

Welcome address by Juris Jansons, Ombudsman Republic of Latvia

Nowadays it seems really strange that we need to speak about corporal punishment. It seems like society is smart enough, educated enough and responsible enough to avoid such action. But still – topic is very important. I would say even – crucially important. Do you want to hear some frightening facts?

According to the survey, made by one of the NGO's in Latvia ("Center Dardedze"), a significant part of the Latvian society (32%) uses physical punishment in the upbringing of their children, moreover, more than half of the respondents do not know that the physical punishment of a child in Latvia is prohibited by law. A paradox, isn't it?

Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted by the UN in 1989. Next year we will celebrate the 30th anniversary of it. In many countries any form of corporal punishment is prohibited by national law. Also, in Latvia, the prohibition of any form of corporal punishment, including spanking, is set out in the Law on the Protection of the Rights of the Child since its adoption in 1998 – so already 20 years! Latvia is not the only Baltic state that prohibits corporal punishment – our colleagues in Lithuania and Estonia already have the same situation. Lithuania prohibited corporal punishment by the law in 2017 and in Estonia 2015. However – does it work?

There is a statutory prohibition of any form of corporal punishment, a liability or a sanction for non-compliance, but the prevalence of violence against children remains high and violence is a topical issue across Europe.

Regulatory framework and regulation are necessary, but it is not enough. I believe we should stop the tolerance towards violence and stop considering it as an internal affair of the family.

The national regulation of Latvia and also the regulation of other countries states that all inhabitants have a duty to guarantee safety of their own and other children and to inform no later than on the same day the police or other institution for the protection of the rights of the child with regard to any abuse of a child and criminal offence or administration violation against a child, violation of the rights of the child or other threat to a child.

In the field of indifference reduction regarding corporal punishment in Latvia, NGOs and the media play important role – by their awareness raising campaigns, as well as by publishing loud cases of violations. Recently there has also been a campaign on tackling society's tolerance towards violence in families, especially against women. As well as, this year on June 1, on the International Day of Child Protection, one of Latvian TV channels launched an initiative campaign "Svešu bērnu nav!", whose main message is about society and responsibilities, that every child is our responsibility, not only our biological children. Campaign encourage the society to actively participate in situations where the child's safety or life is threatened.

I am really happy that we have started to improve our emotional intelligence and educate each other and slowly, very slowly, but move on to the level, where every person knows that violence against children is prohibited and even if, in general and first of all, we are responsible for our children, it doesn't mean we are not obliged to protect other children in the society, if they need our help.

Reporting and case studies are one aspect. Promotion of mental and emotional health of society is also a very important aspect - if there are emotionally healthy parents and children, violence will decrease. Convention on the Rights of the Child Preamble postulates that a child,

for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding. Atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding is possible at the rules that parents feel emotionally comfortable.

This year my Office and European Network of Ombudspersons of Children (ENOC) has mainly focused on the topic of children's mental health. Paul Gilligan, Clinical Psychologist tells that emotions are what make us human. Protecting and enhancing our children's emotional wellbeing and mental health is the responsibility of humanity. Thank you, ENOC, for finding this phrase! ENOC has also made position statement on "Child Mental Health in Europe", which was adopted in September 2018.

I believe this shows us, how important it is to deal with corporal punishment and violation against children in general. We should cooperate and use all our means to deal with problems that are in our countries.

Of course, we can organise different conferences and events to update the topic, but I hope that we all do everything possible to make our intentions implemented! We are here to help children when there is no one who can help. We are here to educate society and ourselves!

Thank you!