Violence against Children and Adolescents in Finland

The aim of this study is to provide a comprehensive review of violence in the lives of Finnish children taking account of its different forms and manifestations. To date, research on violence perpetrated against children has been disjointed and confined to certain types of violence. In Finland, research has been carried out in specific areas such as school bullying, sexual abuse and corporal punishment with many themes hitherto going entirely unexplored. Much of the data available is also now out of date. The situation in Finland reflects an international trend: the types of violence perpetrated against children are studied as separate phenomena and it is only in recent years that attempts have been made to subject it to conceptually and empirically consistent scrutiny. This study is influenced by the work of Finkelhor et al. (e.g. Finkelhor 2007 and 2008), which takes a comprehensive approach to children as victims of violence with particular reference to the threat of violence faced by children in their social environment. Children are exposed to violence in all their everyday environments; at home, at school and at leisure.

This study was conducted as a nationally representative sample survey of 12- and 15-year-old year 6 and 9 pupils in Finnish and Swedish-speaking comprehensive and lower secondary schools. The survey questionnaires were constructed around the following themes:

- Conventional Crime
  - Robbery
  - Personal Theft
  - Vandalism
  - Assault
  - Attempted Assault
  - Unlawful Threat
• Sibling and Peer Victimisation
  ° Assault
  ° Physical Bullying
  ° Emotional Bullying

• Witnessing Domestic Violence
  ° Physical Bullying
  ° Witness to Assault on Mother
  ° Witness to Assault on Father
  ° Witness to Assault on Sibling

• Corporal Punishment or Other Violence Perpetrated by Parent
  ° Violence Perpetrated by Mother
  ° Violence Perpetrated by Father

• Sexual Abuse
  ° Sexual Experiences and Sexual Abuse Committed by Adult
  ° Sexual Experiences and Sexual Abuse Committed by Children and Young People

• Internet and Mobile Phone-based Violence
  ° Harassment and Threats via the Internet and by Mobile Phone
  ° Sexual Harassment and Solicitation via the Internet
  ° Sexual Abuse/Assault as a Result of Contacts made over the Internet

• School Bullying
  ° Peer Bullying
  ° Teacher Bullying

Questions on themes 1 and 2 were based on the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ) created by Finkelhor et al. Questions on themes 3 to 5 were based on questions drawn up by Sariola (1990, 1994), which were utilised for an earlier Finnish study carried out in 1988. This allowed us to draw direct comparisons regarding these themes with the findings from twenty years ago. The questions on theme 6 were based on a study carried out in Norway (Mossige & Stefansen 2007). Questions under theme 7 were primarily based on previous surveys conducted in Finland.

1 14 http://unh.edu/ccrc/jvq
Violence Against Children in Commonplace

The main finding put forward by this study is that violence against children is a frequent occurrence in Finland. Table 1 sets out the prevalence of conventional crimes.

Approximately a quarter of the respondents report having been subjected to an assault or attempted assault. Indeed, a comparison with adult crime victimisation survey results reveals that children are exposed to considerably higher levels of violence than adults. Figure 1 sets out assault prevalence rates as identified by the latest Finnish adult crime victimisation survey and this study. Although the survey questions are not entirely comparable, the results can nevertheless be considered indicative: assaults on children are clearly more prevalent than assaults on adults. This corroborates the findings of Finkelhor (2008, pp. 3–21).

Table 1  Children victimised during the last 12 months by type of crime, sex and school grade, %.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Year 6</th>
<th></th>
<th>Year 9</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thief</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vandalism</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assault</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempted assault</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illegal threat</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assault, attempted assault or illegal threat</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>29</td>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>3869</td>
<td>3784</td>
<td>7653</td>
<td>2856</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Different Types of Violence Experienced by Boys and Girls

The types of violence experienced by Finnish boys and girls differ. Boys are more likely to be exposed to violence outside the home with a significant proportion of the violence experienced by boys perpetrated by another boy. This is peer violence, which mostly takes place outside of the home, on the street or at places of leisure. Girls were found to report more violent incidents in the home than boys. The discrepancy is significant and applies to both the experiencing and witnessing of violence.

The gender-based discrepancy in how violence is experienced makes for an interesting finding, warranting further study. To some extent, the finding could be explained by girls being more observant of aggressive and violent parental behaviour, which in turn may be down to the increased number of campaigns against domestic violence and violence against women. However, the discrepancy is so marked that it should at least in part be attributed to genuine differences in experience.

Multiple Victimisation – the Risk Factors

Violence against children takes multiple forms and it appears that victimisation experiences tend to accumulate. The term poly-victim has been coined to describe the phenomenon of multiply victimised children.
Our findings suggest that approximately two thirds of Finnish children have experience at least one type of violence with just under 5 per cent experiencing at least five types of victimisation. Poly-victimisation appears to be associated with a number of factors including substance abuse by the child and parents, parental discord, lack of parental social control and the type of leisure activities pursued by the child, with criminal behaviour on part of the child a strong correlate to victimisation.

