

## Violence, ¿is a persistent reality of XXIth century adolescence?

### *La violencia, ¿es una realidad persistente de la adolescencia del siglo XXI?*

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#### **Abstract**

*The persistence of interpersonal violence among adolescents deserves more attention from an approach that avoids the biases of pathologization of this population and take into account various manifestations of this violence. In this text we try to describe this phenomenon from the detailed study of the case of the population between 12 and 14 years old in the city of Huelva (Spain). The analysis reveals a complex interrelation between these manifestations, but also the way in which the contexts of violence change and evolve when we contemplate key variables such as the age and gender of the protagonists.*

#### **Keywords**

*Violence, adolescence, family, bullying, cyberbullying, social representations.*

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### **Resumen**

El fenómeno de la persistencia de la violencia interpersonal entre los y las adolescentes merece más atención, desde un enfoque que rehúya los sesgos de la patologización de esta población y recoja fielmente diversas manifestaciones de esta violencia. En este texto intentamos dar cuenta de este fenómeno a partir del estudio detallado del caso de la población entre 12 y 14 años de la ciudad de Huelva (España), revelando la compleja interrelación entre estas manifestaciones, pero también la manera en que cambian y evolucionan los escenarios de la violencia cuando contemplamos variables clave como la edad y el género de los protagonistas.

### **Palabras clave**

Violencia, adolescencia, familia, acoso escolar, cyberbullying, representaciones sociales.

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## **Introduction**

Few population groups suffer from such a distorted view in the whole of public opinion as that of adolescents. As Casas (2010) has pointed out, sometimes this distortion does not seem so much the casual fruit of an arbitrary representation but of the construction of a differentiating discourse between endo and exogroup in which the adult population prefers to think of the adolescent from a pathological perspective and attaching them attributes of a deviant subject. The empirical data tell a very different story that supports the hypothesis of bias in the representation of the collective: in Spain, for example, according to the Central Registry for the Protection of Victims of Domestic and Gender Violence in their 2017 statistics (INE, 2018) of the 6909 victims of domestic violence registered more than 1500 were minors.

For its part, WHO (2002) defines violence in general as:

The intentional use of force or physical power, de facto, or as a threat, against oneself, another person or a group or community, that causes or is likely to cause injury, death, psychological damage, developmental disorders or deprivation.

In this text one of the components of this global definition is investigated: interpersonal violence understood as the forms of physical, psychological or verbal aggression that occur in the relational or inter-individual sphere and in intra-family and community spaces in which the aggressors can be both other teenagers and adults. From the Spanish context, the longitudinal vision provided by the ANAR Foundation stands out; In its latest report dedicated to the evolution of violence since 2009 (ANAR Foundation, 2018) it is noted that violence has not only increased but also has diversified and also included new digital media and, even more significantly, the decrease in the average age of the victims who come to this phone, which in 2009 was 12.6 years and in 2016 11.5. The data fit well with the diagnosis for the same context pointed out by other reports, such as the one made by the Save the Children organization together with the Santander Department of Law and Minors (2015), in which the extent of the phenomenon and, above all, of the lack of integral institutional responses in our environment to stop it is emphasized. Already in the global context, UNICEF also warns that the majority of adolescent deaths are due, in higher proportion, to interpersonal violence rather than to collective violence, showing that violence, more broadly defined, in 2015 alone cost the lives of about 82,000 adolescents worldwide (UNICEF, 2017). A recent meta-analysis not only confirmed the global scope of the phenomenon but concludes that the actual figures of victimization are much greater than the data included in the statistical records of the phenomenon (Hillis, Mercy, Amobi & Kress, 2016).

These data should be contextualized in relation to the two large institutional spaces in which, even today, much of the adolescent population's life is spent: the family and the education system, not being unreasonable to point out that violence "far from being a phenomenon isolated and proper to a particular cultural situation, it is intimately linked to the sociocultural destructuring of postmodernism" (Dupret, 2012, p. 18). The adolescence itself is today longer but also more diffuse and of an uncertain ending that tends to be confused with the beginnings of adult life with which it collides, producing in individuals an insecurity of status that can be traced even in terms of their evolutionary development and cognitive maturity (Hurrelmann & Quenzel, 2015).

