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Child Abuse: A Summary

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Key Words
Child abuse · Research overview · Risk factors · Cycle of violence

Summary
This article presents an overview of trends in the frequency of child abuse and its correlates from a criminological perspective. Results confirm a decline in violent child-rearing styles over the past few years. In part, this is due to a continuing increase in the sensitivity toward this topic among the general public. Both legal reforms and the accompanying public discourse on the condemnation of violence in general and toward children in particular have made a major contribution to changing not only opinions but also actual behavior. Research confirms that this is also an exceptionally significant development in terms of breaking the recurring cycle of violence from generation to generation.

Schlüsselwörter
Kindesmisshandlung · Forschungsüberblick · Risikofaktoren · Gewaltkreislauf

Zusammenfassung
Der Artikel gibt einen Überblick zur Entwicklung der Häufigkeitszahlen und zu den Korrelaten von Kindesmisshandlung aus der Perspektive der Kriminologie. Bedingt durch eine fortschreitende Sensibilisierung in der Bevölkerung ist unter anderem ein Rückgang gewalttätiger Erziehungsstile in den vergangenen Jahren zu konstatieren. Einen bedeutsamen Beitrag zum Umdenken und zu Verhaltensänderungen tragen hierbei legislative Änderungen und damit einhergehende öffentliche Diskurse zur Ächtung von Gewalt, insbesondere zur Ächtung von Gewalt gegen Kinder. Forschungen bestätigen, dass dies auch im Hinblick auf die Durchbrechung des Gewaltkreislaufes eine außerordentlich bedeutungsvolle Entwicklung ist.

'Children have a right to non-violent upbringing. Corporal punishments, psychological injuries and other degrading measures are inadmissible.'
§ 1631 II German Civil Code (BGB) (effective date, 11/8/2000)

For well over 9 years, the law has condemned the use of violence in raising children. This was the result of a year-long discussion of the child's position in the family and society. The prohibition is both a result of and a milestone in a prolonged debate over how to secure the best interests of the child, in which violence as a mode of upbringing, allegedly for the child's own good, has now itself been proscribed. This discourse is not only academic; it is taking place not only in the media and the political arena: Violence today is being publicly addressed in all its facets, at all levels of society.

Legislative changes have occurred in civil law – such as that already mentioned, and the Protection from Violence Act of 2001–as well as in criminal law – such as the criminalization of marital rape (effective date 4/1/2008), and the extension of protection of minors to sexual exploitation (effective date 11/5/2008); these are clear indications that a certain degree of social awareness of these issues has taken hold.

However, there remain many unanswered questions about the frequency, risk factors, and consequences of child abuse. Abuse of children and adolescents often occurs in the victim's own social environment, behind closed doors. Access is difficult both for providing government assistance and for scientific investigation. What follows is adapted primarily from current criminological findings about physical abuse.

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Statistics on Reported Acts

Official statistics that present a picture of criminality in Germany are based on information provided by police, law enforcement authorities, and the prison system. But the most comprehensive information on the crimes is to be found in police investigations. The Police Crime Statistics (PKS) covers all acts that are registered in Germany. Among other things, it provides information on all violent crimes reported within one year. This already suggests a limitation: The PKS compiles statistics only on reported acts, which inadequately reflect reality. The statistics are especially dependent on what is reported, the intensity of police monitoring, and how the statistics are compiled. The assembly of statistics, in turn, varies from one crime to another; for example, sexual abuse of children, unlike sexual assault, is not classified as a violent crime. Under the heading of violent crimes, we find killing, assault, and rape.

The PKS also includes disproportionately frequent acts of violence in which offenders and victims do not know one another. The willingness to report a crime – as proven by many studies of the offenders and victims in unreported crimes – depends on their relationship: The closer the offenders and victims are, the less likely it is that a crime will be reported. For particularly severe assaults, there is more likely to be a record in the PKS [Baurmann, 1996], although still not as much so as if the offender is a stranger. Violence among those in social proximity is therefore significantly underestimated in official statistics.

