

Mental health of children with special educational needs in the context of long-term crisis challenges: as seen by parents

Olha O. Nabochenko¹, Kateryna S. Dovhopola², Tetiana M. Kostenko³, Larisa L. Stakhova⁴,

Liliia M. Rudenko⁵, Iryna M. Omelchenko², Nataliia Liakhova⁶

¹PUBLIC ORGANIZATION "SUPPORT THE CHILD", KYIV, UKRAINE

²MYKOLA YARMACHENKO INSTITUTE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION AND PSYCHOLOGY OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES OF UKRAINE, KYIV, UKRAINE

³ASSOCIATION OF EFFECTIVE PSYCHOLOGISTS OF UKRAINE, KYIV, UKRAINE

⁴SUMY STATE PEDAGOGICAL UNIVERSITY NAMED AFTER A. S. MAKARENKO, SUMY, UKRAINE

⁵MYKHAILO DRAGOMANOV STATE UNIVERSITY OF UKRAINE, KYIV, UKRAINE

⁶POLTAVA STATE MEDICAL UNIVERSITY, POLTAVA, UKRAINE

ABSTRACT

Aim: To study the peculiarities of the mental health of children with special educational needs after 1.5 years of full-scale war in Ukraine.

Materials and Methods: The mental health of children with special educational needs (SEN) as well as the peculiarities of the impact of hostilities on their emotional and volitional sphere was assessed through the anonymous survey of their parents using the questionnaire developed by the authors (25 questions). The research, which was conducted in 2023 using a Google form, involved 466 parents having children with SEN aged 6 to 10.

Results: It was found that among the surveyed families raising children with SEN, 30.7 % of children were in the combat zone or zone of temporary occupation for a week to a month, 19.1 % – for more than a month; 36.9 % of children experienced relocation, 23.4 % were separated from their parents, 19.7 % witnessed hostilities; 49.4 % of children experienced an unstable psycho-emotional state ("emotional swings") during 1.5 years of war in Ukraine, 40.1 % – restlessness, 38.6 % – anxiety; 23.2 % of parents noted that their children were "hooked" on computer games and social networks, 11.2 % – had problems with sleep, 10.5 % – demonstrated the emergence or increase in cognitive problems.

Conclusions: The negative impact of prolonged stress during the war on the mental health of children with SEN has been revealed, which requires psychological support for such children from parents and psychologists.

KEY WORDS: mental health, children with special educational needs, emotional and volitional sphere, parents, war

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INTRODUCTION

The full-scale war has become a significant challenge for Ukrainians, including children. Part of the population witnessed the hostilities directly, stayed in the temporarily occupied territory, or was forced to relocate, losing their homes and belongings, some saw their homes destroyed or lost their jobs and income as a result of the war. In addition, the vast majority, if not every citizen of Ukraine, currently has relatives, friends, or acquaintances who are fighting or performing other tasks in the combat zone [1, 2]. At the same time, the entire population of Ukraine, including those in relatively safe areas, is at high risk of secondary psychological trauma due to a sense of collective danger during air raids, massive shelling, and their consequences, including power, heat, and water outages. In addition, those Ukrainian citizens abroad are at high risk of experiencing symptoms

of acculturation stress and secondary trauma as a result of reading or watching the news, and communicating with other war victims [3, 4]. Not only adults but also children are exposed to these influences. At the same time, children with special educational needs (SEN) are the most vulnerable category due to their developmental characteristics and individual needs [5-7].

The severity of the problem was confirmed at the first stage of our research, conducted in April-May 2022, which was devoted to determining the psychological well-being of children in the acute phase of traumatic stress caused by the full-scale war in Ukraine [8]. This gives grounds to study the problem of mental health of children with SEN in the context of a full-scale high-intensity war with a high component of secondary trauma 1.5 years after the outbreak of hostilities in Ukraine.

AIM

The aim is to study the peculiarities of the mental health of children with special educational needs after 1.5 years of full-scale war in Ukraine.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The mental health of children with SEN, as well as the study of the peculiarities of the impact of hostilities on their emotional and volitional sphere, was assessed by interviewing their parents using the questionnaire developed by the authors. The survey was anonymous and conducted in May-August 2023. The research involved 466 parents having children with SEN aged 6 to 10 years. The parents who took part in the survey lived in Ukraine or were temporarily displaced from Ukraine.