Regarding the family, teenagers of the 21st-century experience, inscribed in their own maturity process, a broad process of family changes that have crystallized, following Silverstein and Giarrusso (2010) in greater fa-

mily diversity and more fluid and less predictable intergenerational contexts. The western family model, on the other hand, built around the ideal of privacy and suffering from a notable normative ambiguity regarding behaviors such as physical punishment, has been insistently pointed out, for at least three decades, as a scenario particularly susceptible to the appearance of violence against children and adolescents (Gelles, 1983).

Likewise, interpersonal violence that occurs within or is connected with educational centers is a fact that many adolescents live today even in very diverse societies. Particularly through one of its main manifestations: bullying<sup>1</sup> (Musil, Tement, Bakracevic & Sostaric, 2014; Fleming & Jacobsen, 2010). We do not have a precise quantification of its magnitude, which is extremely fluctuating according to studies, contexts or measurement criteria and can easily range between 10 and more than 35% (Due & Holstein, 2011; Moore, Norman, Suetani, Thomas, Sly & Scott, 2017; Hillis et al., 2016) but we can assume it occurs frequently enough to mark the lives of adolescents. A recent study on its consequences warns about the connection of this type of interpersonal violence with the development of substance abuse, anxiety problems, depression, suicidal tendencies and other mental disorders (Moore et al., 2017). For example, according to Nocito (2017) in the Spanish context, there is a growing interest in the phenomenon and it is estimated, based on research led by Save the Children (Sastre, 2016), that it may be affecting around 9,3% of the population between 12 and 16 years old (more than 111 000 children) and 6.9% if we talk about cyberbullying. More recently Sánchez-Queija, García-Moya, and Moreno (2017) estimate a consolidated trend since 2006 in the presence of peer abuse in the educational field, depending on whether it is reported by the individual or through an “objective” estimate, would range between 4.4% or more than 21% affected.

On the other hand, it is not strange to find situations where domestic violence can promote aggressive behavior in children and whose results can be evidenced at the school level, pointing out a strong interrelation between both contexts. In this line, it is worth highlighting the study carried out by Gracia (2002) as it demonstrates the relationship between the risk of intrafamily abuse and the violent behavior that some children carry out in

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1 Defined in general terms as intentional physical or psychological victimization, including the dissemination of rumors, beatings or kicks, insults, intimidation or social exclusion within the framework of an unequal balance of power (Olweus, 1980; Pedreira, Cuesta & Bonet, 2011; Carlyle & Steinman, 2007).

educational institutions. Other studies, such as the research carried out by Zambrano (2017) in Ecuador, conclude that the different forms of domestic violence affect the most vulnerable population and influence, in a very decisive manner, the behavior of schoolchildren. The appearance of the new digital scenario has not improved this landscape. In this sense, social networks have revealed themselves as a dangerous scenario that paradoxically feeds both peer support and insults, threats and other painful experiences for children and adolescents in many parts of the world (Byrne, Kardefelt-Winther, Livingstone & Stoilova, 2016).

## Objectives

The objective of this text is to reconstruct an integral vision of the place of violence in the lives of contemporary adolescents from the study of a concrete urban reality: that of the adolescent population of Huelva Capital. Focusing both on the victims themselves of such violence and on the broad group of adolescents, we propose to determine: a) the frequency and extent of violence in the daily life of these adolescents in the main environments in which it develops (the family, the educational center and the public space); b) its connection with the vital satisfaction and subjective well-being of this population, as well as with other variables related to self-esteem; c) the interrelation between the presence of the phenomenon in the spaces and contexts in which adolescent life unfolds: including the digital space.

Through a statistical analysis based on a representative survey of boys and girls between 12 and 18 years<sup>2</sup> we will try to discern, the keys that allow not only to analyze but also to act on the phenomenon from a respectful approach with the complexity of the social life of the teenagers.

