

Marta Makara-Studzińska¹, Urszula Łopuszańska², Katarzyna Sidor²,
Katarzyna Świder³, Elżbieta Pac-Kożuchowska³

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Violence, suicidal attempts and relationships with parents in a group of adolescent girls. Pilot studies

Doświadczanie przemocy ze strony rówieśników, próby samobójcze i relacje z rodzicami w grupie nastoletnich dziewcząt. Badania pilotażowe

¹ Department of Health Psychology, Jagiellonian University – Medical College, Krakow, Poland

² Department of Applied Psychology, Medical University of Lublin, Lublin, Poland

³ Paediatrics Clinic, Medical University of Lublin, Lublin, Poland

Correspondence: Urszula Łopuszańska, Department of Applied Psychology, Chodźki 15, 20-093 Lublin, Poland, tel.: +48 81 448 66 00, e-mail: urszula.lopuzanska@umlub.pl

Abstract

Aim of the study: An analysis of the correlation between experiencing peer violence and suicidal behaviours with regard to relationships with parents. **Material and methods:** The study included 43 girls (aged between 12 and 16 years) admitted to the Department of Paediatrics at the Prof. Antoni Gębala Children's Hospital in Lublin due to suicidal attempts. The study group consisted of 17 girls who experienced peer violence, while the control group included 26 girls who attempted suicide for other reasons than peer violence. A sociodemographic questionnaire and a metric survey of own design, in which the girls specified the intensity of a given feature on a scale of 1–10, were used. **Results:** There were statistically significant differences between girls experiencing peer violence vs. control group in terms of the feeling of being unloved by parents ($p < 0.04$), receiving parental attention ($p < 0.002$), home safety ($p < 0.05$), the feeling of being abandoned by parents ($p < 0.0003$), the feeling of loneliness ($p < 0.004$), being disliked at school ($p < 0.003$), having friends ($p < 0.01$), the number of suicide attempts ($p < 0.03$), and having thoughts about preparing for an effective suicide attempt ($p < 0.01$). A strong conviction about having “cool” friends was correlated with a decrease in the number of suicidal thoughts ($p < 0.02$), belief that the suicide will be successful one day ($p < 0.04$), and the intensity of thinking about preparing for an effective suicide attempt ($p < 0.03$). **Conclusions:** Having friends can indirectly eliminate the consequences of parental failure to meet child's basic needs as well as reduce suicidal thoughts and attempts. The quality of family relationships may affect the relationships with peers, which is associated with becoming potential victims of violence.

Keywords: suicidal attempts, adolescence, violence, peer group

Streszczenie

Cel badań: Analiza zależności między doświadczaniem przemocy ze strony rówieśniczej a zachowaniami suicydalnymi w odniesieniu do relacji z rodzicami. **Materiał i metody:** Przebadano 43 dziewczęta (w wieku 12–16 lat), które zostały przyjęte na Oddział Ogólnodziecięcy w Klinice Pediatrii Uniwersyteckiego Szpitala Dziecięcego im. prof. Antoniego Gębali w Lublinie z powodu próby samobójczej. Grupę główną stanowiło 17 dziewcząt doświadczających przemocy ze strony rówieśników, natomiast grupę kontrolną – 26 dziewcząt, które targnęły się na swoje życie z innego powodu niż przemoc rówieśnicza. Badanie przeprowadzono przy pomocy przygotowanej ankiety socjodemograficznej oraz ankiety metryczkowej własnej konstrukcji, w której dziewczęta określały natężenie danej cechy w skali od 1 do 10. **Wyniki:** Wystąpiły istotne statystycznie różnice między dziewczętami doświadczającymi przemocy ze strony grupy rówieśniczej a grupą kontrolną w zakresie: poczucia bycia niekochanym ze strony rodziców ($p < 0,04$), otrzymywania uwagi ze strony rodziców ($p < 0,002$), poczucia bezpieczeństwa w domu ($p < 0,05$), poczucia bycia porzuconym przez rodziców ($p < 0,0003$), poczucia samotności ($p < 0,004$), bycia nielubianym w szkole ($p < 0,003$), posiadania przyjaciół ($p < 0,01$), liczby prób samobójczych ($p < 0,03$), myśli o przygotowywaniu się do popełnienia skutecznej próby samobójczej ($p < 0,01$). Wraz ze wzrostem przekonania o posiadaniu „fajnych” przyjaciół malały: liczba myśli o odebraniu sobie życia ($p < 0,02$), przekonanie, że kiedyś uda się zabić ($p < 0,04$), natężenie myśli o przygotowywaniu się do skutecznej próby samobójczej ($p < 0,03$). **Wnioski:** Posiadanie przyjaciół pośrednio niweluje skutki podstawowych potrzeb niezaspokojonych przez rodziców i może wpłynąć na zmniejszenie liczby myśli i prób samobójczych. Natomiast jakość relacji w rodzinie może mieć wpływ na związki z rówieśnikami, co łączy się z faktem bycia ofiarą przemocy.

