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The Problem of Child Abuse and Neglect and the Selected Aspects of Social Capital

Problem krzywdzenia dzieci a wybrane aspekty kapitału społecznego

Abstract: This review article, which analyzes empirical articles from the last 30 years, aims to point out the potential role of social capital in preventing child maltreatment at the micro and mesolevels: families and local communities. The analysis is based on foreign research (from English-language journals; unfortunately, there is not any research done by Polish researchers in this field) which examined whether and how social capital (including its aspects such as social trust, networks and social support) can reduce the risk of child abuse and neglect. The first part of the work contains an overview of basic terminological findings. Then, the literature on the subject was reviewed. The results of numerous studies indicate the important role of social capital in reducing the use of violent methods by parents, and the need to reach out to parents who suffer from depression or experience social isolation. The article ends with conclusions and proposals for actions at the local level aimed at supporting families and communities in preventing violence and neglect against children.

Keywords: child abuse protection; parental violence; social capital; social support; trust

Abstrakt: Artykuł o charakterze przeglądowym, w którym analizom poddano artykuły empiryczne z ostatnich 30 lat, ma na celu wskazanie na potencjalną rolę kapitału społecznego w zapobieganiu maltretowaniu dzieci na poziomie mikro i mezo: rodzin i społeczności lokalnych. Analiza opiera się na badaniach zagranicznych (z czasopism anglojęzycznych; krajowych badań brakuje), w których analizowano, czy i jak kapitał społeczny (w tym takie jego aspekty, takie jak zaufanie, sieci i wsparcie społeczne) może zmniejszać ryzyko maltretowania dzieci i zaniedbywania ich. W pierwszej części pracy został zamieszczony przegląd podstawowych ustaleń terminologicznych. Następnie dokonano przeglądu literatury przedmiotu. Zgromadzone wyniki licznych badań wskazują na istotną rolę kapitału społecznego w redukcji stosowania przemocowych metod wychowawczych przez rodziców, konieczność docierania do rodziców, którzy cierpią na takie zaburzenia jak depresja czy doświadczają izolacji społecznej. Artykuł jest zakończony wnioskami i propozycjami działań na poziomie lokalnym mających na celu wsparcie rodzin i społeczności w profilaktyce stosowania wobec dzieci przemocy i zaniedbania.

Słowa kluczowe: ochrona dziecka przed krzywdzeniem; przemoc rodzicielska; kapitał społeczny; wsparcie społeczne; zaufanie

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INTRODUCTION

The rate of child physical abuse or neglect worldwide is estimated at between 15 and 25% (Goodman et al., 2023, p. 2). However, this is an average value based on geographical differences, where the scale of harm depends on the processes taking place in the local community (Mayer, 2023, p. 1962). Polish studies indicate that 32% of children and adolescents aged 11–17 have experienced violence from a close adult at least once in their lives (Makaruk et al., 2023, p. 30).

The topic of interconnections between such a serious and relatively frequent problem as child abuse and neglect and the concept of social capital in social sciences appeared *ad litteram* at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. It became the subject of several scientific works around the world (Croninger & Lee, 1996; Saluja et al., 2003; Zolotor & Runyan, 2006). Research reports in recent years can be categorized according to the levels of impact of social capital on the situation of abused and/or neglected children: (a) family (particularly parental social capital and the problem of parents using violence and harsh parenting methods) (Molnar et al., 2016; Kim & Lee, 2018; Nawa et al., 2018; Mayer, 2023; Kim et al., 2022; Kim & Kim, 2024), (b) neighborhood and local community (Fujiwara et al., 2016; Abdullah & Emery, 2020; Gross-Manos et al., 2022), (c) child abuse prevention system (Molnar et al., 2016; Wulczyn et al., 2021; Keddell, 2023). Due to the length of the article, those focusing on the social capital of the family and the local community were selected for discussion in the following study.