## Method

The data used in this text have been collected through a survey of 789 cases carried out in eleven educational centers for the population between the ages of 12 and 18 in the city of Huelva (Spain). The city is an urban nu-

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2 The survey was part of the preparatory diagnostic work necessary for the participation of the city of Huelva in the 2018 UNICEF Call in the “Child-Friendly Cities” program.

cleus of the Spanish southwest coast of 145,000 inhabitants. In it lived, at the time of the study, 28 700 minors (19.7% of the total population). Children and adolescents from all their urban districts have participated in this survey, which ensures high variability in geographical and socioeconomic terms; specifically, 388 girls and 400 boys were interviewed, with 5% of these participants being children and adolescents born outside Spain. The bulk of the sample, 60.5%, was composed of students of Compulsory Secondary Education (CSE) and 62% were between 15 and 18 years old, also having students from various Vocational Training cycles and the first two High school courses. This is a representative survey proportionally affixed to the distribution of said population in the six Basic Social Work Zones (ZTS) into which it is divided. The educational centers included in each of these areas have been taken as sampling points, so that the resulting sample is diverse and representative of the different realities that make up the experience of being a teenager in the city. The margin of error of the survey is also satisfactory since with these parameters and for  $p=q=0.5$  it is  $\pm 3.2\%$ . An added value of the design is the wide range of ages that it contemplates, from the beginning of adolescence itself until coming of age.

The explicit permission of both the corresponding Territorial Delegation of Education and the Ministry of Education of the Autonomous Community of Andalusia (maximum competent body) was acquired from the beginning of the investigation. The students were informed through a strategy of “informed consent” (Cocks, 2006) of their right to participate voluntarily and to withdraw at any time during the investigation without this having any consequences, as well as the guarantee of anonymity and statistical secrecy regarding the collected data.

On the other hand, the main limitation of the study is that, since a view broad and accessible for informants of various ages of the phenomenon was sought, complex psychometric instruments have been dispensed with and a global measurement has been chosen. This has produced a more general impression of the phenomenon of violence; more respectful of the diversity of contexts in which adolescent life occurs, but also less precise within each of these contexts. An additional limitation is that of not having been able to triangulate quantitative information with a qualitative research path. The project team is currently working on the latter in the face of future research results.

A core of items related to different manifestations of interpersonal violence has been worked on. Ways of verbal aggression have been studied in

the public space, in the educational environment and harassment and non-face to face aggression in digital environments. Except for the first one, where the possible response options were three, the rest could be answered through a 5-point scale, as described in detail below in Chart 1.

We have not renounced to more complex aggregated measures since, in addition to an independent descriptive analysis for each variable, a composite index has been calculated for all the reviewed items, as well as a counter of forms that classifies individuals depending on their exposure to the variants of interpersonal violence to which each item relates to. Next, we break down the main results of the analysis.

## Results

Chart 1 describes information referring to the different manifestations of interpersonal violence among the adolescent population. Almost three-quarters of the consulted population claims that they never receive threatening or offensive messages on social networks, in the same way, physical aggression in educational settings or insults in public spaces are also relatively rare with 68,6% and 66.8% of teenagers who claim never to experience them. On the contrary, verbal violence in domestic and educational environments seems much more frequent and more than a third of the interviewees say they have experienced it and 10% say they suffer it every day or almost every day. We find it equally striking that a form of violence such as physical punishment by adults responsible for the domestic sphere, although a minority, is still so present in the lives of these subjects: just over 36% of them have experienced some time and more than 5% suffer it almost daily.

**Chart 1**  
**Descriptive statistics and frequency distribution**  
**of the items used in the measurement of violence**

Items	Statistical			Answer	Frequency Distribution (%)				
	N	Median	Typical D.	Values	1	2	3	4	5
In the street, someone has insulted me or made fun of me for my looks or for the clothes I wear	782	1,40	0,615	1-3 (1 never, 3 many times)	66,8	26,3	6,9		

They insulted or ridiculed me telling things about me (in school)	783	1,85	0,965	1-5 (1 never, 5 every day)	44,6	35,2	11,4	8,2	,7
Someone hit me with the intention of harming me (in the school)	784	1,44	0,765	1-5 (1 never, 5 every day)	68,6	22,4	5,7	3,0	,4
They have sent me offensive or threatening messages on WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram.	778	1,37	0,738	1-5 (1 never, 5 every day)	74,7	17,4	4,6	2,9	,4
My mother or father insulted or yelled at me	777	2,13	1,052	1-5 (1 never, 5 every day)	31,9	38,5	17,4	9,3	2,8
I have received a slap or other blows from any of the adults with whom I live	783	1,69	0,855	1-5 (1 never, 5 every day)	50,5	36,1	8,3	4,3	,8