If children are victims, the problem is worse, since they have the weakest position in the family and thus also with respect to their – mostly adult – tormentors. It is quite difficult for children to gain access to institutions of justice and social assistance. Thus it is not surprising that the PKS for children (0 to <14 years old) gives a rate of 430 victims per 100,000 residents (R) (frequency is measured with respect to their share of the resident population) for assault in 2008, whereas adolescents (14 to <18 years old) and young adults (18–21 years old) seem to be most at risk, with 2,265 per 100,000 R and 2,887 per 100,000 R, respectively [Bundeskriminalamt (Federal Criminal Police Office) (BKA), 2008]. The rate for crimes against sexual self-determination is also underestimated for the youngest children. In 2008, 16 children were counted as victims of a sex crime, per 100,000 residents. There were 120 adolescents, 77 young adults, and 16 adults (<60 years old) per 100,000 R. Abuse of wards constituted a majority of the crimes against children, at 57%. Young people therefore have the highest risk of becoming victims of violence. The official police statistics, however, give only an imperfect view of this.

Offenses against boys, excluding sex crimes, are much more frequently to be found in the PKS than offenses against girls (93–97% of females were victims of sex crimes [BKA, 2008]). Whether this is because of crime-specific or gender-specific ways that the data are recorded, or whether girls are really less likely to be victims, cannot be answered using the official surveys.

Furthermore, hardly any data have been compiled that could more precisely identify the relationship between offender and victim. A special analysis of police data in Baden-Wuerttemberg, however, shows that children and adolescents are predominantly the victims of adults, not of their peers, contrary to the impression sometimes conveyed by media coverage of youth criminality [cf. Spiess, 2008]. Adults, by comparison, are usually victimized by other adults (>80%).

Looking at the trend of the numbers of victims across several age groups at first presents a contradictory picture, given the increased public awareness of the problems of violence. The number of registered violent crimes has risen steadily in recent years, through 2007 [BKA, 2008]. In particular, there has been an increase in crimes against adolescents and young adults [Bundesministerium des Inneren (Federal Interior Ministry) (BMI), 2007]. This increase, however, is based on precisely this growing awareness [cf. Bair and Windzio, 2008] about what is considered violent, as well as the negative consequences of violence and the resulting social ostracism. This leads to an increased willingness on the part of the population to report crimes, and also to intensified police monitoring [cf. BKA, 2008; Spiess, 2008]. In accord with various studies of unreported crimes [Windzio and Bair, 2008; Oberwittler and Köllisch, 2004; Fuchs et al., 2005; Dünkel and Geng, 2002; see also BMI, 2007], we will henceforth assume that there has been a drop in violent crime. This is first visible in the 2008 PKS: No further increase in violent crime is reported.

For individual crimes, the following developments can be observed:

The PKS shows a decrease in homicides of children age 0–14: In 1998, 221 children were killed (§ § 211, 212, 216 of the Penal Code, StGB); by 2008, this number had dropped to 179, although not at a steady rate. Homicides are less dependent than other crimes on whether they are officially reported, from the standpoint of inclusion in the statistics. The evidence thus suggests that there has been a real decline, not just fewer registered cases.

Physical abuse is a different matter: Changing attitudes towards violence would lead one to expect an increase in the reported cases of abuse. Here, the dry numbers mask the underlying tragedy: In 1998, there were 36,559 registered assaults against children <14 years old; in 2008, the figure was 44,984. The differences are even more apparent if we consider only the abuse of wards: 1998: 2,421; 2008: 4,102.

