

UNSAFE HAVENS?



Violence against Children at
Home and in Schools in the
Baltic Sea Region

Summary



Save the Children
Sweden

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*Save the Children Sweden fights for children's rights.
We influence public opinion and support children at risk
– in Sweden and internationally.*

*Our vision is a world in which children's rights are fulfilled.
A world which respects and values every child.
A world where all children have hope and opportunity*

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Printed by: Rentryck AB

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Introduction

The gap between children's rights and the human rights enjoyed by adults becomes evident when it comes to issues relating to violence. The study *Unsafe Havens? Violence against Children at Home and in Schools in the Baltic Sea Region* shows that physical and humiliating punishments are widely practised and tolerated in most of the countries around the Baltic Sea. Frequently they are excused as being demonstrations of love or necessary and well-intentioned disciplinary measures. Bullying (peer violence) is also common and is often ignored as being "children's play" or something that children and young people have to sort out themselves.

Scope and methodology of the study

The study covers six countries; Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden and the St. Petersburg Region of the Russian Federation. The aim of the study is to explore the situation in these countries and the St. Petersburg Region in relationship to measures taken to prevent corporal punishment of children and bullying and to build the case for legal provisions, public education and adequate protection systems.

The following issues are covered:

- Available research on attitudes in society and the prevalence of physical and humiliating punishment and bullying.
- Laws regulating the issues of corporal punishment and bullying.
- Implementation of relevant laws.
- Government institutions and measures taken by government.
- Responsibilities of regional and/or local authorities and service providers.
- Examples of programmes and projects concerning domestic violence and bullying carried out by non-governmental organisations (NGOs).
- Debate in the media, at political level and among the public on the issues of domestic violence, corporal punishment and peer violence in each country.

This study was carried out on assignment from Save the Children Sweden. The empirical work for the study took place in October and November 2007, consequently any events after this period are not covered.

Save the Children Sweden is aware of the explorative character of the study and the constraints that this implies when it comes to drawing firm conclusions. However, the overall picture provided points to the fact that more attention to issues relating to corporal punishment and bullying, and more action from all actors involved, is needed in order to decrease the levels of violence to which children are exposed in their homes and at school.

Many thanks to organisations working within the field of child rights in the six countries mentioned above and the St. Petersburg region for taking part in the planning and practical execution of the work with the study and also for contributing invaluable knowledge about the situation in the Baltic Sea Region.

Corporal punishment in the Baltic Sea Region

Prevalence

Studies regarding prevalence and attitudes to corporal punishment are difficult to compare as different methodologies have been used, definitions (for example of mild and severe corporal punishment) are not clearly explained in them, etc. Another constraint in relation to this study is that some of the research is only available in the original languages. Existing information, however, indicates that corporal punishment in some form is experienced by between 40 and 80 per cent of the children in all the countries covered by this study, except Sweden. Furthermore, non-physical forms of aggression remains a largely unknown area that needs to be explored and included in practical activities as well as awareness-raising and lobbying efforts.

In Estonia a survey from the 1990s indicated that 80 per cent of parents use light physical punishment, albeit on rare occasions. According to a survey carried out in 2000, only 55 per cent of Estonians were negative towards the use of physical punishment. A 1992 questionnaire survey found that 72 per cent of Finnish students aged 15–16 had, on some occasion, experienced mild corporal punishment at home. Five per cent had been subjected to severe violence. Recent, but more limited surveys, indicate similar results.

Latvian teachers estimate that over 50 per cent of the children in the country are subjected to corporal punishment. Of young people asked about their experience, 23 per cent report being subjected to less severe physical punishment and 13 per cent more severe corporal punishment. According to a survey carried out in Lithuania in 2005 more than 40 per cent of the respondents sometimes punished their children physically. In Poland a 2001 survey showed that almost 60 per cent of Polish children are physically punished by their parents. No research that specifically deals with the St. Petersburg Region has been found. A survey carried out in 2000 of adult respondents in 44 Russian regions, however, indicated that approximately 66 per cent of the respondents had experienced some kind of punishment, either physical or verbal. According to another study 60 per cent of the children had experience of violence in the home.