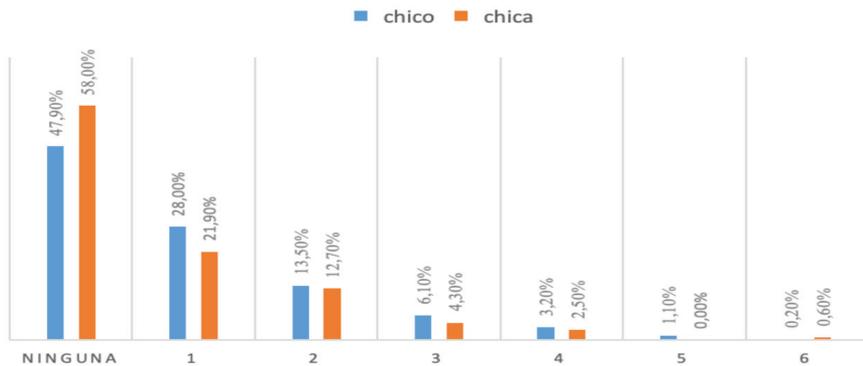
Source: Own elaboration.

What is the relationship between this incidence and key variables such as the age and sex of adolescents?

A logical hypothesis for the issue of violence suffered by adolescents is that it is related to key sociodemographic variables and, more specifically, to the age and sex of the subjects. Based on the information provided by the interviewed subjects, a counter has been constructed whose objective is to identify the times that each of the subjects declares to have suffered, at least once, each of the forms of violence described in the research questionnaire.

Specifically, Figure 1 already shows a lower incidence of violence among girls (58% say they never suffered it) than among boys (47.9%). This disproportion will fluctuate as we move to the extreme and find individuals who claim to suffer different manifestations of violence (to accumulate the 6 possible forms described in the study) but in almost all cases the men seem to be more exposed to it, with the caveat (which actually includes very few individuals) of the most extreme point of distribution.

**Figure 1**  
**Count of forms of violence experienced by sex**  
**(% of those who have experienced them at least once)**



Source: Own elaboration.

We have resorted to a statistical contrast whose results are summarized in the following chart. We contrast the hypothesis that there is a statistically significant difference between the average score in these forms of violence of both boys and girls and two age groups that divide the sample between individuals under 14 and those between 15 and 18 years of age. A look at the different average scores shows how they are always lower for girls, although in some cases the difference is marginal. In the case of age, however, it seems to be an increase in exposure to violence as adolescents grow, in at least 4 of the 6 studied cases (verbal violence in the street, threats in social networks and also the two forms of violence related to the domestic and family space); on the other hand, the score identified with physical aggressions in the educational space decreases. We have slightly shaded in Chart 3 those scores whose difference has proven to be statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) (also indicating whether the contrast has needed to assume that the variances of the two studied groups are not equal).

**Chart 2**  
**Contrast T for independent samples by sex and age**

Items	Differences by sex				Differences by age			
	(Boys) median of item	(Girls) median of item	Dif.	Sig. T (p)	(10-14) median of item	(15-18) median of item	Dif.	Sig.T (p)
In the street, someone has insulted me or made fun of me for my looks or for the clothes I wear	1,40	1,39	0,010	N.S.	1,35	1,43	-0,076	0,041
They insulted or ridiculed me telling things about me (in school)	1,91	1,78	0,129	0,027 (*)	1,87	1,82	0,048	N.S.
Someone hit me with the intention of harming me (in the school)	1,69	1,32	0,372	0,000	1,60	1,42	0,182	0,000
They have sent me offensive or threatening messages on WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram.	1,35	1,28	0,077	N.S.	1,25	1,40	-0,150	0,001
My mother or father insulted or yelled at me	2,04	2,01	0,026	N.S.	1,91	2,15	-0,245	0,000
I have received a slap or other blows from any of the adults with whom I live	1,79	1,57	0,226	0,000	1,65	1,72	-0,066	N.S.

Source: Own elaboration.

N.S. =  $p > 0.05$ ; The difference is not statistically significant.

(\*) According to the Levene test, no equal variances have been assumed.

