Available epidemiological data indicate that the abuse of children within families is a very common phenomenon, and is still on the rise. Among others, abuse includes direct physical and emotional violence to the child, as well as the indirect emotional trauma of witnessing interparental violence. These early trauma experienced within the context of the family can influence the development of the child’s personality as well as predispose towards the development of mental disorders in adulthood. There are some important factors influencing the occurrence of abuse, or the conditions predisposing it: certain parental personality traits appear to be instrumental, and the presence of individual psychopathology of parents is also connected with different forms of family dysfunction as a system, representing a variable which is interpolated in the quality of parenthood as the most important factor that determines long-term consequences on children and possible future psychopathology. The complex but tangible effects of parents’ personality traits on the psychological development of children may contribute to the transgenerational transmission of abuse and violence. The phenomenon of domestic violence and abuse can be described from the perspective of the psychological and systemic theoretical postulates. According to systemic theory and practice, dysfunctional communication in the family is a significant predictor for domestic violence. Characteristics of dysfunctional communication include low levels of verbal expressiveness and emotional responsiveness, low tolerance to criticism and its interpretation as a threat or intimidation, and consequently increased anxiety and subsequent escalation of an argument into violence. Overall it seems that there may be a complex connection between parental personality and family interaction patterns, leading to dysfunctional com-
munication which further amplifies the detrimental characteristics of family dynamics, and eventually escalates to violence. According to one theory, there may be a degree of transgenerational transmission of these communication patterns in children who have been victims of violence, thus propagating the conditions for violence, this time perpetrated by the victims themselves. Therefore there is a pressing need for prevention, perhaps through psychoeducation for parents or through early detection and treatment of traumatized children and adolescents, in the hope that the transgenerational vicious cycle of violence may be broken.

**Key words:** Child abuse, parenting, family system, family violence, psychopathology, transgenerational transmission.

### Introduction

Despite the widespread myth of the family being "a safe place", available epidemiological data indicate that the risk of violent victimization is very high in the context of family relations. Child abuse is, besides traffic accidents, the leading cause of morbidity and mortality among children.\(^1\) It is also well known that traumatic experience of child abuse has a significant impact on the psychological, physical and social functioning and development of a child. It was shown that 25% of women and 8% men experienced physical or sexual abuse perpetrated by their spouse or partner during their lifetime and that 30% of children are witnessing repeated scenes of violence among their parents, which could represent a form of emotional child abuse.\(^2\) The incidence of physical child abuse is about 5.7 per one thousand children, and it is on the rise, whereas the incidence of physical and emotional neglect, as well as emotional abuse is much higher.\(^3\) It is important to note that research of emotional abuse is somewhat neglected, and in comparison to data available about physical abuse, this data are more limited.

The data regarding child abuse and neglect in Serbian families are scarce. In one of few studies conducted 0.7% of the examined subjects stated that scenes of domestic violence are very common, while 7.3% of parents reported that violence occurs from time to time, and that children generally witness these scenes.\(^4\) So, unfortunately, the years of childhood are not always magic but can be full of "sound and fury". According to the research carried out by the Unit for protection of children against abuse and neglect at the Institute of Mental Health in Belgrade, during 2000–2011, there were 734 reported cases of child and adolescent abuse and neglect\(^5\) – only 11.3% were referred to a psychiatrist primarily for abuse and neglect, significantly smaller percentage of children (2.5%) came directly or was referred to the Institute primarily for psychiatric problems with already registered abuse and/or neglect, and the largest number of cases (86.2%) was first discovered during the child’s psychiatric treatment at the Institute.

The phenomenon of family violence and abuse has only recently become multidisciplinary. From the sociological perspective, there is discussion on the historical-sociological legitimacy of the phenomenon of family violence in the context of cultural specificities, enumerating belief in "the privacy" of violence in the family, and the gender inequality related to the issue.\(^6\) The majority of studies, however, focus on research of the psychological impact of traumatic experiences, such as abuse, on the personality development, as well as on the characteristics of personality traits of an abuser. In recent times, studies of family therapists focused on specific characteristics of family communication patterns and interaction in families where there is violence and abuse.\(^2\) In this paper, we will address the phenomenon of domestic violence and abuse from the perspective of psychological and systemic theoretical postulates.

### Child abuse and personality development

The idea that early traumatic experience in the family can influence personality development, as well as different forms of psychopathology in the adulthood, was developed by early psychoanalysts. "The child is father of a man", was said in William Wordsworth’s beautiful poem "The Rainbow" and that was one of the central topics of Freud’s theory.
As the theories about the development of psychopathology were becoming more complex, it became clear that direct correlation of these factors represents a simplification of the complex phenomenon of early trauma. According to some psychoanalysts the intra-psychological processing of experiential content could be more important than the actual experience in early age, while cognitive-behavioral theorists highlight the importance of processing life experiences. The theoreticians of family therapy, however, suggest that the development of psychopathology emerges in the context of subtle, but permanent factors that influence the individual, such as long-term dysfunction of the family structure. Family dysfunction adversities present the most consistent association between chronic adversity and psychopathology and their impact is considered non-specific with regard to the type of disorder. According to the multidimensional model development of a disorder, it is the result of a complex interaction of constitutional factors with psychological risk factors, pointing out to an interaction between "emotional vulnerability" and dysfunctional family environment.