Słowa kluczowe: próby samobójcze, adolescencja, przemoc, grupa rówieśnicza

INTRODUCTION

Suicide is a serious health and social problem in all countries and age groups worldwide. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), suicide rates are highest in the age group 15–29 years, and thus in the period of early and late adolescence (World Health Organization, 2016b). Approximately 800,000 people commit suicide worldwide annually, including 78% of deaths recorded in countries with low or medium economic status. Regardless of the country's developmental status, suicides are more common among males than females (World Health Organization, 2017a). It is estimated that suicide attempts are up to 20 times more frequent than completed suicides (Befrienders Worldwide, 2017).

Suicide rates among adolescents in the 15–19 age group are 7.4 per 100,000 inhabitants, with male rates of approximately 8.8 per 100,000 inhabitants and female rates of 3.2 per 100,000 inhabitants; the data come from 90 countries (Wasserman et al., 2005).

It should be added that although women experience suicidal thoughts more often than men, the number of committed suicides is higher in the latter group, including adolescents (Vijayakumar et al., 2015). Suicide is the second leading cause of death in the age group 15–29 years. Additionally, suicidal behaviours are more common in girls than boys (Turecki and Brent, 2016). Suicidal behaviours are divided into three categories: (1) suicide ideation, which is defined as thoughts of engaging in suicide-related behaviour, (2) suicide plan, which is defined as consideration of a particular method to commit suicide, (3) suicide attempt, defined as engagement in a self-injurious behaviour with at least some intent to die (Nock et al., 2008).

The period of adolescence is undoubtedly the time of biological, psychological and social transformations, which may be a source of mental imbalance and, in the face of difficulties beyond the means of dealing by individuals, suicide may seem the only possible solution in a given situation. Research indicates that there is no single cause leading to suicidal attempts, but usually a combination of individual traits and biological (including genetic), psychological and social agents (Gmitrowicz et al., 2015; Pandey, 2013).

We decided to investigate whether there are correlations between suicidal behaviours, relationships with parents and peers and experiencing peer violence.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Study group consisted of 43 girls aged between 12 and 16 years (mean 14.5 ± 1 year), who were admitted to Department of Paediatrics at the Prof. Antoni Gębala Children's Hospital in Lublin due to suicidal attempts. Inclusion criteria included a voluntary and conscious willingness to participate in the study and the signing a consent form approved by the Bioethical Commission, Medical University of Lublin (KE KE-0254/322/2015) by both

adolescents and their parents. Research materials were collected between 2014 and 2016. Exclusion criteria included the diagnosis of an autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, intellectual disability or psychotic disorders.

Among the adolescent responders, 33 (77%) were students of junior high school, 6 (14%) attended post junior high schools and 4 (9%) attended primary schools. They came from both full (14 – 33%) and split families (30 – 67%). Most girls described their family material situation as good (34 – 79%), 7 (16%) – as very good and the remaining 2 (5%) – as difficult.

Drug overdose was the main reason for hospital admission (29 – 67%); 5 (12%) girls did not reveal the reason for their hospital admission claiming that they did not try to commit suicide, however, according to their parents and doctors, they attempted suicide. The remaining 7 (16%) girls were admitted for other reasons, which included the use of designer drugs, cut injuries to the wrist, swallowing pins, overdose of alcohol. Additionally, 32 (74%) adolescents reported episodes of self-harm, the frequency of which varied depending on the person (from 1 to up to about 100 episodes).

A total of 17 (26%) respondents admitted that they experienced peer violence, with psychological abuse being the main problem, especially when practiced using social networking sites. These girls reported that peer violence was also the reason for their suicide attempt. Other reasons for suicidal attempts (unhappy love, death of a loved one, quarrel with the parent, a leaving boyfriend, family conflicts), or no reasons were reported by the remaining 26 (60%) girls.