In Poland, the issue of violence and social capital was first addressed by Jarosz (2009), but since then there have been no works clearly devoted to the role of social capital in preventing abuse and neglect. This topic only occasionally appeared in scientific publications when discussing related issues (see Czyżewska, 2021, p. 63). Child maltreatment is a problem that goes beyond the direct participants in the act of violence. It is commonly said about the problem of violence that when it cannot be stopped, it affects everyone involved: professionals helping the victim and witnesses and treating the perpetrator, officials and ordinary citizens for whom the issue of the quality of life of members of their neighborhood and local community is important. The appearance of information about the case of a child subjected to drastic violence may sow doubts as to the importance and quality of bonds between people, cause its erosion and thus adversely affect social capital and the social cohesion connecting social groups (Kotch et al., 2014, p. 247).

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND ITS ASPECTS IN RELATION TO THE PHENOMENON OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

The theoretical concept of social capital

The foundation of the concept of social capital, which has been developed since the 1980s by, among others, Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988), Putnam (1995, 2008), Fukuyama (1999)[1] is the assumption that bonds[2] between people are valuable and strengthening them can bring benefits. For Bourdieu, social capital has primarily an individual dimension and characterizes a given individual. He defines it as "a set of actual or potential resources that are associated with the possession of a lasting network of more or less institutionalized relationships, acquaintances and mutual recognition – in other words, with belonging to a group – which enable each of its members to be supported by the capital possessed by the entire community" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248, cited in: Działek, 2011, p. 102).

Putnam defines social capital by emphasizing its collective dimension as "features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and connections, that can increase the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated action" (Putnam, 1995, p. 258). In this approach, this type of capital does not exist in an individual, it can only belong to the sphere between people. In the Polish literature, social capital was defined by Theiss, the researcher of this concept, who in a way synthesized the two approaches described above, as "the potential for cooperation embedded in interpersonal connections and social norms that can bring benefits to individuals, groups and societies" (Theiss, 2007, p. 13). Theiss cites the dilemmas associated with the description of social capital at various levels and calls for specifying what capital is meant: **family**, **neighborhood** or **local** (2007, p. 238).

Some researchers of social capital call its presence **social support** at the individual level, and the lack of terminological agreement is, as is typical in social sciences, the cause of contradictory research results obtained by different researchers, about which I will write more in the "Research Review" section (e.g. Saluja et al., 2003, p. 686).

The concept of social capital distinguishes between the structural aspect, which includes such manifestations of capital as **connections** and **networks**, and the normative aspect, also called cultural or cognitive, which includes the category of **trust** (in the form of personal and generalized trust, called social) and other social norms (Działek, 2011, p. 103). These distinguished categories are important from the point of view of child abuse protection because they enable early detection of potential cases

[1] However, they were not the forerunners of the use of the term "social capital". The first to use it in 1916 was Hanifan writing about the benefits of neighborly cooperation in the article "The Rural School Community Center" (Hanifan, 1916).

[2] To be more precised: networks. In the concept of social capital, especially in Putnam's approach, this term is more often used than bonds (Theiss, 2007, p. 43).

of abuse in local communities, promote awareness of the problem and foster greater social responsibility for children's well-being (Kim & Kim, 2024). The most important theoretical and empirical findings related to these categories will be presented below.

Social networks, trust and social support

Social networks are a manifestation of the existence of social capital, "a system of interconnected and mutually influencing social interactions; includes not only interactions between individuals, but also between various types of social groups" (Encyklopedia PWN, n.d.).

Networks are created voluntarily, not imposed, which does not exclude the possibility that they may be created as a result of someone's initiative, in an institution, etc. They are created at the mesolevel, between the individual (micro-) and institutional (macrolevel) dimensions, and thus become a connection between them (Gamper, 2022, p. 45). In the colloquial sense, they mean the ability to rely on relatives, acquaintances (neighbors). Belonging to a network allows access to the resources of other network members, e.g. knowledge, skills, time, assets, social position, connections. Access to them is gained by gaining the trust of other people (Sztompka, 2007, p. 244).