Of the traditional socio-economic background variables, the family form, the family’s financial situation and parental unemployment correlate with multiple victimisation, however, the aforementioned family behavioural patterns and habits remain a better predictive factor.

**Clear Reduction in Corporal Punishment and Other Forms of Parental Violence**

The past twenty years have seen a clear reduction in the incidence of corporal punishment and other forms of parental violence perpetrated against children in Finnish families. The reduction is reflected in the violence perpetrated by both mothers and fathers. The most significant reduction can be seen in the relatively mild forms of violence previously considered socially acceptable types of corporal punishment. To an extent this finding is not entirely unexpected as at the time of the 1988 survey the effects of new anti-corporal punishment legislation enacted some years prior had not yet filtered into the results. Over the past twenty years attitudes towards corporal punishment have become more negative, a development also identified in Finnish attitude surveys (Sariola 2006, 2007).

**Violence Occurs at Family Level**

Our findings indicate that a significant number of children witness domestic violence. A good deal of this takes the form of intimate partner violence between the parents although violence against the other children is also common. Children most likely to witness violence are those who themselves are subjected to domestic violence. Violence can thus be seen as a family-level phenomenon: where there is violence in the family, each member will be subjected to their share. Intimate partner violence can therefore be considered a clear risk factor for violence against children.
Children witness violence inflicted by the mother on the father and by the father on the mother in equal measure. The findings are at odds with the intimate partner violence paradigm that currently prevails in Finland. Preventative measures have largely been based on the assumption that the perpetrator of violence is the man, with the women and children seen as the victims. Indeed, it has become commonplace to refer to the prevention of violence against women and children. The current findings show the situation to be less black and white. Not only is there no significant difference in the violence inflicted on children by mothers and fathers, the intimate partner violence witnessed by children is evenly distributed between the genders. The findings demonstrate that the accumulation of familial violence clearly occurs by household, not by gender.

**Reduction in Cases of Severe Sexual Abuse**

There has been a clear reduction in young people’s sexual relations with adults over the past twenty years. At the same time there has been a relative increase in the number of negative sexual experiences reported by young people as well as an increase in the proportion of unknown adult sexual partners. This development may be indicative of increasingly relaxed sexual behaviour norms. Although fewer young people are sexually
active by year 9, those who are, are exhibiting increasingly risky behaviour.

There is a reduced incidence of familial sexual abuse, incest and other forms of severe abuse over the last twenty years.

**Internet-based Harassment and Threats**

As technology continues to advance, much discussion has centred around the new channels for violence, one of these being the internet. This survey shows children and young people experience bullying, harassment and threatening behaviour online and by mobiles. Especially girls experience also sexual harassment and solicitation on the internet. However, internet-based acquaintances rarely lead to sexual relationships. A total of 40 young people, or 0.3 per cent of the respondents, had experienced sexual Abuse or assault as a result of contacts made over the internet.

**Better recognition of peer-to-peer violence required**

Peer-to-peer violence is known to be a common form of violence experienced by children, especially boys. A large proportion of the violence tends to take the form of “score settling”, which is not always perceived as violence. This was confirmed by the findings of our survey. The questionnaire included questions on being attacked or hit generally, followed by questions on being attacked or hit by peers. A notable segment of those who had experienced violence perpetrated by peers did not report such incidents when asked the first time, which suggests that these experiences were not generally perceived as violence. That, however, does not detract from the fact that peer-to-peer violence constitutes a breach of each child’s right to physical inviolability.

Another form of violence, which needs to be better recognised, is dating violence among peers. According to the survey, 3 per cent of all year 9 girls and 1 per cent of all boys reported non-consensual sexual experiences with peers. Typically, the coercion took the form of cheating, deception or abuse of one’s position. Instances of physical violence and supply of alcohol or drugs were also reported. Apart from non-consensual sexual relations, dating violence comprises many forms of physical and emotional abuse, which warrant further study also in Finland.
Physical Violence Perpetrated by Adults Rare

In addition to their parents, other adults such as teachers and recreational instructors feature in the lives of children and young people. The findings of this study indicate that instances of physical violence perpetrated against children and young people by their teachers and recreational instructors are extremely rare. Some isolated incidents of violence and sexual abuse by recreational instructors were reported. Less than 5 per cent report physical violence by a teacher. In these instances boys were likely to have been grabbed or hit with girls reporting sexually abusive physical contact.

Reports of psychological violence perpetrated by teachers against pupils were more common. Approximately 15 per cent of all year 9 pupils report psychological violence on part of a teacher. This comprised disparaging and belittling behaviour, threats of violence and criticism of the pupil’s physical appearance. Under 10 per cent of year six pupils reported such experiences. The majority reported disparaging and belittling remarks. Criticism of the pupil’s physical appearance was also relatively common. This is an interesting finding and requires further clarification. The relatively high prevalence is suggestive of communication problems rather than intentional violence.

Bibliography