The study consisted of two parts. First, the girls completed a sociodemographic questionnaire (described above). They were then asked to determine the intensity of a given feature on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 representing very low intensity and 10 representing very high intensity. The questions related to family relationships, school situation, sense of safety, loneliness, and suicidal thoughts (33 questions in total). Statistical analysis was performed using Statistica Software Version 12. Analysis of the significance of differences in the study group was performed using the Mann–Whitney *U* test, and the correlation was tested using Spearman's rank correlation coefficient. The results were considered significant at $p \leq 0.05$.

RESULTS

Relationships with parents, loneliness, peer group, suicidal thoughts, and experiencing peer violence

Figs. 1, 2, 3, 4 show the relationship of the girls in both groups with their parents. The first group included those who experienced peer violence ($n = 17$). The second group included girls who did not experience any peer violence ($n = 26$).

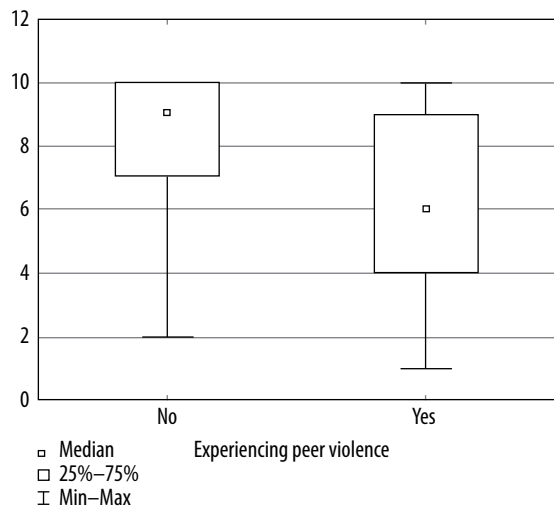


Fig. 1. The feeling of being loved by parents and experiencing peer violence ($p < 0.04$)

The girls experiencing peer violence felt unloved by their parents ($p < 0.04$); additionally, their parents showed them less attention ($p < 0.002$) compared to the other group, and the family environment did not provide them with a sense of safety ($p < 0.05$). As a result, they felt abandoned by their parents ($p < 0.0003$).

They reported the sense of loneliness ($p < 0.004$) (Fig. 5), which was undoubtedly associated with conviction about being disliked at school ($p < 0.003$) (Fig. 6) and having no “cool” friends ($p < 0.01$) (Fig. 7).

It is of concern that these girls were preparing for another effective suicide attempt ($p < 0.01$) (Fig. 8), and the total number of suicide attempts was higher compared to the group not experiencing peer violence ($p < 0.03$) (Fig. 9).

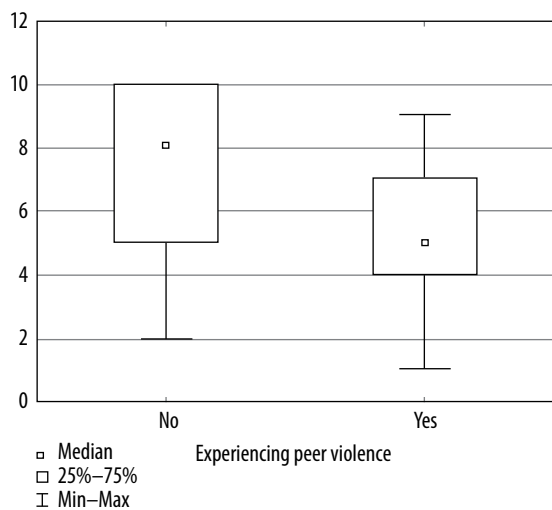


Fig. 2. Showing parental attention and experiencing peer violence ($p < 0.002$)

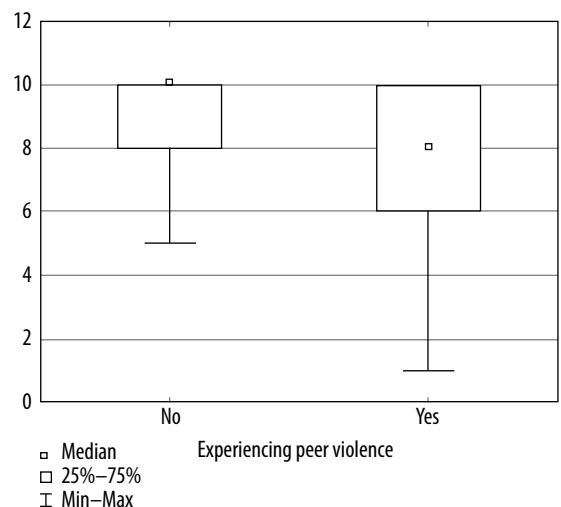


Fig. 3. Sense of safe home and experience of peer violence ($p < 0.05$)