The studies of childhood traumatic stress imply the existence of frequency of early trauma in persons who develop a psychiatric disorder, especially personality disorders, which has prompted research on long-term effects of early trauma on the personality development. Traumatic experiences related to childhood can influence development of disorders in the perception of one’s body, difficulty in establishing trust, intimacy and self-confidence, as well as the development of a negative experience of one’s “self”. The findings indicate that persons who have been victims of abuse during childhood, often develop patterns of avoidance or ambivalence towards emotional bonding, which makes difficult to establish close relations with others in adult age, especially in the sphere of partner relationships. The persons who experienced early trauma often develop self-defeating strategies for overcoming stress and auto-destructive attitudes and patterns of behavior. Victims of childhood sexual abuse have eight times higher risk of repeated suicide attempts, while parental perpetration of sexual abuse increases the likelihood of multiple suicide attempts among women outpatients.

Some studies confirm that adolescents are especially vulnerable, and that there is a high correlation between physical abuse in the childhood and the risk of suicidal behavior, as well as an auto-destructive attitude in adolescence. Suicide attempts before 18 years of age increase with repeated maltreatment of adolescents.

There are certain differences in the manifestation of consequences depending on the time when the trauma occurred. Adult victims of sexual abuse manifest less trust in others, problems in sexual functioning, and poor emotional expressiveness, while victims of sexual abuse during childhood develop cognitive dysregulation, affective instability, identity disorder and problems in the interpersonal domain. An important correlation is observed between these manifestations and the basic clinical characteristics of severe personality disorders.

The quality of parenthood and development of psychopathology

The impact of trauma, experienced in the family setting is considered to be related to various mental disorders, such as personality disorders, especially borderline personality disorder (BPD), eating disorders, substance abuse and schizotypal personality disorder. Furthermore, depression and social introversion can be developed in the individuals that have grown up in families where physical, emotional and sexual abuse occurred. The trauma of early childhood abuse and neglect are significant in development of the BPD and sexual abuse is considered to be a significant etiological factor in over 60% of patients with this disorder. Repeated traumatic experiences are related to development of borderline pathology, causing comorbidity of BPD and post-traumatic stress disorder.

It was shown that the victims of sexual abuse have experienced a high degree of conflicts and a low level of cohesion in their families as well as that abusive and neglectful parenting is determinant of adult mental illness. The severity of personality disorder correlates with the conflicting family environment and the abusive pattern in parent-child relation.
It seems that personality traits of parents and their individual psychopathology are connected with different forms of family dysfunction as a system, representing a variable which is interpolated in the complex dysfunctional patterns of family functioning. The quality of parenthood is probably the most important factor that determines long-term consequences on children's mental health. The majority of children with manifest physical aggressiveness and lacking in socially acceptable manners of channeling aggression originate from families in which mothers had antisocial behavior during childhood. Furthermore, it has been shown that younger mothers are more prone to abuse their children, especially when they have personal history of abuse. However, some studies have shown that paternal and maternal characteristics (such as locus of control, or emotional distress) that predate the birth of a child are related to later behavioral outcomes in child.

It seems that persons with personality disorders enter into the parental and partner relationship, bringing the burden of a deficient and often pathological early development. It contributes to the phenomenon of trans-generational transmission of patterns of abuse, where the abused child in the adult age may become an abuser.

Studies focused on the quality of parenthood and the dysfunctional psychological development of children, have shown that antisocial personality traits among males are related to lower maternal care and higher level of parental restrictions during childhood, while antisocial traits among females are related to lower paternal care, and negation of autonomy carried out by the mother. Over-protectiveness by the father significantly correlates with neuroticism and depression among males, while maternal neglect is significantly related to depression and self-criticism among females. Lower levels of parental care and high levels of intrusiveness are connected to development of certain aspects of the temperament, such as lower self-directedness and distinct patterns of avoiding uncomfortable stimuli.

