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Children's fears and coping strategies in the context of war

Abstract. The article gives a theoretical overview of the concept of fear, fears of children and ways to overcome them. The features of processing and overcoming fears (coping strategies) of preschool children in war conditions are studied. It has been established that under the influence of the war, fears common to preschoolers (unreal imaginary fears) faded into the background and gave the way to real fears of danger and death. It was found that preschool children are clearly aware and differentiate the fears associated with the war.

Keywords: children of preschool age; coping strategies; methods of studying coping strategies; overcoming fears

For more than a year now, the war has been bringing loss, uncertainty, fear and anxiety into the lives of Ukrainian children. Children are deprived from their usual routine and orderly life. The war casts aside carefully arranged world like an old glove. It rewrites destinies and crosses out lives. It changes the priorities and values of adults. And, of course, it affects children. It affects not only those who have witnessed combat, violence or death, but also those who have had to leave their homes, kindergarten or school, friends and relatives. It affects all children in Ukraine, because young children are actually very sensitive to reality, they hear adults talking, pick up on their nervousness, and watch the news on TV and the Internet. Children think about the war, see it in their dreams, lose loved ones in it, depict it in their drawings, and hide from it in a shelter.

Studying the peculiarities of processing and overcoming fears (coping strategies) of preschool children in war is extremely important, because the mental development of

a child is determined by his or her emotional well-being, and childhood fears, fixed in the child's psyche in preschool age, can negatively affect his or her further psychological and emotional development. Therefore, positive emotional contact with a child, which is the basis of his or her neuropsychological health, will depend on timely assistance.

The problem of coping strategies in preschool children, in particular for overcoming fears, is devoted to the works of such foreign and domestic scientists as E. Aronen, R. Granovska, T. Datsenko, T. Kirmanen, P. Korhonen, F. Kramer, I. Kraav, A. Lahikainen, H. Lockston, I. Nikolska, O. Petrunko, S. Salanteri, M. Salmela, M. Taimalu, and others.

The content of children's fears depends on social processes in society. Studies conducted by Edward Robins and colleagues [1] and Patricia Owen [2] have shown that in the 1940s children were afraid of Hitler, in the 1950s - of communism, in the 1960s and 1970s - of nuclear war, in the 1990s - of becoming homeless or victims of crime.

Common sources of fear among children in large cities are adult punishment for failure in a task and fear of humiliation by peers. In small groups, such fears are often minimized or absent [3].

Extensive media coverage of violence-related events and ongoing social and cultural changes seem to have a strong influence on what children fear [1, 4]. When looking at children's fears in different countries, it was found that in different societies children have a general fear of war, and this fear is not always formed under the influence of real events [4].

Interesting facts were found in a study by researchers at the University of New York at Tirana, which compared the fears of Swedish and Albanian children. It turned out that they differed significantly. Surprisingly, despite the plight of their nation, none of the real threats to the country (war, unemployment, famine) were among the main fears of Albanian children. Only one, most frequently mentioned fear - the fear of criminals and bullies - reflected the everyday experience of Albanian children, but the other reported fears were childish - for example, of animals, darkness, and ghosts. At the same time,

Swedish children living in peace and security more often mentioned such global fears as war, poverty, unemployment, etc. [4].

One possible explanation is the role of the family in the political socialization of children, which in traditional and patriarchal cultures, such as Albania, begins much later than in other countries. These surprising differences may also be influenced by parental overprotection, low levels of autonomy, the small amount of contact with the outside environment and the adult world that children are allowed to have, and the many fairy tales, legends, and fables [4].

While earlier studies showed that real-life fears (e.g., fear of real-world violence, gangs, nuclear war) do not begin to manifest until early adolescence, more recent evidence suggests that these fears emerge at an earlier age, during the early school years. It is possible that young children are prematurely exposed to a multitude of fears for which they may be neither cognitively nor emotionally prepared [2]. Thus, it is quite possible that young children today increasingly need the help of parents or professionals to cope with their fears.

More than 120 years ago, in 1897, J. Stanley Hall, the author of the theory of recapitulation and one of the founders of the children's movement, said that it is very important to help children learn to cope with fears, not to eliminate them altogether. "... Not only is everyone afraid, but everyone should be afraid. The pedagogical task is not to eliminate fear, but to compare it with the power of the right reaction" [5].

Overcoming is essential - as children learn to cope with fears, they become more competent in dealing with other life problems and new situations. There is an optimal level of anxiety. We won't learn anything new without anxiety, but too much anxiety is not good either because we are depressed and the brain doesn't work the way it should.

