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The role and actions of the school in preventing domestic violence against students

Submitted: 19.12.2024

Accepted: 16.10.2025

Published: 31.12.2025



Keywords:

domestic violence
prevention,
child protection,
school's role,
school-based
interventions,
interdisciplinary
cooperation,
teacher preparedness

Abstract

Research objectives and problems: The aim of this article is to present the role of the school and the actions that it undertakes to prevent domestic violence against students. In line with this objective, the following research questions were posed: What role does the school play in preventing domestic violence against students? What measures should schools take to counteract domestic violence? How do school staff assess their preparedness and readiness to take action in this area? What recommendations can strengthen the school's efforts to address domestic violence against students?

Research methods: To answer the research questions, a qualitative research design was used, specifically focus group interviews (group discussions, commonly referred to as focus groups). A total of 68 participants took part in the study. The group of respondents consisted of school principals, teachers, homeroom teachers, as well as school counselors and psychologists.

Process of argumentation: The research process is both theoretical and empirical, as it combines an analysis of relevant literature with the author's own findings. It focuses on presenting the role of the school and the actions that it undertakes to support families affected by violence and to protect children experiencing domestic violence. The study highlights that building an atmosphere of trust and safety in the school environment is a vital condition for effectively supporting students at risk of violence and mitigating its negative effects.

Research findings and their impact on the development of pedagogical science: The analysis of the collected material confirms the

key role of the school in preventing domestic violence against students and in supporting families affected by violence. The findings indicate that efforts in this area are highly interdisciplinary, especially within pedagogical science, but also reveal limits in how these responsibilities are carried out.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: The research contributes to the development of the domestic violence prevention system, as well as to broader child and family support measures. The findings emphasize the need to enhance the readiness and openness of educational institutions to carry out effective interventions, provide support to children and families, and strengthen the overall system of support available to educators.

Introduction

Domestic violence is a complex social problem that has far-reaching consequences for the development of a child experiencing violence, as well as for the child's mental health and education. The school, as an institution that plays a key role in a child's life, not only carries out the educational process but also performs caregiving and educational functions, supporting both the student and the student's parents. Therefore, taking action to identify, counteract, and combat domestic violence is one of the school's priorities (Szabelska, 2006).

Child abuse has consequences that extend beyond the immediate situation, and affect the child's entire life. The negative effects of violence involve the child's psychological well-being, as well as their functioning in family and social relationships. Child abuse is therefore not just an individual tragedy but also a burden on society as a whole. One of the most tragic risks associated with violence against children is the risk of death, which may result either from direct acts of violence or from their consequences, such as self-harm or suicide attempts. Child abuse also leads to disturbances in cognitive development, learning, and peer relationships. In addition, children experiencing violence are at increased risk of serious conflict with the law and involvement in criminal activities (Szabelska, 2006; Czyżewska, 2008; *Przeciwdziałanie krzywdzeniu dzieci* 2017; Wiśniewska-Nogaj & Kwiatkowska, 2024).

As indicated by the research report *Diagnoza przemocy wobec dzieci w Polsce 2023* (Makaruk et al., 2023), violence from a known adult has been experienced by 32% of children and adolescents. This percentage is steadily increasing. The report shows that also psychologists or school counselors (13%), as well as teachers (11%), are among the adults whom children and adolescents most often approach in difficult situations. Polish legislation obliges the education system (Act of 29 July 2005 on the Prevention of Domestic Violence) to identify domestic violence and child abuse. In this respect, schools are required to report suspected violence by initiating the Blue Card procedure and to cooperate with interdisciplinary teams responsible for building an effective system for preventing domestic violence and providing assistance to families affected by it.

The aim of this article is to discuss the role and importance of the school in preventing domestic violence against students by analyzing measures to support child protection. The article includes research based on the qualitative method of focus group interviews. It points to the significant role of the school in providing support to families affected by violence and in protecting children, emphasizing the need to build an atmosphere of trust and safety. The conclusions stress the need to develop an effective anti-violence system and to strengthen schools' readiness to intervene and provide assistance.