The decline of sexual abuse cases in absolute numbers is surprising, however: in 1998: 21,884 children; in 2008: 15,195 children (§§ 176, 179, 182, 183, 183a StGB); and for sexual abuse of wards: in 1998: 1,358; in 2008: 1,019. We can only speculate about the reasons for this decline. Existing findings from the questioning of victims are of limited validity, because field access is extremely difficult: Questioning of the

younger victims is limited for ethical and methodological reasons; victims have limited recall of victimization from early childhood. Questioning of offenders also provides only limited information.

Taking into account the findings of criminological research, however, provides a more reliable picture: Violence against children and adolescents is declining. The official statistics for some crimes also show this. Since 2008, there has at least been a stagnation in violent crimes.

Research on Unreported Crimes

A differentiated picture of violence in Germany can only be attained by looking at research on unreported crimes. There exists no ongoing survey of German victims and/or offenders; thus the existing studies present different findings, depending on the methodology used. Contradictory findings are rare, however, so it is possible to draw conclusions about the frequency of such crimes and the conditions under which they occur.

Social science research focuses on the causes and the explanation of acts of violence [cf. Heitmeyer et al., 1998; Kühnel, 1995]. The consequences of violent actions for the victims has been a subject of criminological research [Pfeiffer et al., 1999; Wetzel, 1997]. In 2003–2006, the Robert Koch Institute carried out a nationwide Health Survey of Children and Adolescents, which recorded, among other things, the 12-month prevalence of experiences of violence [Schlack and Hölling, 2007]. Here, for the first time, nationally representative data were compiled on experiences of violence and attitudes toward violence on the part of children and adolescents, data that can be correlated with a large number of health parameters. In about one-quarter of the children and adolescents questioned, violence is part of everyday life. It can be either instrumental (targeted) or expressive violence; expressive or situational violence is much more strongly accepted by children and adolescents.

There is, however, a scarcity of current studies on sexual abuse of children [cf. Kendell-Tacket et al., 1997; Bange and Deegener, 1996]. The following comments therefore pertain solely to corporal punishment.

Prevalence

The investigative findings of recent years show that about one-half to two-thirds of German parents punish their children physically [cf. Engfer, 2000; Hahlweg et al. 2008]. International research produces similar findings [Kuntsche and Wicki, 2004; Straus and Stewart, 1999]. Representative surveys in the USA confirm prevalence rates as high as 94% for the 2- to 5-year-old group [Straus and Stewart, 1999]. About 70–80% of German children experience less frequent and milder physical violence from their parents [Pfeiffer and Wetzels, 1997]. A long-term study of various age cohorts suggests, however, that parental physical violence has decreased in recent years [cf. Pfeiffer and Wetzels, 1997].

Analysis of data compiled as part of a project to investigate the impact of a statutory prohibition of violence in child-rearing, with international comparisons, referred to here as the Halle Study of Family Violence, supports this assumption. This project was initiated back in the 1990s by Frehsee [1992, 1993]. The surveys relevant here were carried out at different times in five European countries: Germany, Austria, Sweden, France, and Spain [Bussmann et al., 2009, 2010]. The study surveyed 1,000 parents who had at least one child <18 years old. Interviews were also conducted with the adolescents (12–18 years old; n > 1,000), some at a different time than the adults (for details, see *http://bussmann.jura.uni-halle.de/familiengewalt/*). In the generation born before 1962, only 9.2% reported being raised without physical punishment, whereas 55.5% experienced a quite violent upbringing [Bussmann et al., 2010]. At the current maximum of 29-year-olds, 14.1% were raised without violence, and 38.1% still suffered corporal punishment. Significant decreases were also seen in the neighboring country of Sweden. However in countries such as France and Spain, where violence is not similarly proscribed either by public debate or judicially, a decrease can hardly be detected. This points to the importance of communicating a change in values, in order for a change in attitude to occur – even though the change in attitude (in Germany) has been proceeding slowly.

