

Do security guards really make schools safer?

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Keeping children safe is a shared responsibility. Bullying in schools, peer online violence, domestic abuse and their implications for schools, student-student, teacher-student, parent-teacher conflicts are serious challenges for educational institutions. Our experience shows that institutions currently have ad-hoc responses to these challenges. We encounter many forms of bullying in schools, ranging from verbal humiliation to online harassment and physical violence. Whatever the form, bullying severely impacts on the child's psyche, and these conflicts can have serious consequences. It is therefore very important to recognise that institutions working with children (schools) are in bad need of help, both from the state and the civil sector. However, the institution of school security guards offered by the state does not recognise the problem or does not recognise it well, and therefore cannot provide teachers and schools with adequate, long-term and effective help that is reassuring and effective for all. School bullying is preventable. There are several measures, action plans, training, and cooperation opportunities now available to educational establishments to help them to prevent and deal with it effectively.

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The Hungarian Parliament passed a law instituting security guards at schools on July 3rd 2020; thus, from September 2020, security guards started to work in 478 public and vocational educational institutions. School security guards are public servants who enjoy a special legal status; they have access to means of law enforcement and are employed by the district police. The government's intention by instituting this new job is to protect both teachers and pupils from violent and abusive actions, which occur on school premises with increasing frequency.

Violent and abusive actions at schools – among pupils, or between (a) teacher(s) and (a) pupil(s), initiated by either party – most frequently stem from

unhealthy power relations, from unsatisfactory communication or bottled up tension, which some are unable to handle constructively, or have not learnt to handle constructively. The root cause of the inability to manage conflicts constructively may be the lack of positive behaviour models, a feeling of helplessness, or simply the desire to take revenge for the abuse or violence one has had to endure. This means that there may be several different reasons why one behaves aggressively or violently in a certain situation. This is why maintaining discipline at schools, preventing violent or abusive actions, resolving certain societal issues must not be entrusted to the police, as that will only result in pseudo-solutions.

It may be true that teachers feel safer if there are security guards in schools, but the claim that security guards in and of themselves prevent and effectively manage school violence is not tenable. Let us see three reasons why not:

1. A school is an institution that necessitates cooperation between the stakeholders: teachers, students and parents must establish a good rapport, based on mutual trust. If school conflicts are not managed well, all three parties will be dissatisfied. If tensions and conflicts are not managed using the proper methods of pedagogy, psychology and social work, but rather resolved by using external control, namely policing, the concerned parties will not be motivated to develop a true conflict resolution mechanism. The head of the school is not in a position to instruct the security guard as the guard is not a member of the school staff, but an employee of the district police force.
2. School security guards' authority is limited to the premises of the school during teaching hours. They are not authorized to act on external premises where school programmes take place (e.g. in swimming pools, or on school trips), let alone in cyberspace. If a school seriously wants to prevent violence and to exercise effective conflict management, it must provide full-scale protection and safety for all its pupils and teachers, not only within the confines of its premises and only in the time frame when a security guard is present. The current arrangement means that the protection and safety provided by school guards are not comprehensive enough.

Since school guards' authority is limited in space and time, it is very likely that violent actions against pupils or teachers will increasingly take place outside the school or online. Schools may claim that handling such

cases fall outside their sphere of competence. Why is it not an acceptable response, though? Such a claim is not acceptable since a school is a community. Its pupils are mates when travelling to school on board of a bus, or chatting online in the evening, or participating in an online lesson. The feeling of belonging to the community must be strengthened at any cost and not to be destroyed or weakened since this feeling of belonging promotes cooperation, trust and honesty, qualities indispensable for the proper operation of a school.

3. Another claim regarding the job of school guards is that their presence in and of itself is a deterrent (Iskolaőrsegről szóló állásfoglalás, 2020). However, apart from some extreme cases, in most secondary schools the level of aggression and violence does not call for the permanent presence of security guards. In most of the extreme cases, severe economic and social problems should be resolved first and foremost; school security guards will not be able to prevent children from turning to a life of crime.

'People may become more rule-abiding when threatened with sanctions, but this will not make them understand and keep in high regard the rules enforced.' (Aronson, 2009, p. 171)

Such critique of the institution of school security guards does not mean that the current safety level in schools is satisfactory. School violence is a grave and persistent problem for teachers, children and parents alike. It is essential to act so that the situation can be improved. A school provides full-scale protection for its pupils if it does all in its power not to cause harm to children and to protect them from all forms of violence and aggression on and outside of school premises, at all programmes organized by its staff. This includes taking precautions as well as handling all cases of violent or abusive behaviour promptly and effectively. Such protection includes not only the cases defined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, ratified in Hungary in 1991. (1991. évi LXIV. törvény. ENSZ Gyermekjogi egyezménye)); it involves a more comprehensive concept of responsibility for caregivers, which obliges them to cater for the overall well-being of children as well as to minimize any harm caused to children.