Sweden is the exception to the pattern in the Baltic Sea countries described above. The most recent Swedish studies indicate that less than ten per cent of parents use corporal punishment. According to these studies very few children are struck with implements.

Legal framework

In Sweden corporal punishment was prohibited in 1979. In 1983, prohibition was introduced in Finland. The Latvian Law on the Protection of the Rights of the Child, which prohibits corporal punishment and outlines the responsibilities of national, regional and local authorities in case of violence against children, was adopted in 1998.

Experts in St. Petersburg consider the provisions in Russian legislation such as the Family Code and the Criminal Code to be sufficient for corporal punishment to be prohibited in all settings. Despite this, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has urged the Russian Federation to “explicitly prohibit by law all forms of corporal punishment in the family”

In Estonia and Lithuania amendments to relevant child protection laws banning corporal punishment have been developed by the governments and will be debated in their parliaments in 2008.

In the mid-1990s an attempt to introduce a ban on corporal punishment in Poland failed. Consequently, prohibition on the application of corporal punishment in the family is not explicitly expressed in any Polish law.

Implementation and government institutions

Lawyers and other experts interviewed in the St. Petersburg region highlight a number of obstacles to the implementation of the laws on violence against children, obstacles such as low level of legal consciousness and lack of trust among the population, lack of motivation and competence of law enforcement officials, absence of clear definitions in the law and limited knowledge on how to interview children. First and foremost, the issue is a question of attitudes, however. By and large corporal punishment remains socially acceptable in the Russian Federation.

The same is true about most of the other countries in the Baltic Sea Region. In Poland and Estonia, however, government institutions such as the Ombuds Office for Children and ministries have initiated and/or financed campaigns regarding violence against children. National violence prevention campaigns or programmes have also been carried out by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health in Finland and the Ministry of Social Security and Labour in Lithuania.

In all the countries government institutions at local level have a mandate to intervene in cases of violence and abuse against children. Considerable challenges, such as lack of coordination between institutions, lack of trained specialists and administrative capacity and constraints relating to attitudes and lack of initiative, remain, however.

Examples of NGO initiatives

Primarily NGOs in most of the Baltic Sea countries work with service provision, offering therapy to children who are victims of violence and abuse and providing

training to professionals. Helplines for victims of domestic violence, which are run by government institutions and/or NGOs, are available.

NGOs also carry out awareness-raising campaigns, publish research and books about child raising methods without the use of violence and lobby governments for legislation banning corporal punishment.

In the St. Petersburg Region relatively few NGOs work with issues relating to domestic violence and corporal punishment. One reason for this is that other child rights violations, such as sexual exploitation and children living in the streets, attract more interest.

In Sweden NGOs publish studies and carry out advocacy and awareness-raising activities, for example regarding better coordinated support for children who have been victims of violence and abuse. NGOs also carry out parental trainings on child rearing. These kinds of courses have mushroomed in Sweden in recent years but are primarily the responsibility of the municipalities.

Debate on corporal punishment

In Sweden corporal punishment is mostly a non-issue. There are, however, exceptions to the silence that normally surrounds it, for example in 2007 when a father was acquitted by a district court after admitting having smacked his daughter. The Children's Ombuds Office issued a statement following the court decision and requested an information campaign similar to the one carried out when the ban on corporal punishment was introduced in 1979 as "there is a new generation of parents who might need information". After a similar sentence a few years ago the decision was, however, reversed by a higher court. Child rights advocates hope that the same thing will happen this time.