The legal basis of the child protection and domestic violence prevention system – the role of the education system

The legal protection of the child is defined by the most important legal acts, beginning with the Constitution of the Republic of Poland (1997), which contains several specific provisions on children's rights. The crucial article that deals with the protection and rights of children is Article 72, which states that "The Republic of Poland shall ensure the protection of the rights of the child. Everyone has the right to demand from public authorities the protection of the child against violence, cruelty, exploitation, and moral corruption. A child deprived of parental care has the right

to care and assistance from public authorities. In the course of determining the rights of the child, public authorities and those responsible for the child are obliged to listen to and, as far as possible, take into account the views of the child.” Another important document is the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1991). It is an international treaty that defines and protects children’s rights worldwide. It guarantees the rights of the child regardless of color, religion, or origin. The Convention was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989, and Poland was one of the initiators of its adoption. The document entered into force in 1990. In Poland, the Ombudsman for Children acts as the guardian of children’s rights.

In 2025, the Act on the Prevention of Domestic Violence (Act of 29 July 2005 on the Prevention of Domestic Violence) was enacted in Poland. This legislation defines the tasks related to preventing domestic violence, the principles of working with persons experiencing domestic violence, and the principles of working with persons who use domestic violence. The phenomenon of domestic violence is also defined in detail. According to Article 2 of the Act, violence is a single or repeated intentional act or omission, involving the use of physical, psychological, or economic advantage, that violates the rights or personal goods of a person experiencing domestic violence, in particular:

- a) endangering that person’s life, health, or property,
- b) violating his or her dignity, physical integrity, or freedom, including sexual freedom,
- c) causing physical or mental harm, suffering, or distress,
- d) restricting or depriving that person of access to financial resources or the opportunity to work or become financially independent,
- e) substantially invading that person’s privacy or causing a sense of threat, humiliation, or anguish, including through electronic communication.

A minor who experiences violence from parents or other family members, or who witnesses domestic violence, is considered a person experiencing violence.

Under the Act, each municipality undertakes measures to counteract domestic violence, in particular through the work of an interdisciplinary team. This team is composed, in accordance with Article 9a, of representatives from: social assistance agencies; the municipal commission for solving alcohol-related problems; the Police; the education sector; health care; non-governmental organizations; the Military Police; and the probation service. These representatives constitute the local system for preventing and counteracting domestic violence.

When information is received regarding the occurrence of domestic violence, the interdisciplinary team appoints a diagnostic and assistance group, which conducts a diagnosis and assessment of the situation in response to the reported suspicion of domestic violence and implements measures to protect and assist the family affected by violence. When the person experiencing violence is a minor, the diagnostic and assistance group also includes the student's homeroom teacher or another teacher familiar with the child's home situation. The group may also include a school teacher and a school psychologist. Members of the interdisciplinary team and of the diagnostic and assistance groups perform their tasks as part of their official or professional duties.

The tasks of the interdisciplinary team include, in particular:

- a) initiating and supporting measures to prevent domestic violence;
- b) monitoring actions taken to counter domestic violence;
- c) issuing opinions on matters concerning the application of the Act;
- d) initiating amendments to legislation on the prevention of domestic violence;
- e) issuing opinions in the event of disputes between public administration bodies and non-governmental organizations carrying out tasks in the field of domestic violence prevention;
- f) issuing opinions on public tasks related to counteracting domestic violence and on commissioning such tasks to entities obliged to cooperate in this area;
- g) developing standards for assisting persons experiencing domestic violence and for working with perpetrators of domestic violence;

- h) establishing mechanisms, in cooperation with other actors, for providing information on standards for assisting persons experiencing domestic violence and for working with persons perpetrating domestic violence;
- i) issuing opinions on domestic violence prevention projects developed on the basis of shelter programs.

The tasks of the diagnostic and assistance group include, in particular:

- a) assessing, on the basis of the Blue Card procedure, the domestic situation of persons experiencing domestic violence and persons perpetrating domestic violence;
- b) implementing the Blue Card procedure when domestic violence is confirmed, especially when there is a risk to life or health;
- c) notifying the person suspected of committing domestic violence that a Blue Card procedure has been initiated in their absence;
- d) submitting a request to the interdisciplinary team to refer a person using domestic violence to corrective and educational programs or to psychological and therapeutic programs for perpetrators of domestic violence;
- e) requesting the interdisciplinary team to report that a domestic violence perpetrator has committed an offense;
- f) monitoring the situation of persons experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, domestic violence, including after the conclusion of the Blue Card procedure;
- g) completing the Blue Card procedure;
- h) documenting the actions taken as the basis for determining that initiating the Blue Card procedure was not justified;
- i) informing the chairperson of the interdisciplinary team about the results of the actions taken under the Blue Cards procedure.