What makes a school safe?

A school is not the sum total of isolated individuals who function perfectly independently of one another, and do their jobs as required. A school is a community, within which each and every individual has their unique place, role and responsibility. School climate is determined by the trust level between the different players within the school community. Trust must be present in all relationships. Trust among adults at schools, teachers and other employees, is strengthened by their cooperation and mutual respect and the clear delineation of every player's sphere of competence. Establishing and constantly fostering trust among teachers and pupils will enable pupils to turn to their teachers if they or one of their peers get into trouble.

A school is going to be safe (Medrano & Toussaint, 2012) if it recognizes that children are vulnerable because of their age, and it is the responsibility and duty of all adults to protect them. Thus the school should put heavy emphasis on prevention, on involving kids in all facets of school life, including decision-making in matters that concern them. Schools should take special care when recruiting their staff, the professionals working with pupils, and provide ongoing professional development for them regarding child protection, and make sure that they are familiar with the content of the relevant documents.

“The climate of a school may support or hinder children’s acquisition of the skills necessary to live and thrive in a community. It is possible to establish such an environment in a school that not only prevents violence, but promotes emotional maturation and the development of emotional intelligence. In my view, this is not only a worthwhile aim, but an indispensable part of the all-round and healthy development of young people.” (Aronson, 2009, pp. 96–97).

Another important question is within what time frame and within what spatial boundaries it is the responsibility of the school to protect its pupils. No doubt that it is the responsibility of the school to provide protection during the school day, on the school premises. School security guards provide protection within these limits. However, safety and protection must be provided for children at school programmes outside the school building and school day. It is always the duty of the adults who organize such programmes and are present on the spot to shoulder this responsibility. It is also the school’s responsibility to provide protection even when the children are not present in the school building: the school should not publish any content on any platform that the children would not like

to be published or which may cause them harm in any way. In other words: when communicating about children, their interests should guide the actions of the school's adult employees.

Online presence is becoming more and more important for pupils.¹ The 'virtual world' is – in many aspects – a communicational and social space just like the 'real world'. It holds a good number of advantages. For example, it opens up the world for us, it provides an enormous amount of information for us, and it reduces the importance of physical distance. However, its dangers should also be carefully considered: a lot of conflicts are transferred to the virtual world; thus they become even more difficult for adults to spot. Moreover, children may meet online both people and content which jeopardize their well-being.

The best way to provide for the well-being of children is to make sure that they are surrounded by adults who are committed to protecting them and their rights. This is why new staff members should be recruited with utmost care if we want to minimize the risk of violence and abuse against children. It is essential to check out the candidate's background thoroughly, to find out if there has been any suspicion ever that the person got involved in abuse or violence against children, no matter whether the candidate is applying for a permanent position, for a temporary or contract job, or for a volunteer job.

Furthermore, children can turn to an adult with full confidence if they know with absolute certainty what kind of response, attitude or behaviour they may expect. To make sure that the responses are consistent, adults must familiarize themselves with the rules of conduct and the prescribed procedures, which they are obliged to follow.

What do children think of school safety?

In 2019, the Foundation 'Hintalovon' (in English: On a rocking horse (Németh, 2019)) conducted a research project, among other issues on school safety, with 5,300 child respondents. The findings reveal that for the majority of pupils the school is a safe place, but every 5th child, 22% of all respondents, do not feel safe at school. Whether they feel safe or not seems to depend on abuse, on information about abuse, and the different kinds of adults and security devices they meet at school. In their opinions, it is a climate of acceptance and the presence of sup-

¹ In March 2021, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child issued its recommendations on the rights of the child in digital environments.

portive adults that could render schools safer, not security devices or the physical environment. They would feel safer if all children were treated in a fair and equal manner, no matter how much they might differ from the mainstream; if there were more experts they could turn to; and if harassment and abuse at school would cease.

What is called child abuse?

Child abuse comprises all kinds of behaviour that cause harm to a child, or hinders their safe and healthy development. Threatening to torture or beat a child also counts as child abuse, since the threats will arouse fear and anxiety. Child abuse does not comprise only verbal or physical action: failure to act also qualifies as abuse, if it results in harming the child.