Relations with peers and intensified suicidal thoughts in the group of girls after a suicide attempt

Among all evaluated characteristics, we decided to identify those that related to relationships with peers, such as the feeling of being liked at school and having “cool” (friendly) friends. These variables were correlated with questions relating to the intensity of suicidal thoughts. Tabs. 1 and 2 show the correlation of Spearman’s ranks in the range of the above features listed in relation to all respondents ($n = 43$). The feeling of being liked by a group of peers at school was negatively correlated with the thoughts about being noticed by others after one’s death ($r_s -0.30, p < 0.04$). No statistically significant correlations were found with regard

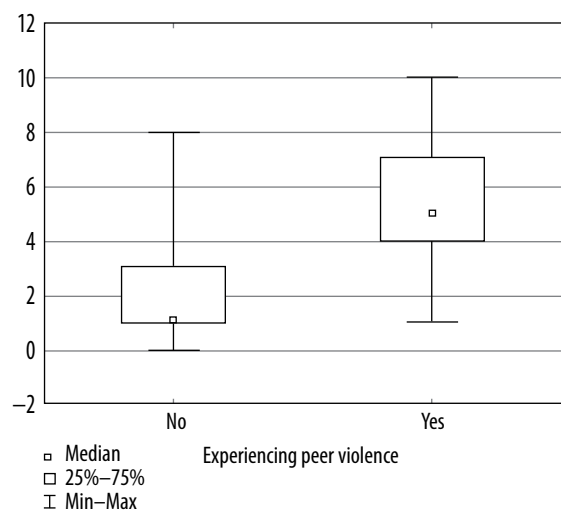


Fig. 4. The feeling of being abandoned by the family and experiencing peer violence ($p < 0.0003$)

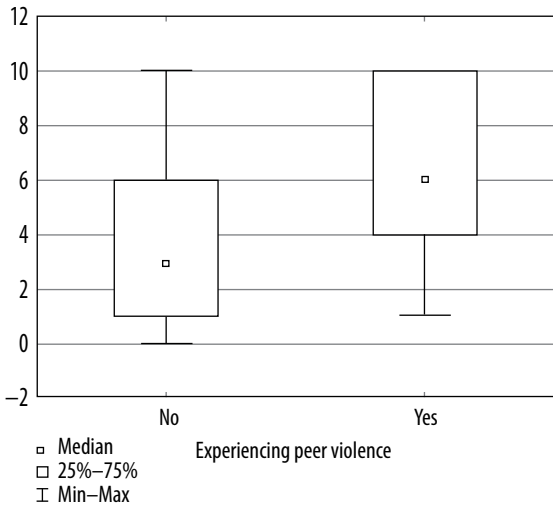


Fig. 5. The feeling of loneliness and the experience of peer violence ($p < 0.004$)

to thoughts about committing a suicide ($p < 0.14$), the feeling that the suicide will be successful one day ($p < 0.95$), frequent thinking about self-destruction ($p < 0.96$), conviction that after death, they would be finally noticed by others ($p < 0.26$), preparing for an effective suicide attempt ($p < 0.26$), or a conviction that only death can solve problems ($p < 0.56$). The feeling of being liked did not correlate with the number of suicidal attempts ($p < 0.79$) or the number of self-harm acts ($p < 0.79$).