Violence against children, and especially corporal punishment, does not attract much attention in the St. Petersburg Region either. When issues relating to violence against women and children are covered in the media, it is mainly the most brutal cases that are highlighted. Discussions about causes and structural patterns are largely absent. Also in Estonia interest from the media has been noticeable mostly through coverage of individual cases. Both government institutions and Estonian NGOs deliberately advance their positions with caution due to their fear of statements that they feel Estonian society may not yet be "ready for". Silence also surrounds this issue in Latvia, except in May when NGOs and the Ministry of Social Security and Labour carry out an annual campaign on violence against children.

In Poland campaigns and other activities have contributed to the increased visibility of issues relating to corporal punishment. Increasingly, violence against children is also debated in Latvia and Finland.

Bullying in the Baltic Sea region

Prevalence

Seemingly bullying is a serious problem in all the countries that are included in this study and in the St. Petersburg Region. The availability of studies on the prevalence of peer violence, however, varies greatly between the countries. Existing studies are also difficult to compare as they use different methods and sometimes do not differentiate between bullying and other forms of violence.

A considerable amount of research is available in Estonia. A longitudinal study indicates that bullying has decreased in recent years. According to this study approximately 15 per cent of students are involved in bullying. Studies carried out in Finland indicate that between six and nine per cent of students are bullied frequently. In Lithuania 25 per cent had suffered frequent harassment and two thirds of the students were exposed in some manner, according to surveys carried out in 2003. Approximately five per cent of Swedish students feel bullied by other pupils at least once a week. Another 20 per cent of the students in grades 4–6 suffer from less frequent bullying. A third of all Polish students and teachers consider violence to be a serious problem. No information about the prevalence of bullying in Poland has been found. Nor have any statistics been found in the St. Petersburg Region and Latvia, but government institutions and NGOs consider bullying to be an increasing problem in both places.

Legal framework

The Swedish School Law specifically mentions the term bullying and states that all school staff must make efforts to stop degrading treatment. In 2006 a special law, the Act Prohibiting Discrimination and other Degrading Treatment of Children and School Students, was passed. This law stipulates even more clearly than the School Law that school staff bear the responsibility to counteract bullying and other degrading treatment.

No specific laws regulating bullying exist in the other countries included in this study. In Lithuania the Law on the Fundamentals of the Rights of the Child, which states that the dignity and honour of a child shall not be degraded and the child shall not be subjected to cruel treatment, applies. In Estonia the Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act establishes that “schools shall ensure the mental and physical security of the students and the protection of students’ health during their stay at school”. In Latvia violence, including bullying, is dealt with in the Criminal Code. An amendment to Finland’s Basic Education Act states that students participating in education are entitled to a safe learning environment. In Poland issues relating to peer violence are considered in accordance with the provisions of the Act on Juveniles and the Penal Code. Also in the Russian Federation, cases are dealt with according to the articles in the Criminal Code concerning abuse, assault, etc.

Implementation and institutions

All Swedish schools must have an Equal Treatment Plan which establishes responsibilities, routines and actions in order to stop degrading treatment. A Child and Pupil Representative for Equal Treatment is mandated to support students if schools fails to take action and might claim damages on behalf of a student. The Swedish National Agency for School Improvement has been directed by the government to formulate an action programme against bullying.

In Finland, provincial governments can urge schools to take measures against bullying and if the schools do not comply they may be punished by imposition of an administrative fine. Estonian government authorities have addressed the issue of bullying on several occasions. The implementation of a strategy aimed at the prevention and reduction of violence in schools was shared between different authorities and a new action plan was under preparation in late 2007.

The Latvian Ministry for Children and Family Affairs plans to prioritise issues related to violence in schools. All schools are supposed to establish a plan on how to deal with violence.

In 2007 the Lithuanian Prime Minister formed a task force for the preparation of recommendations on violence prevention. These recommendations were about to be approved by the government in late 2007. One of the recommendations was to implement an internationally recognised bullying prevention programme.

The Polish Ministry of National Education initiated the programme “Zero Tolerance for Violence at School” in 2007. All schools should develop a programme against bullying.