It is essential to name the different forms of abuse and all other factors that the school would like to protect the children against. When compiling a school's own list of abusive behaviour, consulting domestic² as well as international³ lists of recommendations is a suitable starting point

The signs and symptoms of abuse are interrelated and often overlap; recognizing them is a must for the school staff so that they can act properly and take the necessary steps in the interest of the abused child.

Alert and case management

The key to protecting children is recognizing the threat and informing a person who is able to manage the case properly. It does not matter whether the person who recognizes the threat and alerts the expert is a child or an adult: the important thing is that they should know when and who should be alerted, and how they can do this.

Children are more likely to alert teachers if there is trust between children and staff, and thus children can be certain that real help is going to be provided. It is of special importance that alerting responsible adults can take place anonymously; for example, there should be a locked box in a fairly hidden spot for col-

² See e.g. 'Guidelines for Healthcare Professionals in Suspected Cases of Child Abuse and Neglect' and the relevant protocols, issued by the Ministry of Human Resources.

³ According to the UN World Health Organization's (WHO) definition, child abuse and neglect comprise physical and/or emotional and/or sexual abuse, neglect or negligent behaviour, all forms of commercial or other exploitation, which entail causing real or potential harm to the child's health, development, survival and dignity, within a relationship which is founded on responsibility, trust or power.

lecting written reports of abuse. A good number of child abuse cases remain unknown because the concerned parties or those who do notice what is going on do not report them, fearing the consequences of their action. For example, a marginalized and ostracized child may not turn to anybody for help for fear that their situation may further deteriorate within the community.

What exactly is going to happen after the alert depends on the concrete case, and on what the best interest of the child concerned dictates. It is important, however, to establish a framework that ensures that the handling of the case serves the protection of the child.

One of the guiding principles of action is that all reports, alerts and suspicions should be taken seriously and investigated thoroughly. This helps to avoid overlooking cases and makes sure that even false alarms have some consequences. One of the consequences may be discussing the topics that surface in these cases with the children. A false alarm is not necessarily malevolent: it may be simply indicative of the topics and issues that preoccupy children's minds.

The other guiding principle is that each and every case should be handled keeping the relevant legal regulations and the child's interests in mind. The persons who handle the case must know exactly when and who should be involved in managing the case. At the same time, they must avoid causing harm to the child and should cooperate with the child and keep them adequately informed at all times.

The third guiding principle is that the alert should be fully documented, firstly because the person, child or adult, who reported the case should know what happens as a consequence of their action, i. e. they must be informed about the child's welfare and how the case is being handled. Secondly, proper documentation of the alert is an important pre-condition of the proper management of the case.

Involving children

Even though adults are responsible for the children entrusted to their care, in a good number of cases children know best what they want and need. However, this is not the only reason why children should take part in school life, including in making decisions that concern them. Accepting children as partners and giving them opportunities to form and express their own opinions, which then are respected and taken into consideration in decision-making is also highly relevant

for the well-being of children and for establishing a high level of trust between adults and children.

Children are entitled to have a childhood free of abuse and violence. To provide such a childhood is the duty not only of the parents but also of the school. Schools need support, practicable conflict management methods, in-service teacher education courses and financial means to achieve this goal.

All forms of violence and abuse are unacceptable. Violence is not limited to causing physical pain, as it is possible to hurt somebody verbally or with gestures, which is just as unacceptable as physical abuse. All reports and cases should be taken seriously and thoroughly investigated. Violence is never an acceptable response to violence.

School security guards act like receptionists, or support the school staff to handle the extra tasks necessitated by the pandemic in a lot of institutions. School guards together with school management are trying to find a suitable role for the guards in the operation of the organization. The main issue is that school guards, who are employees of the police forces, are supposed to prevent violence on school premises and to manage violent or abusive cases at schools properly, which they are unable to do, because this is a complex, pedagogical job, inseparable from the life of the school community, which cannot be 'outsourced' to the police. Violence and abuse are two of the most important and urgent issues at schools, an area in which schools are in bad need of help. Luckily, there are numerous organizations, research projects, programmes, opportunities for collaboration, which schools and kindergartens can turn to for help and support. The Round Table for School Safety⁴ is a collaboration of experts that provides a range of options and examples of the many ways in which institutions and schools can prevent and tackle aggression in schools.

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⁴ www.kerib.hu

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