When faced with fear, children display overt (attempts by the child to directly change the conditions that cause fear, such as clinging, withdrawal, distraction, and direct confrontation) or covert (attempts to change their assessment of fear stimuli, such as cognitive attempts to reassess the fearful situation, problem solving) strategies based on a

combination of internal and external resources. The choice of these strategies depends on children's perception of their internal and external resources. External resources include potential allies, such as family members, peers, teachers, other adults, or even inanimate objects (e.g., stuffed animals, security blankets). Internal resources include: positive self-esteem, a sense of independence, problem-solving ability, and a sense of control over some aspects of fear [6]. The younger the child, the greater the importance of environmental structure and support in reducing the child's vulnerability in stressful conditions [7].

In a study of coping strategies of Finnish preschoolers, Kirmanen & Lahikainen found that the most typical way to overcome fears was to run away or avoid actions (about 70% of children) or to perform some action in a situation of fear (for example, to start playing 40%). Children reported several cognitive coping strategies (11%) [8]. One very important way to overcome difficulties was to seek support from other people (adults) (about 50%). Often, the presence of a close adult alone seems to be enough to cope with or reduce fears. Children also tell other people about their fears.

Expressing emotions (crying) is also a common coping strategy (65%). Children also mentioned primary control strategies, where they try to make the situation less frightening (e.g., turning on the light when they are afraid of the dark) (92%). Aggressive coping strategies were also used (e.g., killing a spider or fighting back against an offender 41%).

It is not surprising that a large percentage of children (60%) do not know what to do in a frightening situation or are of the opinion that they cannot do anything [9]. In a study by Smith and colleagues, preschool children were asked what they did when they were afraid. Children reported that they took aggressive actions (39%), sought adult support (16%), and gave non-verbal responses (14%) [10].

Research by American scientist Kevin Mooney and his colleagues has shown that children report different survival strategies in response to their nighttime fears. They presented five categories: internal self-control (e.g., thinking to oneself that there is

nothing to be afraid of), social support (e.g., calling mom or dad into the room and asking them to sit next to them), inanimate objects (e.g., hugging a pillow), prayer (e.g., praying), and avoidance/escape (e.g., trying to stay up later). It was found that the most commonly used strategies are self-control and escape [11].

Peter Muris and his colleagues also studied children's nighttime fears and ways to overcome them. Children most often mentioned the following ways: seeking support from parents (44%), avoidance (30%, e.g., I try to go to bed later), distraction (27%, e.g., I start reading a book), trying to fall asleep (24%), active control (12%, e.g., I check my room to see if anyone is there), clinging to soft toys (5%) [12].

Robert Sorin studied the fears of Canadian and Australian preschool children based on information from caregivers. The researcher found that children mainly express their fears by crying (about 70% in both countries), but also by verbalizing and body language (more often in Canada, about 50%), as well as by withdrawing and hiding, approaching or clinging to an adult, and screaming (most often in Australia) [13].

A child's ability to cope with fears depends on their experience, family environment, and culture [14].

Children need to learn to cope with their fears, and for this they need the help and support of close adults (parents). How can loved ones help children cope with their fears? The best way is to offer emotional support to children while they learn to control their environment. Some of the most effective solutions are also the simplest (e.g., leaving lights on at night, accompanying and being there for the child when they are afraid of something). Fears are a normal part of childhood, and they can actually help children cope with certain developmental issues. However, when fears cause a child to repeatedly avoid certain situations, when they persist for an extremely long time, or when they occur at an inappropriate age, they can interfere with the child's functioning and normal development.

In order to identify the content and strategies for overcoming the fears of children aged 5-6 during the war, we examined 34 children (18 boys and 16 girls) of senior preschool age during their stay in a preschool education institution in Kyiv. The children

were not direct witnesses to the hostilities, but most of them were evacuated for some time and all of them had to hide in a shelter during air raids since the kindergarten reopened.

In our work, we used a semi-structured interview and a modernized methodology for studying children's fears and strategies for coping with them, developed by Finnish and Estonian researchers [15]. Thus, individual interviews and the drawing interview method were used to collect data.