Social capital is strengthened by **trust** and destroyed by violence in social life. Sztompka, introducing the category of "culture of trust" and its opposite, "culture of cynicism", identified the ways of creating, maintaining and losing trust. Trust is a "bridge over the abyss of uncertainty" (Sztompka, 2007, p. 18, 21), the most valuable type of social capital, the "core of social capital" (p. 244, 245). A specific feature of trust is that whoever has it, has a chance to have even more of it. The same thing refers to societies: those that are high-trust societies become even more so because people live "under pressure" to trust, but also to be credible – trust spreads ever larger, absorbing areas of distrust and cynicism (Sztompka, 2007, p. 243, 245).

The area in which trust, as one of the categories of social capital, is crucial, is the quality of the organization of the child abuse prevention system. Whether a social worker, policeman, or judge is perceived as competent and trustworthy determines whether society will believe that the protection system and people working within it protect the rights of children and their parents, and whether they have the legitimacy to take (less or more radical) interventions. This trust in the representatives of this system guarantees a sense of security and meaning when a citizen decides to report suspected child maltreatment (Skivenes & Benbenishty, 2022, p. 421; Molnar et al., 2016, p. 392), which is still perceived in Poland as a "denunciatory activity" rooted in the distant times of real socialism (Bieńko, 2018, p. 37).

The consequence of belonging to a social network and trusting one another within it is the ability to use its resources, including social support. In the social sciences we mean by this term

> all available help that can be received by a person who finds themselves in a difficult life situation (material, health, mental or social). This is a type of help that is a natural consequence of a person's way of life – social life and his or her membership in a network of social contacts and the ability to build and maintain relationships. (…) expected help, available to an individual or group in difficult, stressful, breakthrough situations that these people are unable to overcome. (Dąbrowska, 2015, p. 118)

It is therefore a special type of accompanying a person in crisis, which makes the concept of support exceptionally valuable from the point of view of preventing child abuse (Jarosz, 2008, p. 491), because

> an isolated and closed modern family can hardly seek help in its own social environment when the environment remains indifferent and inactive. (...) It is sometimes believed that one of the most important causes of family violence is the lack of social contacts and the lack of ability to establish such contact, which results in the lack of a psychological support system, i.e. factors that mobilize mental strength to cope with the problem, and the lack of sufficiently strong social control. (Frieske & Poławski, 1999, p. 169)

A distinction is made between providing immediate support (which means that one can rely on their immediate surroundings, neighbors and local acquaintances for so-called "*ad hoc* favors", such as childcare, minor financial or material assistance), and long-term support (regular support in the event of long-term health problems, including mental health problems or addiction-related problems) (Maguire-Jack & Showalter, 2016, p. 35).

Social support, considered necessary in reducing the incidence of child maltreatment and promoting the well-being of children and their families, received from friends, family or spouse reduces the so-called family stress and strengthens mechanisms for coping with problems, protects against depression and burnout (Wu & Xu, 2020, p. 185; Zhao et al., 2019, p. 2; Merritt, 2009, p. 933). At the same time, the more difficult it is to obtain the more it is needed: it is impoverished by deepening inequalities, disadvantages and the stressors associated with them (Thompson, 2015, p. 22; Lois, 2022, p. 117). Just as there is a mechanism of positive feedback loop that can lead to a gradual increase in social capital resources (Działek, 2011, p. 103), there is also a negative feedback loop: for example, poverty is a factor that increases the probability of having a low level of social capital, and in turn its low level in the local community is inversely correlated with parental physical violence, in particular against children living in poverty (Nawa et al., 2018, p. 1225).