The evaluation by the Halle Family Violence Study also makes clear that the reduction of violence in child-rearing is associated with a change in parental attitudes to corporal punishment. When asked whether they considered mild physical punishment to be legally permissible, 83% of parents surveyed in 1996 answered in the affirmative; in 2001, the figure was 61%; in 2005, 48%; and in 2007, only 25% [Bussmann et al., 2008]. An even sharper decline is observed for more severe forms of corporal punishment. Asked whether they see it as acceptable to spank a child hard, 35% of the parents said 'yes' in 1996; in 2001 it was still 19%; in 2005, 9%; and in 2007, 8.5%.

For more in-depth analysis, the Halle study divided the subjects into groups according to the types of sanctions used. These included all the types of sanctions surveyed. In addition to corporal punishment, children were, for example, banned from watching television or from talking, or were simply shouted down. The German survey in 2007 yielded the following distributions of responses:

Parenting without sanctions or corporal punishment: This group in 2007 consisted of about 28.5% of all participating parents with children <18 years old. Families in which parenting rarely occurs by force and there is no corporal punishment belong to this group. These parents discipline their children verbally or use psychological sanctions. (Before 2007, this cat-

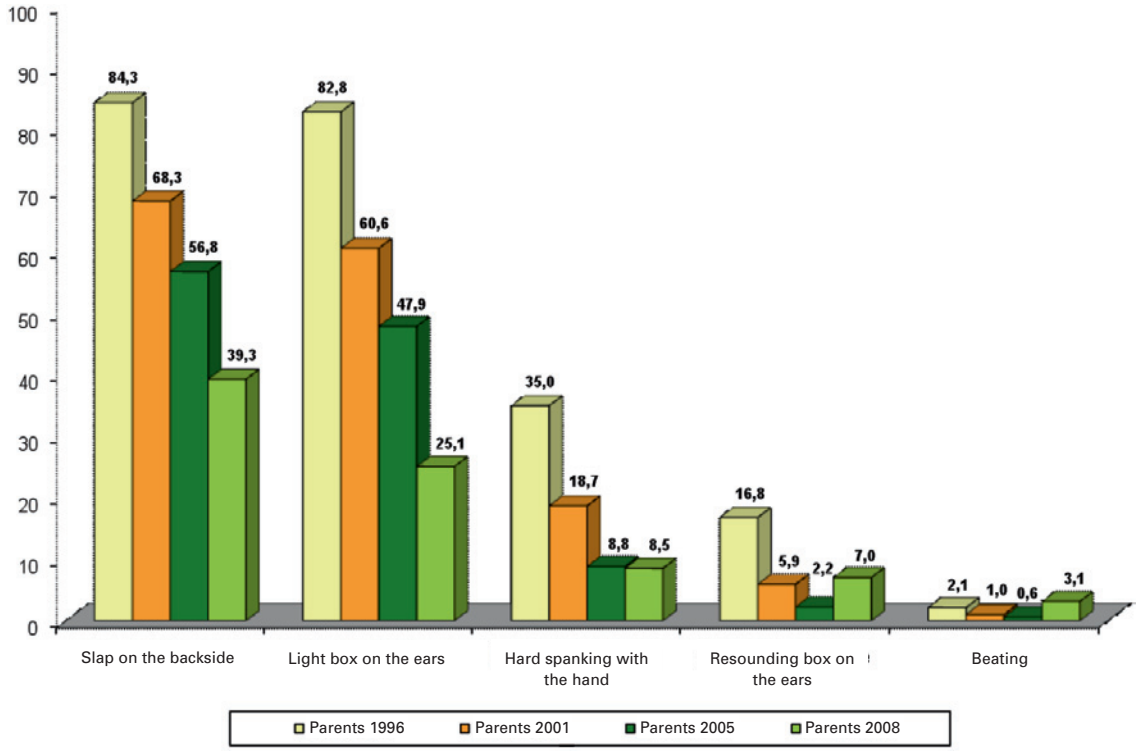

Fig. 1. Statements by parents (in %) about what German law permits.

egory also included parents who rejected corporal punishment at least most of the time.)