The education sector is also one of the six entities entitled to initiate the Blue Card procedure (Decree of the Council of Ministers of 6 September 2023 on the “Blue Card” procedure and model “Blue Card” forms, 2023).

As the description of tasks and powers indicates, the education system plays a significant role in the domestic violence prevention system, particularly in the area of child protection. The school, where the child spends time on a daily basis, plays a key role in ensuring the child's safety and support. Teachers, educators, and other school staff have the opportunity to observe students' behavior and psychophysical states, which allows for the early detection of concerning signs that may indicate emerging problems in the family or peer environment. Through direct contact with the student and the student's parents, schools can act both preventively and interventively. Teachers and school staff, through ongoing dialogue with the family and regular observation of the child, are able to identify the first signs of crises or violence. In this way, the school becomes not only a place of learning but also a space where children and their families can find help and guidance in overcoming difficulties and building a safe family environment.

As Monika Czyżewska (2024) points out, the tasks of the school in situations involving threats to a child's welfare have a specific preventive or intervention-oriented character, depending on the situation and stage of intervention. At the level of preventing child abuse, the school's task is to educate students, parents, and school staff, shaping attitudes and psychosocial skills related to the issue of violence. It is also important to foster a supportive atmosphere for building relationships and trust, and to follow clearly formulated rules for handling situations of suspected violence. At the level of advanced risk detection, it is crucial that school staff, supported by the psychological–educational team, are alert to symptoms that may indicate difficulties experienced in students' families. Teachers should identify signals even when they occur at long intervals or appear unrelated. Teachers and school psychologists, thanks to their specialist knowledge, are particularly well positioned to analyze crisis situations and develop an appropriate action plan. Their role is also to build trust among students and teachers so that anyone can come to them for support. The final level involves daily work with the child and the family experiencing a crisis, undertaking interdisciplinary cooperation, and monitoring the progress of the implemented measures.

Interdisciplinary cooperation in supporting the child and the family should take place with the participation of public and non-public actors operating in the community who are involved in addressing domestic violence (Wojtanowicz, 2024). In order to protect minors from abuse, the Act of 13 May 2016 on Counteracting the Threat of Sexual Crime and the Protection of Minors was introduced (Act on Counteracting the Threat of Sexual Offences and the Protection of Minors, 2016). Under this Act, as of 15 February 2024, all entities working with children are required to have standards for the protection of minors (commonly referred to as child protection standards). These standards constitute a set of policies and procedures designed to keep children and young people safe from all forms of abuse, neglect, and exploitation. Educational institutions are also required to implement these standards.

The legal provisions cited above, along with the measures taken to protect children from abuse, are intended to provide minors with safe and supportive conditions for development. However, for these measures to be effective, the school must be adequately prepared, formally, organizationally, and in terms of competence. The protection of minors requires knowledge of the law and its practical implementation, the development of a culture of safety, and an awareness of and responsibility for the welfare of children.

The role and actions of the school in preventing domestic violence against students – analysis of the author's own research

A focus group interview method was used to achieve the research objective of examining the role and actions taken by schools to prevent domestic violence against students. The focus group interview (focus group, focus discussion, commonly referred to as a focus group interview) is a qualitative research method used in psychology, sociology, and social research (Banaszak, 2017). Central to this method is the interaction that occurs within the research group, particularly among the participants

themselves. The conversation takes place in a wider social context, often using projective techniques. Participants do not always have fully formed opinions on the topics discussed; rather, their views often develop in response to the perspectives expressed by others. The moderator, as the discussion leader, plays a significant role in guiding the process. The discussion follows a pre-developed scenario outlining the stages of the study. The discussion is recorded to allow for an in-depth analysis of the collected material (Wojtanowicz, 2024).