**Systemic perspective of family violence**

Researchers of the systemic theory and practice point out the importance of dysfunctional communication process in families, finding them to be more significant predictors of domestic violence than the personal and socio-demographic characteristics. It was shown that violence against children or partner has the function of establishing control, and presents a type of interactive communication. Abusive parents often have rigid expectations regarding children behavior, which they usually reinforce by corporal punishment, creating and maintaining a vicious circle of behavioral patterns in the family. Studies, furthermore, depict deficiency in communication skills in families with violence. Abusive parents have less empathy, lower level of verbal expressiveness and weaker impulse control. It was shown that violent parents and partners more frequently attribute hostile and negative intentions to actions and words from other family members, and react with a "counterattack" demonstrating aggression. In nonviolent families negative feelings are the most frequent reactions to disagreement and criticism, while violent parents or partners react by stopping interactions and personal emotional responses, because they interpret the content as threatening or intimidating. This, consequently, creates higher levels of anxiety in the relationship and augments the risk of escalation into a violent act. It is considered that there is a mutual connection between dysfunctional patterns of interaction within family and their consequences.

Violence is considered to be caused by dysfunctional patterns of communication, and as a consequence of specific interaction, which have reverse effect on the family functioning. It has been shown that children, victims of family abuse, demonstrate less verbal communication skills and weaker social competency in the adult age, which might be a risk of developing antisocial behavior as well as of the problems in partner relationships. Establishing long-term close relationships for these people is very difficult. One of the reasons for this is the acquired pattern of interpretation of the content of communication, which includes interaction with people outside the family, whose intentions are perceived as hostile. Studies emphasize the connection between violent behavior in partner relationships and negative interactions with parents in childhood, as well as corporal punishment by parents.
Because of all that, the Belgrade Institute of Mental Health has unique departments collaborating with different sectors (social care, justice, schools, etc): the Unit for protection of children against abuse and neglect, Unit for treatment of people accused for domestic violence (referred by Department of Justice), Department for couple and family treatment) as well as continuous education on healthy parenthood.

**Conclusion**

It seems that there is a complex connection between personality, family interactions patterns and violence. Communication skills, closely related to the parent’s or partner’s personality traits, processes of interpretation which give meaning to events and communication content, emotional reactions and styles of interaction which are consequently established, are connected in a complex, mutually dependent way, with a risk of violence and family abuse. On the other hand, once established, violent patterns in the family are amplified and maintained, deeply compromising communication between family members and family functionality, creating conditions for dysfunctional personality development of children. Therefore, preventive strategies such as education of healthy parenthood as well as early detection and treatment of children and adolescents who had traumatic experiences are some of the most important activities of mental health care workers. It is important for future generation of adults and for breaking up the spiral of violence and its trans-generational transmission.

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Παιδική κακοποίηση και μελλοντική ανάπτυξη ψυχιατρικά

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Παιδική κακοποίηση και μελλοντική ανάπτυξη

D. Lecic-Tosevski,1–3 S. Draganic-Gajic,1,2 M. Pejovic-Milovancevic,1,2 S. Popovic-Deusic,2 N. Christodoulou,4 M. Botbol5

1School of Medicine, University of Belgrade, Belgrade,
2Institute of Mental Health, Belgrade,
3Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Belgrade, Serbia,
4Institute of Mental Health, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, United Kingdom,
5University of Western Brittany, Department of Child Psychiatry, Brest University Hospital, France

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Διαθέσιμα επιδημιολογικά δεδομένα δείχνουν ότι η ενδο-οικογενειακή παιδική κακοποίηση είναι ένα πολύ συχνό φαινόμενο που εξακολουθεί να βρίσκεται σε άνοδο. Μεταξύ άλλων, η κακοποίηση περιλαμβάνει τη σωματική και συναισθηματική βία στο παιδί, καθώς και το έμμεσο συναισθηματικό τραύμα που προκαλείται όταν το παιδί γίνεται μάρτυρας διαγονικής βίας. Οι πρώιμες ενδοοικογενειακές τραυματικές εμπειρίες μπορούν να επηρεάσουν την ανάπτυξη της προσωπικότητας του παιδίου, καθώς και την εμφάνιση ψυχικών διαταραχών στην ενήλικη ζωή. Υπάρχουν μερικοί σημαντικοί παράγοντες που επηρεάζουν την εμφάνιση της κακοποίησης και τις συνθήκες που την προδιαθέτουν: Καθοριστικής σημασίας φαίνεται να είναι τα χαρακτηριστικά της προσωπικότητας των γονέων και η παρουσία ψυχιατρικάς κακοποίησης στους γονείς, τα οποία συνδέονται με διάφορες μορφές συστημικής διαλείτουργίας της οικογένειας, και αντιπροσωπεύουν μια παράμετρο που κατ’ επέκταση συνιστά την ποιότητα της γονικής λειτουργίας ως τον πιο καθοριστικό παράγοντα για τις μακροπρό-
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Λεξεις ευρετηρίου: Παιδική κακοποίηση, γονείκα συμπεριφορά, οικογενειακό σύστημα, οικογενεια- κή bia, ψυχοπαθεία, διαγενεακή μετάδοση.

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