A stronger belief in having good (“cool”) friends reduced suicidal thoughts ($r_s -0.34, p < 0.02$) and the belief that one day the suicide would be successful ($r_s -0.31, p < 0.04$); also, the intensity of thoughts about self-destruction ($r_s -0.32, p < 0.03$), and the thought that after death someone would finally take notice (“of me”) ($r_s -0.48, p < 0.001$) were

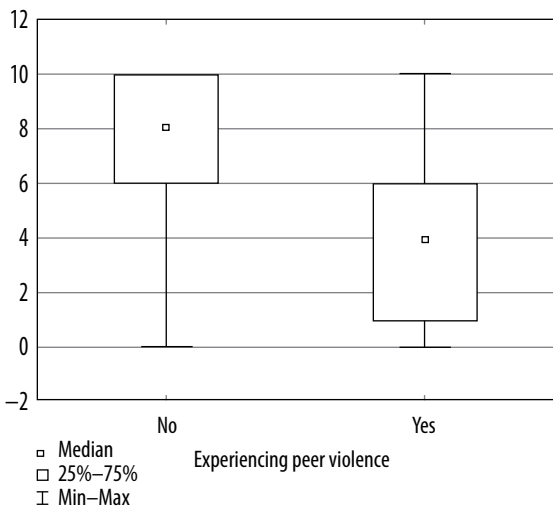


Fig. 6. The feeling of being liked at school and experiencing peer violence ($p < 0.0003$)

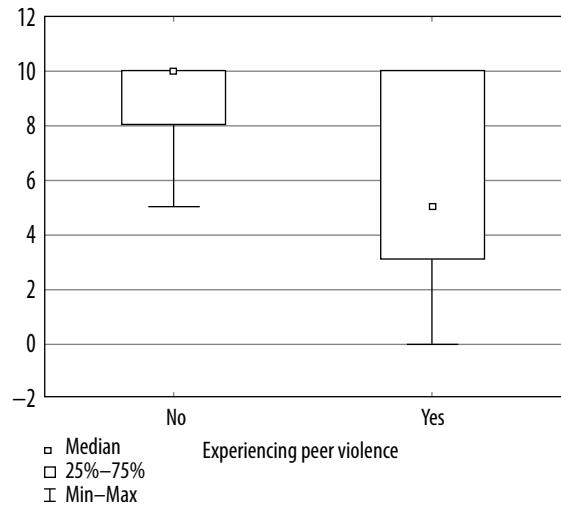


Fig. 7. The feeling of having “cool” friends and experiencing peer violence ($p < 0.01$)

reduced. Additionally, the increase in the conviction of having “cool” friends was correlated with decreased thoughts about preparation for an effective suicidal attempt ($r_s -0.32, p < 0.03$). However, there was no correlation with the belief that only death can solve problems ($p < 0.12$). There was also no correlation between having “cool” friends and the number of suicidal attempts ($p < 0.15$) or the number of self-harm acts ($p < 0.79$).

DISCUSSION

Our study shows that experiencing peer violence may lead to suicidal behaviours, the feeling of loneliness and being rejected at school. Similar findings were reported by Burk et al. (2014), who analysed the phenomenon

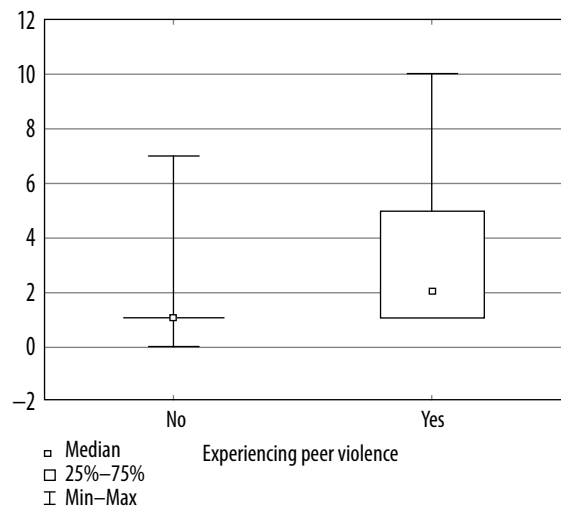


Fig. 8. Preparing for an effective suicide attempt and experiencing peer violence ($p < 0.01$)

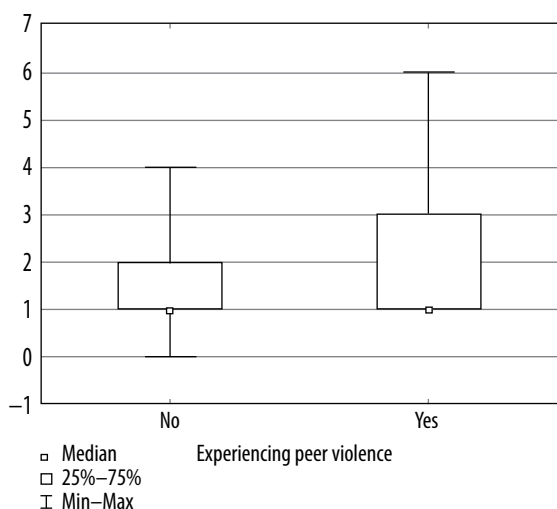


Fig. 9. The number of suicide attempts and experiencing peer violence ($p < 0.03$)

of violence in schools in Oklahoma. Adolescents experiencing violence or intimidation reported loneliness, depression, suicidal thoughts, suicidal plans, and suicidal attempts (Burk et al., 2014).