The study was conducted in six research groups, involving representatives of primary schools from the Małopolskie Voivodeship. A total of 68 individuals participated. The group of respondents consisted of principals, teachers, homeroom teachers, and school counselors and psychologists. The sampling was purposeful. The criterion for participation was experience working within interdisciplinary teams and diagnostic–support groups responsible for preventing domestic violence. The study included individuals actively involved in implementing the Blue Card procedure and cooperating with institutions forming part of local domestic violence prevention systems. The purpose of this selection was to gather the opinions of practitioners with knowledge and experience resulting from their direct involvement in inter-institutional activities supporting children and families affected by violence. The research was conducted between February and June 2024.

In relation to the stated research objective, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What role does the school play in preventing domestic violence against students?
2. What measures should schools take to counteract domestic violence against a student?
3. How do school staff assess their preparedness and readiness to take action in cases of domestic violence against a student?
4. What recommendations can strengthen the school's efforts to address domestic violence against a student?

The research results are presented in an aggregated manner, encompassing the main themes and categories identified in the participants' statements. Selected quotations illustrating the diversity of opinions are included, with the analysis focusing on common trends and areas requiring support in the school's efforts to prevent domestic violence against students.

Respondents unanimously emphasize the significant role of the school in uncovering violence experienced by students in the home environment. They note "that it is increasingly common for us to diagnose such cases and to take intervention measures." "Reports come from both children and parents, most often from mothers who are also victims of violence. There are also reports from fathers." "We are also alert to children's behavior that may indicate domestic violence or show signs of physical abuse or neglect." Respondents primarily associate their role with the obligation to disclose such incidents and report them to the appropriate authorities. "We should report any such case to social welfare, the court, or the police." "It's not easy because we often don't have hard evidence... We don't want to act to the detriment of the parents or the child with conclusions that are too hasty." As they note, "when the diagnosis is clear, it is our duty to complete the Blue Card A procedure."

Respondents also point to difficulties in fulfilling their role. "Parents increasingly do not consent to their child talking to an educator or psychologist, and then our possibilities are very limited." "They intimidate us by reporting us to the Board of Education or by taking legal action against the school... This limits us and even stops us." "Hence our role is to act in a balanced way, to diagnose, and to refer the case to the interdisciplinary team or the support group, which will then confirm the presence of violence or not." Respondents indicate that their supportive role toward students is limited. "We can work with the student at school, support them, but only with parental consent." "However, our possibilities in this respect are limited... We do not want to label such a student by sending them to a counselor or psychologist." "It happens that the student and the parents, after the violence is disclosed, avoid contact with us and do not cooperate." "We are also constrained in fulfilling our role by RODO regulations."

Among the key activities of the school, respondents include diagnosing the student's school situation and providing assistance to the student and family in the form of counseling and pedagogical and psychological support. At the same time, they stress that "we don't have much capacity to act. It is significantly limited... We are not always able to diagnose violence, and we are not allowed to go to the student's home." "However, we always try to build appropriate support and observe how the situation develops." "We work with other professionals in diagnostic and support groups and interdisciplinary teams." "We also carry out educational activities, building students' awareness of what violent behavior is, making them aware of children's rights, and pointing out where they can go if they experience harm or difficulties." "There are posters hanging in the school, leaflets distributed, talks during homeroom classes, and preventive workshops for students." "We also raise the topic at parent meetings and invite specialists from outside the school to these meetings." "We have adopted standards for the protection of minors and we train ourselves on the topic."

Awareness of the role and responsibilities incumbent on the school in addressing harm to students leads respondents to reflect that they are not fully prepared to meet these challenges. "It is difficult to say whether we are fulfilling our tasks 100 percent." "The multitude of responsibilities and difficulties we experience at school are not conducive to confronting this topic." "Parents can sometimes be demanding and uncooperative, and we don't have the tools to change this." "We also lack comprehensive knowledge in this area; we can't always see it... We try to be vigilant and act, but the regulations change so often." Respondents also point to difficulties arising from the obligation to participate in diagnostic and support groups. "Meetings often take place outside our working hours. Still, we try to attend them." "During lessons, it is difficult to provide a substitute for the teacher who needs to attend these meetings." "We have staff shortages and difficulties ensuring full staffing." "The school operates according to the school-year cycle; during breaks from teaching, it is difficult to prepare student assessments or attend meetings... Then it becomes the principal's responsibility."