Research methods: analysis and generalization of literary sources, questionnaire survey, statistical methods. 24 sources from the databases Scopus, PubMed, Web of Sciences Core Collections, Index Copernicus and others were investigated. The survey was conducted according to the author's questionnaire, which contains 25 questions to determine the impact of hostilities across the territory of Ukraine on the mental health of children with SEN. The survey was conducted using the Google form created by the authors (<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1pk4gmeDuFtL3l4VuMZv4oop-gWWH2s6SpkgU-xMLqNng/edit?ts=6570b8af>). The results of the research were presented in percentages and processed in Microsoft Excel for Windows 10. This research followed the regulations of the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki and ethical principles for medical research involving human subjects. Informed consent was received from all respondents who took part in this research.

RESULTS

The survey found that at the time of the survey, 87.8 % of parents were at home with their children, 9.4 % were forced to move abroad with their children, and 2.8 % were temporarily displaced to another region of Ukraine. According to experts, the most negative impact on the mental health of children, especially children with SEN, is the duration of stay within a stressful environment. Thus, it was found that 19.1 % of children with SEN had been in the combat zone or on the temporarily occupied territory for more than one month, 30.7 % of children had been in the combat zone for one to four weeks, 9.7 % had been in the combat zone for 1-7 days, and 38.0 % had not been in the combat zone. It was found that the values of the Ukrainian population changed during the war. Thus,

the situation in the country (71.7 %) and the situation in the family (20.8 %) have the greatest impact on the psycho-emotional state of the surveyed parents during martial law; at the same time, economic difficulties affect the psycho-emotional state of only 3.4 % of parents. A similar trend was observed when studying the factors shaping the psycho-emotional state of children during the war: for 42.8 % of children, the situation in the country was a determining factor, for 39.5 % – the situation in the family, for 9.7 % – the situation at school (class). First of all, this is due to the spread of situations of general social tension, which naturally affects various social groups (communities, families, classes, etc.).

The survey also revealed that during the full-scale war in Ukraine, children with SEN had to go through the following: relocation (36.9 %), separation from parents (23.4 %), witnessing hostilities (19.7 %), losing friends (8.2 %), losing loved persons (5.8 %), etc. (Fig. 1). It was found that at home, most children were cheerful (43.1 %) and vigorous (39.7 %), but a significant number of children showed an unstable psycho-emotional state ("emotional swings", 39.7 %), as well as aggression (6.9 %), sadness (4.3 %), fear (3.4 %), detachment and unsociability (1.9 %).

It has been established that during the war in Ukraine, parents of children with SEN most often experienced anxiety (70.8 %), restlessness (41.2 %), fear (40.6 %), "emotional swings" (37.8 %), hope (33.5 %), panic (17.4 %), and emotional pain (17.4 %). And their children most often experienced "emotional swings" (49.4 %), restlessness (40.1 %), anxiety (38.6 %), joy (28.3 %), fear (26.6 %), hope (15.5 %), and sadness (13.9 %) (Table 1). As we can see, the emotional and volitional spheres of both parents and children reacted differently to critical stressful situations provoked by the war. However, negative emotions are dominant.

It was found that most of the time during the war, parents of children with SEN were in the following moods: neutral (47.9 %), unstable ("emotional swings", 32.0 %), depressed (14.2 %); some parents reported being in a good mood (21.5 %). In contrast to their parents, children with SEN, according to their parents, were in a good mood (42.1 %), experienced "emotional swings" (30.3 %), were in a neutral (25.3 %), joyful (19.1 %) or happy (7.9 %) mood. Only 1.5 % of children were in a depressed mood.

Fig 2 shows the changes that have occurred in the mental health of children with SEN after 1.5 years since the beginning of the war in Ukraine. It was found that 23.2 % of children increased the time spent on social networks and playing computer games, 12.2 % became more sensitive and began to show tearfulness, 11.2 % began to sleep poorly at night, and some chil-

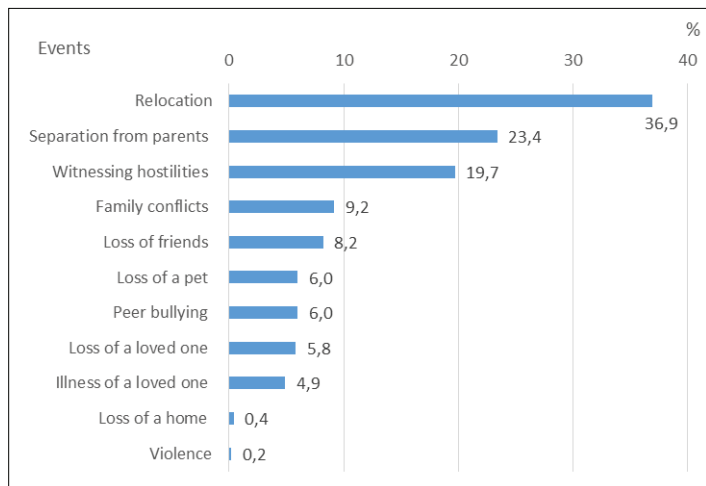


Fig. 1. Events experienced by children with SEN during the war in Ukraine (%).