RESEARCH REVIEW – NETWORKS, TRUST, SUPPORT AND SOCIAL CAPITAL IN STUDIES OF PARENTS OF ABUSED/NEGLECTED CHILDREN

The social resources that are available to a family through its connections and relationships with other families and the communities to which it belongs are "family social capital" (Kysar-Moon, 2021, 2023). However, it should be taken into account that the social capital surrounding a child does not come exclusively from their parents. The child's siblings, teaching staff at school and in other social, cultural and educational institutions, non-teaching staff, as well as neighbors and, to some extent, friends met via the Internet, may also be "capital-generating" and bond-forming. The social capital derived from them plays an important role as an intermediary variable between the experiences of parental violence and their negative effects on children. These other, non-parental forms of social capital flowing from the child's environment may, to some extent, compensate for the lack of support (or neglect) from parents (Kim & Lee, 2018, p. 14).

Social networks and trust

Research confirms that the social networks in which parents live and the level of social capital of the broadly understood community to which they belong (in the form of norms of reciprocity and trust between people) are important factors influencing their standard of living, which, in turn, determines the well-being of their children (Zhu & Shek, 2021, p. 2; Jack, 2004, p. 375). The social networks of parents who neglect their children have been assessed in studies as weaker and less developed than the networks of non-neglecting parents (Wu & Xu, 2020, p. 186; Merritt, 2009, p. 929). An example of how this mechanism works is depression experienced by a parent: a withdrawn, introverted adult who gives up social contacts is an increased risk of not caring for the child (Kotch et al., 2014, p. 258).

Fujiwara and his team's study focused on the relationship between neighborhood social capital in a local Japanese community and the occurrence of physical violence against four-month-old infants. Studying the mothers of these children, not only the level of trust the women had in their community was analyzed, but also the access they had to support from their personal social networks. One of the variables examined was violence against children. The results showed a significant correlation between social trust in neighborhood networks and the likelihood of physical abuse of infants. Support from personal social networks was a similarly protective factor against violence. Conclusions of the study emphasize the importance of community-level interventions aimed at strengthening the social support networks of mothers who feel lonely (Fujiwara et al., 2016, pp. 5–6).

A study conducted between 2014 and 2019 in over 220 South Korean localities confirmed that not only social networks and involvement in community affairs are related

to rates of child maltreatment, but also the category of trust in communities. This effect is greater in smaller and medium-sized towns and rural areas (Kim & Kim, 2024).

The longitudinal LONGSCAN study (conducted for 20 years on a group of mothers in the United States) showed that the trust that existed in the community to which the surveyed people with children belonged significantly reduced the impact of caregiver depression on destructive and self-destructive behaviors of those of their children who experienced childhood neglect. This effect was not observed in the group of mothers who did not neglect their children throughout the entire 20-year study period (Kotch et al., 2014, pp. 255–256).

Community support and social capital

Zolotor and Runyan were among the first to conduct extensive research in this area. They found that increasing social capital reduces the risk of child neglect, psychological abuse of children and domestic violence. Interestingly and controversially, in the same research they also found that there is no relationship between having social capital and the use of severe physical punishment. They analyzed two types of family violence: domestic violence and severe physical punishment, originally expecting that the links with social capital would be similar in both cases. However, this did not happen, perhaps for the following reason: domestic violence is prosecuted by law and almost universally unacceptable in society. Conversely, physical punishment against children – there is (and at the time when the study was conducted, there was even greater) social acceptance for it. Zolotor and Runyan therefore concluded that social capital may be a factor protecting against the occurrence of domestic violence because it is less socially accepted and illegal (Zolotor & Runyan, 2006, p. 1129).

Similar studies on the connections between social capital (or more precisely, its deficits) and the use of harsh disciplinary methods by parents were conducted several years later. Despite some discrepancies in the results[3] still being indicated, there is a correlation: the weaker the social capital, the greater the likelihood of using (too) strict methods of disciplining the child (Kim et al., 2022, p. 8).[4]

[3] These discrepancies were caused, among others, by methodological limitations, such as difficulties in reaching a larger group of respondents, demographic profile of respondents with a predominance of people with higher education and increased socio-economic status and, most importantly, based on the retrospective self-report of the respondents.