Conventional parenting: Besides non-physical sanctions, 57.5% of parents commonly use physical sanctions. But they largely avoid punishments as severe as beating. Parents who had used severe physical punishment just once were assigned to this group.

Quite violent upbringing: Approximately 14% of the parents belong to this group. These parents punish more frequently and choose both psychological and severe physical sanctions.

Looking at the results of previous years, there has been a steady decline in the proportion of parents who also rely on severe corporal punishment (1996: 23.3%), whereas the group of parents who get along without physical sanctions (1996: 13.1%) is growing steadily. The proportion of those using conventional parenting methods is also steadily falling. This is caused by a change in attitudes towards violence. The data of the Halle Family Violence Study bear this out (fig. 1; for details, see Bussmann et al. [2010]).

Schöbi and Perrez [2004] also make this connection in representative studies in Switzerland. The frequency of corporal punishment decreases in comparison with the surveys from 1990 to 2004; in particular, there is assumed to be an increased awareness that corporal punishment of young children is an undesirable means of child-rearing. Similarly, Kuntsche and Wicki [2004] establish that there was a decline in Switzerland in 1998 and 2002, and they too refer to the prevailing ideal of nonviolent child-rearing.

Risk Factors for Child Abuse

The image of 'beating by lower-class parents' often predominates in the public perception. Certainly socio-economic problems, as well as lower intellectual abilities, pose additional burdens. However, research into unreported crimes shows that the differences, while somewhat significant, are not so great that the problem of violence can be assigned primarily to a specific social layer.

Straus and Stewart [1999] detect marginally significant differences in their representative survey done in the USA, to the extent that more lower-class parents said that they beat their children; but this applied only to the group of parents >29 years old. When parents beat their children, there is no demonstrated effect of socioeconomic status on the frequency of the violence.

The 2007 questioning of parents in the Halle Family Violence Surveys shows a similar picture, wherein social class-dependent assignment to the three sanction groups occurred on the basis of information about educational level and income. In the lower class, 26.5% of parents raise their children without corporal punishment; in the middle class, 29.5%; and in the upper class, 28.9%. From the lower class, 61% are assigned to the conventional parenting group, 55.5% of the middle class, and 57% of the upper class. Severe corporal punishment is found to be even more common, in 2007, among the middle and upper classes (15% and 14%, respectively) than in the lower class (12%).

It is also assumed that single parents use violence more frequently and intensely. Again, this cannot be demonstrated

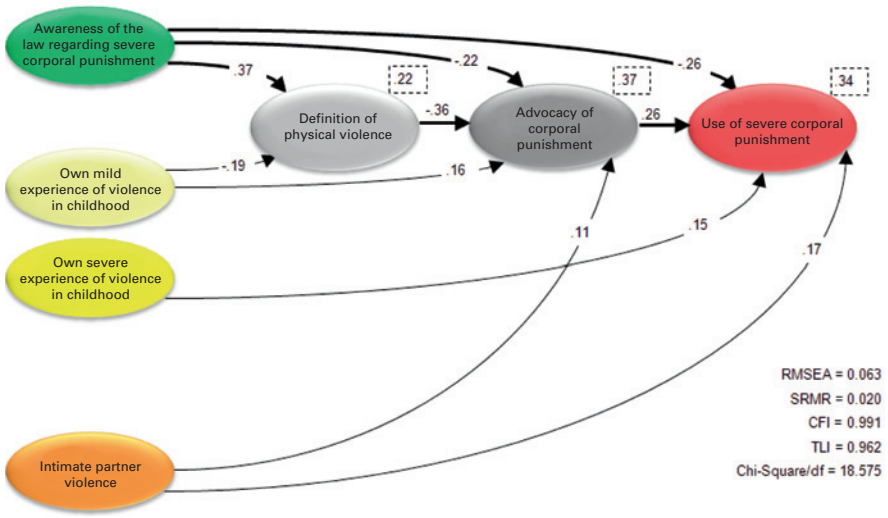

Fig. 2. Path models for severe corporal punishment (parents from Germany, Sweden, Austria, Spain, France, N = 4,474; 2007–2009).