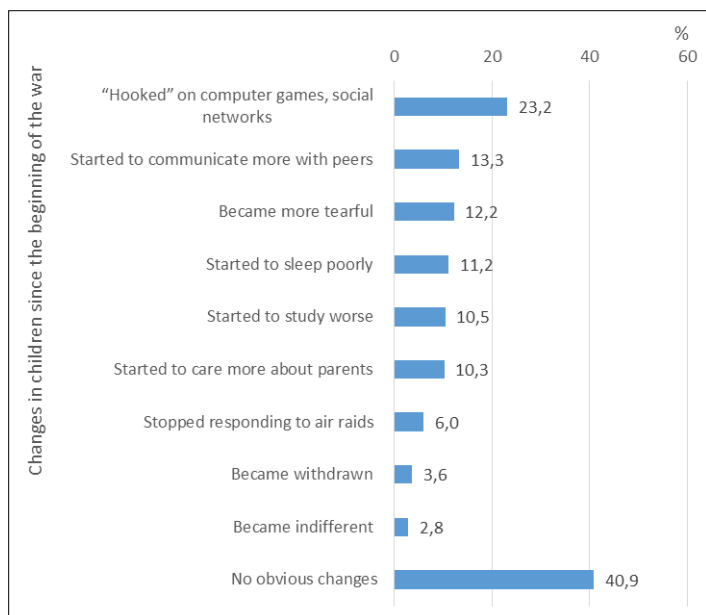


Fig. 2. Changes in the mental health of children with SEN after 1.5 years since the beginning of the war in Ukraine (%).

dren became withdrawn (3.6 %) and began to show indifference (2.8 %). These indicators can be explained by the reassessment of values and the emergence of compensatory mechanisms in children's psyches that are different from those that are relevant in normal peaceful life.

It was also found that over the past year, 23.8 % of parents regularly consulted psychologists for help in working with children with SEN; 25.1 % of parents did so sporadically; 52.3 % of parents did not consult psychologists. At the same time, 23.2 % of children are currently working with psychologists offline, 8.2 %

Table 1. The feelings most often experienced by parents and their children during the war in Ukraine (no more than 3 options were allowed, %)

Feelings experienced by respondents	Interviewed respondents	
	Parents of children with SEN	Children with SEN
Fear	40.6	26.6
Anxiety	70.8	38.6
Restlessness	41.2	40.1
Panic	17.4	10.3
Emotional pain	17.4	3.9
Grief	5.2	0.6
Joy	3.0	28.3
Hope	33.5	15.5
Self-confidence	4.9	9.4
Confidence in the future	9.4	5.4
Despair	9.9	2.1
Sadness	12.9	13.9
"Emotional swings"	37.8	49.4

online; 11.2 % in a mixed mode (offline + online); and 57.5 % of children do not need psychological help.

It has been established that 45.9 % of parents receive the necessary information about psychological assistance and support for children with SEN during consultations with specialists, 27.7 % – from websites and social networks, 23.4 % – from relatives and friends, 21.9 % – from educational and awareness videos, 20.2 % – from specialized literature, 3 % – from television. At the same time, 48.9 % of parents need more information on how to improve their children's mental health and correct their emotional as well as volitional sphere. Moreover, 54.9 % of parents are convinced that to improve their children's mental health, it is necessary to increase the number of classes aimed at developing such mental cognitive processes as memory, attention, and thinking; 47.0 % prefer art therapy (fairy tale therapy, music therapy, etc.); 42.5 % of parents see the prospect of improving the mental health of children with SEN in the development of their speech; 26.2 % – in the development of discipline in children; 25.1 % – in the formation of their psycho-emotional stability. Thus, the results of the survey revealed certain negative changes in the mental health of children with SEN during the war in Ukraine, which requires psychological support for such children from parents and psychologists. The main purpose of such support should be to create a comfortable psychological environment that would help restore the psychoenergetic resources of children with SEN.

