family context and bad relationships that can have a negative impact on the overall socio-emotional development of children and become predictors of various problems in behavior (Fosco et al., 2012), and according to the results of this research, of all forms of violence toward peers. Other studies have also confirmed that adolescents who do not have parental support are more likely to engage in violent actions, and that parental warmth and support can protect adolescents from participating in violence (Wang, Iannotti, Nansel, 2009). It seems that the experience with parents can have an important role in shaping the quality of relationships with peers.

A sense of connection with others as an important component of moral sensitivity, is particularly contributed by caring, closeness and support, which is why children gain a sense of security. Although parents are the most important sources of support for children, there are other important people in their lives, too. The ability to build a relationship with them, feel closeness and support, is not only important for their healthy development, but is also a protective factor of violent behavior. Some studies (Mueller, Haines, 2012) have shown that the perception of adolescents that they have at least one positive relationship with adults who are not their parents, but are for instance their teacher or coaches, reduces the risk of problematic adjustment. Therefore it can be concluded that adolescents who experience connection in school and family have better opportunities for positive adjustment. Because in this study we have not separated parental caring from that of others, it is important to emphasize that a lack of connection to adults can be a predictor of violent behavior toward peers. The obtained results are supported by numerous evidence of the impact which important people’s support to adolescents has in forming relationships with their peers, and it is considered that it is likely to affect the quality of social relationships throughout the whole life (Lamborn and Felbab, 2003).

The result on male gender being the predictor of physical, verbal and overall violence is consistent with the results of other studies which highlight an increased tendency of young
men to direct forms of violence (Wang, Iannotti and Nansel 2009). Williams and Guerra (2007) have also reported that young men often participate in physical violence, but have not found gender differences when it comes to verbal violence. The inconsistency of the results can be explained with the use of different measurement instruments.

Gender differences are on most occasions explained with educational modeling, but also gender stereotypes about physical strength of boys and malice and the girls’ propensity to manipulation, which is associated with their more frequent participation in relational and electronic violence (Wang, Iannotti and Nanse, 2009). However, in this study, female gender has not been confirmed as a predictor of indirect forms of violence. It is possible that girls less often report violence and spreading rumors, destroying relationships, slander on social networks, etc. and do not consider it violence. Future researchers are suggested to examine gender differences in peer violence.

According to the results, age is also a predictor of physical violence, and older children are more prone to using physical force. Older children’s tendency to argue with younger children was already pointed out by Olweus (1998), and Griffin and Gross (2004) also confirm that usually older students are the perpetrators. This study has been conducted in seventh and eighth grades, when the propensity to violent behavior is the strongest, which might be the reason for this result, but it is good information that violent behavior decreases after this period and falls in middle school (Williams and Guerra, 2007).

**Limitations**

Although this study expands the understanding of the role of some aspects of moral in peer violence, it does have some limitations. They are primarily contained in the self-testimony of adolescents, which can always have an impact on results. Maybe the results would be different if we separately analyzed the cognitive and affective empathy and support of parents and teachers, thus we encourage future researchers to examine it.
Conclusion

The results of this research draw attention to prevalence of all forms of violent behavior among peers and the need to take serious measures for its prevention.

According to the results, empathy can be seen as an important protective factor for violent behavior, but not as its predictor. However, we believe that empathy can enrich moral sensitivity and encourage moral consideration which is based on ethical golden rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." In any case, understanding the position of others is an important starting point of moral and especially non-violent behavior.

The results clearly show that a lack of caring and support from adults is a predictor to all forms of peer violence, so there is a need of highlighting their role in prevention. It can be concluded that caring and supporting parents and teachers, who provide structure and guidance, use appropriate supervision, give advice, guidance and assistance in overcoming various challenges including those in social relationships, encourage children to similar interactions with peers and reduce the risk for violent behavior. Figuratively speaking, they nurture and encourage moral sensitivity, and therefore can be a buffer against violence.

Developing awareness of how one’s behavior can affect others, i.e. the development of moral sensitivity, has to be a starting point in encouraging positive behavior and deterring all forms of incorrect and violent behavior toward peers.

Therefore, a need for paying more attention to some aspects of moral, but also introducing ethics of caring in our schools are important preventive activities. The ethics of caring can be an objective which contributes to promoting better relationships, reducing school violence or how Gilić and Geiger (2007) say it, it can help in tracing the path of domination and power to creating a more equal world.

We believe that the results of this study could help in better understanding of the phenomenon of peer violence, creating effective interventions and making better preventions programs in schools. At the end, it is worth repeating that improving skills of empathy and quality support and caring of parents and teachers can help reduce violence and immoral behavior toward peers.
References