with the data from the Halle Family Violence Study. A comparison was made between parents who had primary or exclusive responsibility for raising their children, and those whose child-rearing was shared equally with a partner. Among the single parents, 25% did not use corporal punishment; for the reference group, it was 29%. Conventional parenting was used by 60% of single parents and 57% of the comparison group. But only 1 percentage point separates those in the third category: Frequent and severe use of violence is found in 14.6% of single parents and 13.6% of those with a partner. This finding is matched by other studies [Straus and Stewart, 1999], although the findings are not homogeneous in this respect or with regard to socio-economic status.

The data of the Halle Family Violence Study suggest that what is paramount are the parents' own experiences of violence, intimate partner violence, and awareness of the social norm respecting corporal punishment as a means of child rearing [Bussmann et al., 2008]. These factors could even mask the much-observed socio-demographic factors found in other studies.

Knowledge of right from wrong respecting the ban on corporal punishment has a strong direct and indirect influence on whether one resorts to severe physical sanctions (see fig. 2). Intimate partner violence also has both direct and indirect effects on the use of physical violence, albeit to a lesser extent. If the parents report that they themselves suffered severe corporal punishment, severe corporal punishment against their own children is more likely. With the small number of model variables, it was possible to clarify at least 34% of the variance in the dependent variable [cf. Bussmann et al., 2008, 2010]. Other studies confirm these findings [Durrant, 1999; Frehsee et al., 1996].

By communicating societal values and norms, changes can be brought about in attitude and even behavior. This finding instills confidence in regard to the oft-mentioned 'cycle of violence' [Spatz Widom, 1989], as confirmed in a number of empirical reviews [cf. Albrecht, 2008]. To this extent, the possibility of breaking this cycle exists at all levels of society.

Effects of Violent Experiences in Childhood and Adolescence

International research on family violence perceives the danger of a spiral of violence within the family and has long documented that not only severe punishments, but also the frequent use of mild corporal punishment involves (substantial) developmental risks for children and adolescents. These range from severe psychosocial disorders (anxiety, lack of social contact, drug abuse) to antisocial behavior such as aggressiveness and lack of empathy.

In addition, adolescents who have had a quite violent upbringing are themselves more likely to commit criminal offenses, especially acts of violence. This view is supported by German and international investigations [Albrecht, 2008; see also Pfeiffer et al., 1998; Kuntsche and Wicki, 2004]. Thus there is a cycle of violence: Parents beat their children because they learned the model by being beaten themselves [cf. Spatz Widom, 1989; Smith and Thornberry, 1995; Straus et al., 1997; Wetzels, 1997; Bussmann, 2004, 2005; Schöbi and Perrez, 2004; Deater-Deckard et al., 2003]. The 2005 Halle Family Violence Surveys, differentiating the types of sanctions used by parents, also show an increased burden of violence in adolescents who have suffered both frequent and severe physical punishments. There were also significant differences between the group that was raised conventionally and that which experienced no physical sanctions at all. The adolescents were asked, among other things, how often they themselves have beaten others. In the group of 12- to 14-year-olds, in 2005, 14.1% of respondents who were raised without corporal punishment stated that they had done so at least once. In the conventionally raised group, 27% admitted having done