Most respondents participating in the study are experienced educators with long careers in the education system. They therefore offered recommendations aimed at strengthening the school's efforts to counteract domestic violence against students. Among the most important, they pointed to the need to clearly define the school's actions and responsibilities in providing support and assistance to the student and the student's family. "The boundary of the school's interference in a student's functioning outside school is still unclear... It used to be that an educator or teacher could visit a student's family at home, but now we are not allowed to do so. We have to ask the parents' permission for everything, and those experiencing difficulties do not give us this consent."

Participants also identify knowledge gaps in the area of domestic violence prevention. They point out that "teachers are often not trained in detecting violence and in using the BC procedures... We are still struggling with the vagueness of the actions within the procedure." They also emphasize the need to provide support and protection to teachers. "We are concerned about the reaction of the child's parents or guardians (aggression, threats, attacks against the school), as well as the escalation of violence against the child after intervention." According to the respondents, the school's interdisciplinary cooperation also needs to be strengthened. As they note, "we identify difficulties in communication with the police, family court, and social assistance." "We often encounter a lack of responsiveness from the institutions responsible for child protection, and the Blue Card procedure does not guarantee immediate protection for the child, which may discourage its use."

The school therefore plays a key role in preventing domestic violence against students, although this task presents many difficulties. Teachers, educators, and school psychologists diagnose cases of violence, which are often difficult to identify and intervene in. Respondents indicated that reports of violence come from both children and parents, and their role is mainly to respond and follow the required procedures. The school also carries out educational activities, and organizes workshops, information campaigns, and meetings with parents. However, respondents emphasized that they observe a low level of effectiveness in this area and

face difficulties in cooperating with other institutions within the child and family support system.

Summary

Preventing child abuse and assisting families affected by violence requires a comprehensive, multidisciplinary approach. The school plays a very important role in this regard. However, to be effective, several measures should be taken to better support teachers and educators. The research findings confirm the key role of the school in preventing domestic violence against students while simultaneously highlighting significant limitations in fulfilling this task. Respondents emphasize that, despite growing awareness of the problem, teachers often do not feel sufficiently prepared to undertake interventions or to cooperate with support institutions. These difficulties stem from legal and organizational constraints, fears related to parents' reactions, and the lack of clear procedures.

The collected data indicate the need to strengthen the competencies of teaching staff, clarify the scope of the school's responsibilities, and improve inter-institutional cooperation. The effectiveness of the school's actions in the area of child protection therefore depends on systemic support, better communication with institutions, and the development of a culture of safety and trust within the school environment.

One important factor determining the effectiveness of child abuse prevention is the strengthening of empathetic attitudes among teachers and educators. As Katarzyna Plutecka (2019) notes, an educator should be characterized by empathy, understood as "moving inside from outside" or "being in touch with emotions" and understanding the meaning of the other person's experience. She also stresses "empathizing with the effects and the need to respond adequately to their signs." Ultimately, she places empathy between rational reasoning, inference, and intuition. Another element of efficient school intervention is improving teachers' and educators' knowledge of how to recognize symptoms of child abuse,

how to apply laws related to violence in practice and how to use the Blue Card procedure (Frankowiak, 2023).

It is also important to strengthen the school's interdisciplinary cooperation with other actors, particularly social welfare bodies, the police, the courts, and NGOs. Such cooperation should take on a systemic character, a permanent partnership among entities and services operating in the local environment, which will enable a holistic and complementary diagnosis of domestic violence and support the development of effective counteraction strategies (Models of Cooperation: Recommendation Book, 2021).

Addressing domestic violence is a challenge for many professionals today. To overcome these difficulties, evaluation activities that examine the effectiveness of interventions and progress in building a safe, nurturing environment for children are essential. Supervision is also helpful in this regard. In the educational system, it can address three key areas: workload management, staff development, and support (Chojak, 2021). The overarching issue is to create a safe school climate so that staff, students, and their parents feel secure. Jadwiga Przewłocka (2015) defines school climate as the quality and character of school life, encompassing norms, values, and expectations that support a sense of social, emotional, and physical security.

In conclusion, preventing domestic violence against children requires institutional and legal mechanisms as well as the development of empathy, cooperation, and shared responsibility in the school community. Schools that promote trust, openness, and partnership are better equipped to protect children and effectively respond to signs of violence.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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