[4] For a more complete picture of the advancement of research on the relationship between abuse and social capital, studies inconsistent with the above findings should be cited. Saluja and his team (2003) analyzed whether social capital or social support weakens the relationship between child abuse and its mental and behavioral effects (such as depression, anxiety disorders and aggression) in six-year-olds. In their opinion, social capital, unlike support, does not strengthen non-harmful behavior. They defined social capital as a category referring to an individual contribution (social investment) to the community to which one belongs. In their approach, social support is related to bonds with friends or acquaintances who provide psychological and material support. Saluja et al. indicated that child

Both older and newer studies indicate that parents who abuse and/or neglect children turned out to have less extensive support networks around them, lived in greater social isolation, and lived in a given community for an average shorter period of time than the non-abusing parents who were also studied. Even if the abusive parents lived in a community characterized by strong social ties and social capital, they themselves had much less access to these networks and any other resources resulting from social capital than the other respondents (Kim et al., 2022, pp. 7–8).

CONCLUSIONS

A review of Polish- and English-language literature from 1995 to 2024, considering social capital as a key variable in preventing child abuse, shows that at the family, neighborhood and local level it plays an important role in providing support and protection against violence experienced in the family home. Parents' social networks and the level of social capital in the community they belong to have a positive impact on their quality of life and the well-being of their children. Parents with limited social networks may have difficulty providing support and care for their children. Social **trust** in neighborhood networks may be a key protective factor against domestic violence. Long-term research shows that trust in the community can reduce the impact of caregiver depression on parental neglect and the resulting destructive and self-destructive behavior in their children. **Social support** can play a vital role in improving the mental health of both caregivers and children. The conclusions of studies suggest the need to strengthen the social support network for mothers who feel lonely or isolated.

Deficiencies in social capital have consequences in contributing to the continuation or deterioration of the situation of the maltreated child: there is a correlation between the lack of social capital (or its weakness) and the use of **harsh disciplinary methods by parents**, under which term "violence against children" is concealed. Parents who abuse and/or neglect children often have less social support and live in greater social isolation. It is important to identify such families and provide them with a timely diagnosis, adequate intervention and appropriate social support.

abuse and the level of social capital are not related. Contrary to the slightly later works of Zolotor and Runyan (2006) and Merritt (2009), proving that the greater the capital, the lower the risk of child abuse in a given community, Saluja and his team were inclined to the view that social capital does not strengthens non-abusive behavior towards children in the family, because it does not affect feelings of either depression-anxiety (which may result in child neglect) or aggression (reinforcing violent behavior), but they emphasized that having and using social support has the opposite effect (Zolotor & Runyan, 2006, p. 686). The contradiction in the research results was explained by the way of defining social support and social capital. It is possible that the category of social capital was used incorrectly, and the variable was *de facto* social support (Saluja et al., 2003, p. 685).

In the local community, both professionals and individuals can contribute to the growth of social capital. This is achieved by sharing information with neighbors, friends or relatives, e.g. regarding actions promoting a healthy lifestyle, local safety, providing information about existing support groups and encouraging the organization of self-help groups, making one's workplace or place of residence a prosocial space, associated with kindness and the opportunity to meet community members, facilitating interpersonal contacts, which is especially important for people belonging to groups affected by social inequalities and disadvantaged, e.g. children with disabilities and their families.

In the Polish context, participation in interdisciplinary teams and working groups established under the Act on Counteracting Domestic Violence (2005, last amendment: 2023) may certainly contribute to the growth of social capital. There is a huge role for superiors to play here, so that members of these bodies perceive teams and working groups as real help in carrying out an effective team intervention in the case of the child and his or her family, and not only participate in them due to formal coercion.

The final conclusion from the scientific inquiry is the need for further research in order to deepen the understanding of the mechanisms underlying the processes of violence or neglect and the lack of reaction of witnesses to their manifestations (counteracting which is a condition for the development of civil society and the sense of security in local communities), improving intervention strategies and increasing the effectiveness initiatives to protect children's well-being. In the current, challenging Polish reality, this will be especially necessary.

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