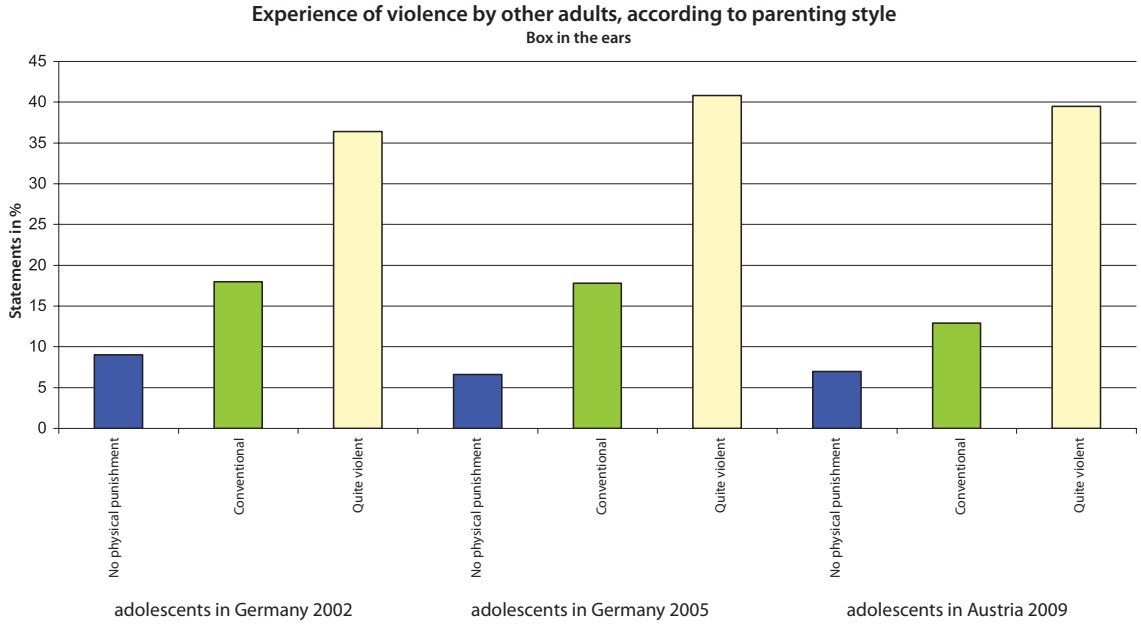

Fig. 3. Experience of violence by other (non-parent) adults, according to parenting style (adolescents, 12-18 years old, 2002: N = 407; 2005: N = 216; 2009: N = 186).