Some of the shaded contrasts are in a marginal sense because the p-value closest to 0.05 is found: the case of the small difference regarding sex in the score of boys and girls when responding about verbal aggressions in their educational center, but also of the difference found between the two age groups in relation to verbal aggressions in the public space. From the rest, we can understand that the great differences are concentrated in understanding that boys seem to be significantly more exposed to various forms of physical violence and also that exposure to this physical violence decreases as age increases. With age, however, other types of aggression are also more present. We have introduced in the analysis new explanatory variables that can account for both relevant aspects of the subjective well-being of adolescents (Satisfaction with life, with family and with their life in the educational center) as indicators of their socioeconomic and social capital and cultural situation and other values that describe their state of health and self-esteem.

**Chart 3**  
**Descriptive statistics of explanatory variables**

Variable	Description	Median	Typical D.	Values
Satisfaction with life (*)	Perception of general satisfaction with life	5,71	1,566	1-7 (1 very dissatisfied, 7 completely satisfied)
Satisfaction with family life (*)	Perception of satisfaction with family life	5,92	1,543	1-7 (1 very dissatisfied, 7 completely satisfied)
Satisfaction with life the educational center (*)	Perception of satisfaction with school	4,89	1,650	1-7 (1 very dissatisfied, 7 completely satisfied)
Socioeconomic status	How often do you worry that your family doesn't have enough money?	2,25	1,038	1-4 (1 never, 4 always)
Cultural capital	How many books would you say are in your house, in addition to the ones you use to go to school?	2,76	,906	1-4 (1 there are no books, 4 more than 100)
Health condition	How good would you say your health status is, in general?	3,95	,871	1-5 (1 bad, 5 excellent)
Perceived sadness	How often have you felt sad?	2,74	,924	1-5 (1 never, 5 every day)
Social capital (peer support group)	If I needed it I think I could easily get help from my friends	3,50	,727	1-4 (1 disagree, totally agree)

Source: Own elaboration.

(\*) Items belonging to the abbreviated version of the Huebner life satisfaction scale (1991).

To analyze the mutual influence of these variables in a global, synthetic and accessible way we have preferred to resort to an analysis of bivariate correlations. These correlations (measured through Pearson's  $r$  statistic) range between 0 (no correlation between the studied variables) and 1 (total correlation) and can be negative (when the score of one variable increases, the other decreases) or positive (both scores increase). For the sake of clarity and accessibility of the text, the complete correlation matrix has been deleted and only those statistically significant and of greater magnitude are indicated.

In this sense, the study of these correlations reveals a clear pattern. The more forms of violence the adolescent person experiences (Violence In-

dex<sup>3</sup>), the lower scores on the variables that measure their satisfaction with the family (-0.271), their school or institute (-0.210) and also their life in general (-0.266); the coefficient that yields the highest score is the one related to the measurement of the frequency with which the same person feels sad (0.319), in this case, with positive sign since this frequency increases at the same time as the exposure to the violence. In the same way, an increase in exposure to violence seems to also increase the cases in which adolescents describe a worsening of their health (-0.252).

It is reflected in moderately high correlation coefficients, how the different forms of described violence are clustered in certain contexts with which subjects, most likely, experience them in an overlapping manner. For example, in the domestic sphere, the two forms of violence pointed out (insults and other verbal aggressions and the use of physical force) are clearly correlated (0.431). However, they do not seem to have such a clear linear relationship with other expressions of violence (except for verbal aggression in the street). In this same logic, we have found more intense relationships between those forms of violence related to bullying and abuse (either among equals or by adults) in schools. Thus, the correlation between receiving verbal and physical aggression in schools is particularly intense and with positive sign (0.521). The forms of physical and verbal aggression also have a fairly intense relationship with verbal violence suffered in the street (with a coefficient of 0.451 in the case of insults and humiliations) but also with exposure to violence in the digital space of social networks (0.434), which reveals an important pattern of violence transfer from “analog” to virtual spaces and vice versa.