In the St. Petersburg Region, the Commission on Minors’ Affairs and Protection of Their Rights intends to address the issue of bullying. A working group on prevention of violence in all spheres of life in St. Petersburg has also been set up.

Examples of NGO initiatives

The NGO Child Line was the first organisation in Lithuania to draw attention to bullying. A campaign including information to children and training of professionals was initiated in 2004 and since then the Child Line has been successful in lobbying politicians.

The two largest publishing groups in Poland are carrying out the campaign “School without bullying” and a hotline where cases of violence can be reported has been opened. The Nobody’s Children Foundation has opened a helpline on cyberbullying and is planning a campaign on the issue. Latvian NGOs have initiated projects, such as preventive work in schools and training of teachers, on how to deal with conflicts. Bullying is one of the most common issues raised by children who call the helpline run by a Latvian NGO. The Estonian Union for Child Welfare has carried out several programmes against bullying, often in cooperation with local authorities. In Finland, the Mannerheim League for

Child Welfare (MLL) has developed a peer student system which exists in some 90 per cent of the secondary schools in the country. In cooperation with government authorities, MLL has also carried out a school peace programme. Limited information is available about cyberbullying, but MLL has started a project for families on how to cope with electronic media.

Few NGOs in the St. Petersburg Region work with the issue of bullying. The NGO Stellit carried out a project on social exclusion in three schools aiming at enhancing cooperation between government institutions at different levels, NGOs, etc.

The Swedish foundation Friends helps schools set up plans of action against bullying, trains school staff, disseminates information etc. Save the Children Sweden has set up a website where young people can discuss issues such as violence and bullying and lobbies the Swedish Government regarding measures against bullying.

Debate on bullying

From being a more or less unknown phenomenon in Lithuania a few years ago, bullying is now an issue that receives considerable attention. The NGO Child Line has been instrumental in this process. Also in Poland the issue of bullying, including cyberbullying, is increasingly taken up for discussion.

Violence and bullying are themes that are frequently discussed in Sweden, at the political level as well as in the media and among its citizens. There has been an intense debate in the media in Finland, especially after a tragic case when a 13-year old girl victim of bullying committed suicide. Also in Estonia these issues cause some debate.

As of yet there is no intensive debate on bullying in the media or among the general public in Latvia and discussions about the issue have recently started up among professionals. In the St. Petersburg Region the attention paid to violence in schools is limited, except when it comes to extreme cases and gang related violence.

Concluding comments and topics for further discussion

Corporal punishment

- The study *Unsafe Havens? Violence against Children at Home and in Schools in the Baltic Sea Region* shows that although legislation banning corporal punishment is a precondition for meeting child rights standards, in theory and practice, a legal ban is not enough. Finland has had a law prohibiting physical punishment for almost 25 years and Latvia for nearly 10 years. Still corporal punishment is widely practised in both countries.

The situation is different in Sweden, where the use of corporal punishment has decreased dramatically since the ban was introduced in 1979. The information campaign carried out by the Ministry of Justice, which ensured that 99 per cent of the Swedish population knew about the new law two years later, played a crucial role. However the question remains: are there also other factors that contributed to this successful outcome? More knowledge about opportunities and challenges relating to public education and attitudinal change would provide important lessons for countries such as Estonia and Lithuania where governments are in the process of presenting legislative amendments that will prohibit corporal punishment to parliament.

- Surveys regarding prevalence as well as attitudes to corporal punishment are difficult to compare. However, it seems that between 40 and 80 per cent of the children in all the countries covered by this study, except Sweden, experience corporal punishment. These high percentages should demand urgent action in all societies concerned.
- Few studies asking girls and boys about their experiences and opinions on corporal punishment and other child raising methods have been carried out. Some research is made retrospectively, that is adults are asked about the situation when they were children. However this does affect the reliability of the studies. Consequently, the need for more research that involves children is evident. It would be an advantage if these studies used standardised definitions and methods in order to facilitate comparisons between countries and over time.
- Government officials, as well as NGO representatives, in several of the countries stress the need for practical parental training on how to be a good parent, child rearing methods without the use of violence etc. In recent years, this type of training has been introduced in many countries and is becoming increasingly popular among parents. The main challenge, however, lies in also exposing parents who are less likely to ask for this kind of support to values and attitudes associated with positive, non-violent parenting.