School is one of the sources of violence and, at the same time, an important environment in child's life. By its intentional influence, it stimulates not only the intellectual development, but also supports the development of personality.

It is also the place where a young person faces and experiences violence (Dojwa, 2008).

What is the scale of school violence? Based on an international research on school bullying it can be concluded that although the scale of this phenomenon is high in Poland, it is not the highest in Europe. For example, bullying affects approximately 9% of students in Sweden, 13% in Finland, and even up to 43–44% in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The percentage is 25% for boys and 12% for girls in Poland (Craig et al., 2009).

According to a study on aggression and violence at school, carried out in the Analyses and Documentation Office of the Chancellery of the Senate of the Republic of Poland (research conducted since 1970s), the level of aggression and violence among children and adolescents in Poland is still rising (Kancelaria Senatu, 2012).

A 2011 study in a group of 3,169 students from representative schools in Poland (all levels of education) which was conducted as a part of a social programme known as "School without violence," showed that verbal violence, which is experienced by up to 63% of students, is the most common form of school violence. Physical violence in the form of deliberate knocking over or beating was experienced by 33% of students, and severe physical violence (with dangerous tools causing injury) – by 7% of students. Relational violence, which a type of aggression in which harm is caused by damaging someone's relationships (by spreading negative rumours, excluding others

Pairs of variables	Spearman's <i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
I feel being liked at school & I have thoughts about not to wake up	-0.2373	0.1254
I feel being liked at school & I think about committing suicide	-0.2259	0.1451
I feel being liked at school & One day I will kill myself	0.0088	0.9551
I feel being liked at school & I often think of how I will kill myself	-0.0076	0.9609
I feel being liked at school & I believe that when I die someone will finally notice me*	-0.3094	0.0434
I feel being liked at school & I'm getting ready for an effective suicidal attempt	-0.1724	0.2687
I feel being liked at school & Only death can solve my problems	-0.0937	0.5496
I feel being liked at school & Number of suicidal attempts	-0.1772	0.2554
I feel being liked at school & Number of self-harm acts	-0.0404	0.7966

* Marked results are significant at $p < 0.05$.

Tab. 1. The feeling of being liked at school and intensification of suicidal thoughts in girls after suicidal attempts – Spearman's rank correlations ($n = 43$)

Pair of variables	Spearman's <i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
I have some cool friends & I think about committing suicide*	-0.3400	0.0256
I have cool friends & One day I will kill myself*	-0.3130	0.0409
I have some cool friends & I often think of how I will kill myself*	-0.3215	0.0355
I have some cool friends & I believe that when I die someone will finally notice me*	-0.4825	0.0010
I have cool friends & I'm getting ready for an effective suicidal attempt*	-0.3228	0.0347
I have some cool friends & Only death can solve my problems	-0.2355	0.1283
I have cool friends & Number of suicidal attempts	-0.2229	0.1506
I have some cool friends & Number of self-harming	-0.0481	0.7591

* Marked results are significant at $p < 0.05$.

Tab. 2. The sense of having "cool" friends and intensification of suicidal thoughts, in girls after suicidal attempts – Spearman's rank correlations, results were considered to be significant at $p < 0.05$ ($n = 43$)