## Discussion

Regarding interpersonal violence, its scope and ramifications, the analyzed data lead to several significant findings. From the outset, the word “violence” conceals a diversity of experiences and manifestations whose preva-

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3 We have proceeded to calculate an index of violence against adolescents by adding the score of each individual (6 possible values, in total) in each of the items in Chart 2. The result of adding the variables that measure different manifestations of the Violence against adolescents is an index or sum that has a minimum value of 6 and a maximum of 28 points (although the range of responses ranges from 6 to 25 points and less than 10% of respondents score above 14 points). Each individual in the sample has a score in this index (valid after excluding missing values: 758 cases).

lence and scope in the lives of individuals is highly variable. Some of them have a very low presence, although others - as is the case with verbal aggression and humiliating behaviors in schools - are not only present but seem to be frequent for a not insignificant proportion of adolescents. Other data point to an important normalization of bodily violence against minors, even among those adults called to protect them in the private space (practically 1 in 2 adolescents interviewed said they had been hit at home sometime and more a third say they are frequently insulted by their parents). Comparatively, the growing adult concern about the extension of violence to digital environments seems overdetermined according to the results, if we take into account that almost 3/4 of the studied population said they had never experienced it.

On the other hand, the analysis has found the hypothesis that there is an important relationship between the types of violence that the adolescent subject experiences and variables that allude to both maturation (age) and the construction of gender identities (sex). Specifically, a) boys seem to be significantly more exposed to various forms of physical violence in both educational and domestic spaces and also b) exposure to this physical violence, particularly in schools, decreases as age increases: a transnational pattern coincident with that indicated by other studies (Inchley et al., 2016). According to our data, it is equally true that as adolescents approach the age adulthood, other types of aggressions that occur both in the digital spaces of social networks and in the family and domestic environment become more present.

What is the relationship between interpersonal violence and the variables that measure the subjective well-being and self-esteem of adolescents? The exposure to violence does not seem to have an easily interpretable relationship with the socio-economic position of the subjects, nor with other variables such as social capital (measured through peer support) or cultural capital.

The variables that measure the relationship between violence and its different manifestations and the measurement of the subjective well-being of adolescents, as well as the self-perception of their state of health, seem to contribute more analytical value. It has been found that the scores related to the well-being of the interviewed individuals decrease - modestly, although sensibly - as the index score that aggregates the different forms of violence grows, pointing to a remarkable impact on the personal well-being of the respondents.

The data have also revealed the importance of the scenarios and contexts of interpersonal violence and very particularly how the different forms of violence are clustered in certain contexts, with which subjects most likely expe-

rience them in an overlapping manner. The two contexts where a good part of life takes place at these ages, the domestic or family and educational centers, are also - paradoxically - the main risk scenarios, acknowledging, as has been set out in the theoretical framework of this text, that they are also changing contexts subject to important transformations. Findings that coincides with those of recent national studies (Moreno, Ramos, Rivera, et al., 2019) and transnational studies (Bello, Martínez, Rodríguez & Palacios, 2019).

## **Conclusions**

What this study shows is that interpersonal violence, with not being an experience shared by most adolescents, is also not an anecdotal or occasional phenomenon in the contemporary teenage experience as a whole. Most likely, we are talking about a pre-existing and persistent phenomenon that will accompany many teenagers along their path to adulthood and that has become increasingly complex with the irruption of the digital space and the uncertainties caused by the continuous transformation of two crucial institutional spaces: the familiar and the educational.

We have tried to provide an integrated vision, even if it is only a first step, of what a diversified set of manifestations of violence entails in this experience that starts from the story of the adolescent population and has them as main informants. From the experience of a specific geographical framework, both causes in context and features of interpersonal violence have been identified that coincide with the global reality of adolescence in the 21st century and seem to follow broad and persistent patterns. With all the caveats that can be made to a study that has a local character, we believe that this has contributed an interrelated vision that presents relevant findings in the understanding of the phenomenon that invites, at the same time, to rethink the ways of acting on it. It is equally evident that a more attentive and respectful look at adolescent reality demands greater balance in the representation (methodological and analytical) that the adult population has, so far, made of the phenomenon, as has been evidenced.

In this context, it is very likely that acting on the violence against the adolescent population - preventing it as much as fighting it in the different contexts in which it appears - is more a matter of avoiding risk narratives and the criminalization of subjects, instead betting on an important work of

empowerment and accompaniment to be carried out by the adult society, more specifically from the public policies and institutions of the welfare system, but also educational ones. For this, it is essential to build participatory channels that allow the construction of intervention routes *with* children and adolescents, rather than on them. Knowing the manifestations of interpersonal violence from their experience should be part of a first diagnosis that does not over-determine the agenda of concerns and fears of adults versus those of minors, allowing the approach to this phenomenon to be better adjusted to the complexity of being a teenager today.

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