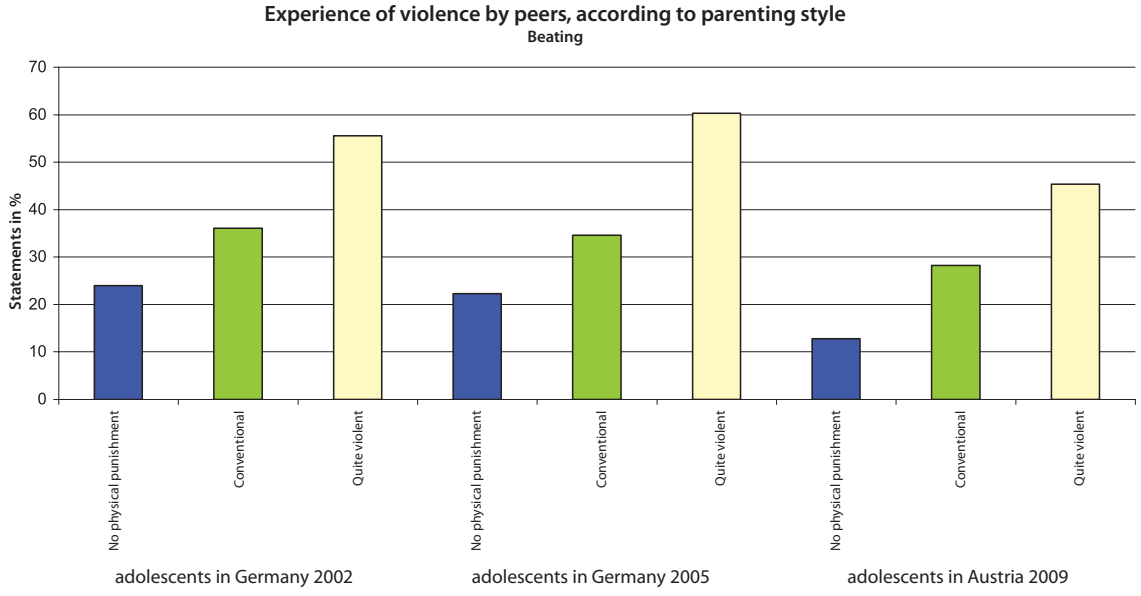

Fig. 4. Experience of violence by peers, according to parenting style (adolescents, 12–18 years old), 2002: N = 769; 2005: N = 396; 2009: N = 292).

so, and among those raised with considerable violence, the figure was as high as 58%. Thus it is clear that even low-threshold physical sanctions considerably raise the risk of delinquency.

Prospective longitudinal studies provide further clear evidence that not only violence to oneself, but also witnessing violence in one's social environment increases the likelihood of later violent behavior [Zingraff et al., 1993; Smith and Thornberry, 1995]. Witnessing violence between one's parents poses a particularly serious risk. Such effects can even have a (continuing) impact on the grandchildren's generation [Noll, 2005].

Children who experience domestic violence also have an increased risk of later victimization [Noll, 2005, Pfeiffer et al., 1999]. In our own studies, the adolescents were asked how often they were beaten by adults other than their parents or by peers. The results are remarkably stable from one survey year to another, and are also independent of country. Figures 3 and 4 show all the responses from those who had been beaten at least once. The likelihood of also being beaten by other adults rises several-fold for adolescents who experience frequent and severe corporal punishment (fig. 3). Similar distributions are shown for violence perpetrated by other adolescents (fig. 4). The differences in frequency, with respect to the

individual parenting styles, are more apparent, the more serious the assault.

Victimization by third parties is only one aspect of the complex set of conditions underlying antisocial behavior, negative labeling, and hardening of deviant behavior. Criminological research shows that children from families blighted by violence display a greater tendency toward aggressive behavior. They also have much less ability to control their own emotions and to deal appropriately with conflicts, in order to de-escalate them [Farrington, 1992a, b; Lösel et al., 1997]. This in turn leads to their peers or teachers perceiving them negatively, rejecting them, and labeling them as disruptive [cf. Liska and Reed, 1985; Olweus, 1983; Cairns and Cairns, 1992]. Deviant behavior is hardened through a process of reciprocal interaction of causal factors [cf. Lösel and Bender, 1997]. Alongside family socialization at a young age, social isolation and labeling at school and in the peer group are quite significant.

Against this background, reducing the level of violence in the family is an important element in breaking the cycle, both inside and outside the family.

Conclusion

Both the available figures on the distribution of intra-familial violence and the findings on its effects, especially violence experienced personally by children and adolescents, are a reminder of the great need for intervention and prevention. It is here that prevention of violence in the family begins. Although not all research questions have yet been answered satisfactorily, clear connections are nevertheless coming into focus. Children and adolescents who are beaten by their parents grow up in a world of violence. From their perspective, those who use violence are the ones who 'make it' in our world. In family violence research, the family is regarded as a 'battlefield' [Straus et al., 2006]; nowhere else in society is the risk so great of becoming a victim of violence.

Findings from research on unreported crimes provide a sound basis for stating that there has been a steady decline in child abuse in recent years. All the more so, since it can now also be identified using PKS data. In 2008, for the first time, there was no increase in the rate of violent crime. It is to be hoped that the worst is past.

Also, the Halle Family Violence Study was able to demonstrate that broad-ranging anti-violence social discourse – combined with consistent statutory proscription – can support a shift toward a violence-free society. Today we are discussing more and more intensively the less visible forms of violence in child-rearing: psychological violence and neglect. This problem is also gradually being recognized by the general public. The very development of such a discourse reveals a change in social values. At least we in Europe are on a good path.

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