from social activities), was experienced by 41% of students. Theft was the most common form of material violence – 13% of students were victims of theft in 2011. Material violence (damage, destruction, theft, financial bullying) was experienced by 20% of respondents, while 19% of students experienced cyberbullying, i.e. violence with the use of information and communication technologies, primarily the Internet and mobile phones. The analysis of the statements of the surveyed students showed that the risk of being a victim of systematic bullying was associated with social relations. Students who had less friends and more enemies also had worse grades, worse economic status, and less support from family and friends (Komendant-Brodowska, 2011). This corresponds to our findings. Adolescents reporting suicidal attempts who experienced peer violence had poor relationships with their parents compared to the girls who also had a history of suicidal attempts, but did not experience harassment from their peers. These girls did not receive sufficient attention from their parents and lacked the sense of safety in their home environment. Family relationships translated into peer relations; they experienced the sense of loneliness and a conviction about being disliked at school (they believed they had no friends at school). Researchers point out that the typical individual traits of the victims of peer violence primarily include relational factors – bullied students are characterised by peer rejection, a small number of friends and low level of peer acceptance (Salmivalli, 2010). Some children are more likely to be exposed to violence (e.g. due to overprotective parents or physical weakness), however, the risk of victimisation is reduced by the number of friends and the quality of friendship as well as by the overall position in the peer group (Smith et al., 2004). This corresponds with our findings. As previously mentioned, girls who were victims of peer violence felt unaccepted in the school environment, and the feeling of loneliness was reinforced by the lack of friends. Stronger belief in having “cool,” sincere friends reduced the number of thoughts on committing suicide, self-destruction and preparation for an effective suicidal attempt. Growing up is a period of constant changes, which make it difficult to stabilise the sense of dignity and find the purpose of existence. Searching for acceptance is a continuous struggle for a teenager (Mitchel, 1994). Our findings indicate that an increased sense of being accepted and liked at school correlated with a decreased conviction about being finally noticed after one’s death. This reflected not only the need for being accepted by others, but also the unmet need for parental attention (Szymczak et al.). It is believed that the family environment is one of the fundamental and key factors preventing suicide among children and adolescents (Bąbik and Olejniczak, 2014). Our study did not take into account the parental attitude towards the evaluated children, which was a limitation. However, as mentioned before, experiencing peer violence was associated with an unhealthy relationship with parents, who failed to meet the basic needs, including safety and acceptance.

A family should meet a number of basic needs which include acceptance (a sense of being an important family member), belonging and love (Dąbrowski, 2006).

Therefore, a family should meet existence, emotional and social needs of its members. However, this is not always the case. The failure to meet two of the most important needs of children, i.e., feeling safe and emotional contact, can lead to frustration, apathy, withdrawal, avoidance of contacts with the outside environment, aggression and other socially unacceptable behaviours, or a sense of rejection (Jundziłł, 2005).

Deficiencies in meeting the needs such as positive emotional contacts, safety, belonging to family, recognition and acceptance seriously affect the whole mental sphere of children, especially their emotional development, identification and the process of socialisation, which may lead to isolation (Woodhead, 1997). The unmet needs and low self-esteem may result in poorly developed social skills, rendering children potential victims. But it is also possible that children raised in a family environment where parents exhibited abusive behaviour and violence, including corporal punishment, are more likely to become victims and/or perpetrators in peer relations (Velki, 2012).

Correlations between family safety, meeting the basic psychological needs, authentic behaviour, knowledge of true self, and also the level of adjustment were assessed among adolescents in Israel. Good relationships with parents and family safety correlated positively with good relationships in school and having friends (Goldner and Berenshtein-Dagan, 2016). Preventing and reducing loneliness is crucial for the well-being. Social relationships protect people from loneliness, whereas the lack of friends is strongly linked with the feeling of loneliness (Nicolaisen and Thorsen, 2017). Our study showed that good relations with peers protected against increased suicidal thoughts.

Social support protects individuals against the feeling of loneliness throughout life and is particularly important in the period of adolescence. Our findings suggest that the lack of support from friends is significantly correlated with the feeling of loneliness. It seems that women are affected by the lack of support from family or friends to a greater extent than men (Lee and Goldstein, 2016).

The study showed that social fears may be associated with an increased risk of suicidal thoughts in teenagers. Conclusions indicate that loneliness may be of particular importance in the relationship between social anxiety and suicide in teenagers (Gallagher et al., 2014).

CONCLUSIONS

Being a victim of peer violence is associated with the quality of parent–child relationship. Unhealthy relations with parents translate into difficult relations with peers and, as a result, may increase suicidal thoughts and contribute to suicidal attempts.

Failure to meet the basic needs of children, such as the feeling of safety and acceptance, translates into a sense of loneliness and promotes victimisation in a peer environment. Having friends can have a positive effect on reduced suicidal thoughts in adolescents and indirectly neutralise the effects of unmet needs, e.g. being noticed and accepted by the closest family.

Conflict of interest

The authors do not report any financial or personal connections with other persons or organizations which might negatively affect the content of this publication and/or claim authorship rights to this publication.

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