- Helplines, in other words toll-free telephone numbers (and sometimes mail addresses) which children and young people can call if they need somebody to talk to about their problems, is a common method for support to children. Methodological development regarding how calls are reported would greatly enhance these helplines' usefulness as a source of knowledge and basis for intervention. Moreover, other methods of making support services directly accessible to children, without them having to rely on parents and other adults to act on their behalf, are needed. NGOs could play a crucial role in proposing such services.
- In several countries there is a legal duty for health service staff, teachers and other public officials, sometimes also for the general public, to report cases of suspected abuse of children to the social service authorities responsible. Has this duty increased the number of cases reported and are there differences in the numbers of cases reported compared to countries where only a moral duty to report exists? Another important topic is how to encourage people who have witnessed violence against children to report. Currently many people perceive that reporting does not lead to any improvement and therefore refrain from action.

Bullying

- Information regarding the prevalence of bullying in the six countries and the St. Petersburg Region is not always available. If studies exist they are difficult to compare due to the use of different methods etc. The reasons for the differences that seemingly exist are not clear. However, it is obvious that the education systems in many of the countries concerned have numerous problems to deal with, such as low salaries and lack of motivation among teachers, lack of psychologists and other support staff and limited involvement of parents. More information about how different factors affect the prevalence of bullying is needed.
- In some of the countries it is mandatory for schools to develop programmes against violence, equal treatment plans or other prevention programmes. The potential of these plans may be limited if they are not firmly disseminated to all people spending their time in school, and needless to say, if they are not applied in cases of bullying. There is space for more sharing of experience regarding school programmes against violence, including analysis of different methods used and their effects.
- Very little evidence of the involvement of parents and other caregivers in measures against peer violence in schools has been found during the work with this study. For various reasons parental involvement is, however, of crucial importance. Methods that enable parents to take part in prevention as well as actions that are needed to counteract bullying, support victims and identify sustainable solutions are needed.

- Cyberbullying is an emerging issue in all the countries concerned. Knowledge about the phenomenon is still limited, however. As young people's use of the Internet and mobile phones will continue to increase, there are good reasons to incorporate this issue into activities aimed at preventing or counteracting bullying.

The role of NGOs and overall developments in society

- Primarily, NGOs play a role as service providers directly, for example, by supplying therapy and other kinds of support for children who are victims of violence and indirectly through offering training for teachers, health care staff, social workers, police officers and other professionals. In addition, NGOs compile information and publish material on children's rights, the prevalence of violence, positive parenting etc. To various degrees NGOs also act as watchdogs and, through awareness-raising and lobbying, highlight problems and propose legislation or other measures that need to be taken by governments or government authorities at different levels. In most of the countries covered by this study, government authorities use tendering processes to procure social services from NGOs. The consequences of this method of purchasing services, for example with regard to accountability, service quality and equal access in different parts of the countries, are as yet inadequately analysed.
- Although the links are not clear it is obvious that both violence against children in the home and bullying are issues that are connected to overall developments in society. Experts, politicians, NGO representatives and others in the Baltic Sea countries highlight factors such as growing income disparities, tension between different nationalities, poverty and increasing competition and commercialisation. This wider context needs to be included in analyses together with action against corporal punishment and bullying.
- This study has identified gaps regarding knowledge, awareness and services as well as numerous opportunities for further action by government authorities at different levels, parents and NGOs. Hopefully, the information contained in this study will constitute a basis for further research, intensified awareness-raising and lobbying and enhanced action – towards the aim of societies free of violence against children.

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