A semi-structured interview about children's fears allows us to explore the wide scope and diversity of children's fears. The conversation with the child began with an open-ended question as follows: "All people, even adults, are sometimes afraid of something. What are you afraid of?" Children were allowed to talk about their fears as long as they had something to say on the topic. Additional questions were allowed if necessary. In connection with each fear, the process of overcoming it was analyzed with the help of the question: "What do you do when you are afraid of this?". If the child had difficulties with the beginning of the answer, the interviewer was allowed to ask if the child was afraid of animals, television programs, or nightmares. These three topics were chosen as examples of the most common and usual childhood fears.

As can be seen from previous studies, the fears of 5-6 year olds are usually a mixture of unrealistic imaginary fears (e.g., imaginary creatures, exotic animals) and more realistic fears related to their immediate environment (e.g., separation, loneliness, darkness, bad strangers). The fears of children in our study were distributed as follows:

1. War (air raid, bullets, bombing, explosions) - 70%;
2. Darkness - 40%;
3. Spiders - 35%;
4. Imaginary creatures (monsters) - 30%.

We have identified 7 ways to overcome fears.

The most frequent way of overcoming fear was active constructive behavior of the child to make the situation less frightening. The second most frequent way was the

behavior of attachment and seeking support from close people. The third most frequent was the expression of feelings (mostly crying and screaming).

In the picture interviews, we selected nine fear items and presented them to children in the form of pictures associated with a story. After each story, the child was asked the following three questions: "How does Mariyka/Bohdanchyk feel?", depending on the gender of the respondent; "Is she/he afraid and how much? What will she/he do next?" The drawings depicted absolutely neutral social situations, but which, in light of early research (personal conversations), can cause a sense of fear. The choice of this method was based on the experience that it is easier for a child to answer questions on behalf of another character (Maryka or Bohdanchyk) than to answer direct questions. The child identifies with the child in the picture and talks about his or her fears and ways to overcome them "through" another child. The fear items included in the illustrated part of the interview were as follows:

1. Going to bed alone in the dark (fear of the unknown).
2. A situation of misunderstanding with other children (fear of failure and criticism).
3. Parents arguing (fear of failure and criticism).
4. Parents criticize the child (fear of failure and criticism).
5. Going to the doctor (medical fears).
6. Getting lost in the woods (fear of danger and death).
7. Getting lost in a crowd (fear of danger and death).
8. Parents going on a long trip (fear of the unknown).
9. A child hears an air raid alarm (fear of danger and death).

As it turned out, children are most afraid of getting lost in a crowd or in the forest. In this situation, more often than in other cases, children mentioned asking other (strangers) for help (for example, asking someone to help them find their parents or asking a police officer for help). The children used active behavior (e.g., the child starts looking for the way home) and expression of feelings (usually crying). Fear of separation from

parents and situations of parental disputes are in second place. The most frequently mentioned ways are constructive behavior (e.g., saying "Don't fight anymore, please stop"), as well as avoidant behavior (e.g., running to his/her room) and changing activities (e.g., starting to play). Changing activities can also be seen as a form of escape - running away to another activity (e.g., play) that helps to forget about the fear. In total, 10 ways of overcoming fears were identified in this part of the interview.

Most often, children reported the following ways of overcoming fear: primary control - active constructive behavior to change circumstances to make them less frightening; asking for help from close adults (usually a mother), emotional reactions. All the coping methods completely coincided with those identified in the previous semi-structured interview. An interesting fact was that no one among the children surveyed said that they did not know what to do when they were scared.

Thus, our study refuted the claim of American colleagues that real-life fears begin to manifest themselves in children only during school years [2] and showed that preschool children are clearly aware of and differentiate fears related to war. We can see that under the influence of the war, the fears common to preschoolers (unrealistic imaginary fears) have faded into the background and given way to real fears of danger and death (70% of our respondents reported fear of war).

The overwhelming majority of the children surveyed chose active constructive behavior to get rid of fear. We believe that this can be explained by the fact that in the context of military operations, adults are much more likely to explain to children the rules of safe behavior and teach them appropriate actions in emergency situations. For example, when the air raid alarm was activated (picture 9 in our illustrated interview), every single child knew what to do: get dressed, take a suitcase and run for cover, which is what they had been doing for the past few months. Can we conclude from this fact that the children have become more successful and resourceful in finding ways to cope with their fears? We think so. Children who have experienced difficult life events usually have more effective strategies for overcoming fears, more often used constructive fear control

strategies and less often avoidant behavior. Thus, it can be argued that the experience of life difficulties in most cases contributes to a certain resilience, gives confidence in one's ability to control the situation, confidence in oneself, one's actions and deeds.

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