DISCUSSION

Ukraine has a psychosocial model for determining special educational needs and, under subparagraph

20 of paragraph 1 of Article 1 of the Law of Ukraine "On Education" (2017), a person with special educational needs is a person who needs additional permanent or temporary support in the educational process to ensure his or her right to education, which significantly expands the number of children who may have special educational needs. Under paragraph 7 of Article 19 of the Law of Ukraine "On Education" (2017), the categories of persons with special educational needs are defined by acts of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, taking into account international norms and standards. These categories were defined by the Regulation on the Inclusive Resource Center, approved by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine on July 12, 2017, No. 545. Appendix 4 referred to as "Categories (Types) of Special Educational Needs (Difficulties)" provides 5 categories (types) of difficulties, including intellectual, functional, physical, educational, and socio-adaptation/socio-cultural difficulties, which may be based, in particular, on the presence of manifestations of the consequences of psychological trauma. As a result, children with SEN can include a fairly wide group of children, which tends to increase, which maximizes the severity of the problem [5, 6, 9, 10].

According to the survey conducted by Gradus Research Company in April 2022 in Ukraine with 784 parents having children (under 18, n = 1179), 75 % of parents claim that their children show some symptoms of mental trauma. The most common symptom is the so-called "emotional swings" when the mood quickly fluctuates without external causes from very good to extremely bad and vice versa. In addition, every fifth child has sleep disorders, and every tenth child has a decreased desire to communicate, nightmares, and memory impairment [11].

If we turn to the experience of researching the impact of war on the psychological state of the population, including children, we can note the significant impact observed over several years. In particular, scientists [12, 13], using the scale of the impact of events in Sierra Leone, found that 99 % of the population has levels of disorders indicating severe post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Similar findings were reported in a study of Kosovo Albanians, including adolescents over 15 years of age, one year after the war, which found an increase in respondents meeting the criteria for PTSD (25 %) and two years later, when 18 % of respondents still met the criteria for PTSD, although only 2 % of respondents' main complaints were related to mental health problems [14, 15]. The results of a long-term study conducted in Armenia show that the level of post-traumatic stress disorder in children remained high 4.5 years after exposure to severe trauma [16]. At the same time, a similar study, which surveyed 813 school-age children from municipal schools in Pristina, identified three main clusters of stress in these children: 1) lack of recreational and cultural resources; 2) health and mental complaints; 3) school problems [17]. The issue of the consequences of psychological trauma on children who have survived war or terrorism has been raised in the studies of many scientists who focus on long-term changes in the child's social construction of the world [18, 19]. At the same time, scientists [20, 21] note that the factors that should be taken into account whenever assessing the mental health of children and adolescents after psycho-traumatic events include: 1) severity and type of trauma, 2) the need to assess multiple disorders, 3) independent assessment of children's behavior, 4) assessment of family members, especially mothers, 5) functional status, 6) age and developmental differences, 7) existing risk factors, 8) cultural competence. Authors [22-24], based on the analysis of several studies, show a high prevalence of mental health problems among migrants and refugees. In particular, the experience of "culture shock" and "acculturation stress" can aggravate the psychological state of migrants, and lead to repeated stress, nervous breakdown, depression, and anxiety disorders. Thus, a

large number of scientific studies have been identified in this area, but despite the 1.5 years of high-intensity war in Ukraine with a high component of secondary trauma, there is a lack of research on mental health issues specifically for children with SEN. There are also no longitudinal studies that would allow comparing the dynamics of mental health of children with SEN at different stages of martial law in Ukraine. The results of our research confirm and supplement the findings of many scientists about the negative impact of prolonged stress during the war on the mental health of children with SEN.

CONCLUSIONS

It was found that among the surveyed families raising children with SEN, 30.7 % of children were in the combat zone or zone of temporary occupation for a week to a month, 19.1 % – for more than a month; 36.9 % of children experienced relocation, 23.4 % were separated from their parents, 19.7 % witnessed hostilities; 49.4 % of children experienced an unstable psycho-emotional state ("emotional swings") during 1.5 years of war in Ukraine, 40.1 % – restlessness, 38.6 % – anxiety; 23.2 % of parents noted that their children were "hooked" on computer games and social networks, 11.2 % – had problems with sleep, 10.5 % – demonstrated the emergence or increase in cognitive problems.

The negative impact of prolonged stress during the war on the mental health of children with SEN has been revealed, which requires psychological support for such children from parents and psychologists. The obtained results also indicate the expediency of conducting long-term studies to research the state of mental health of children with SEN in the coming years and the need to develop programs to restore and maintain the mental health of children with SEN.

PROSPECTS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

It is planned to investigate the peculiarities of psychological support for children with SEN by pedagogical workers during the war in Ukraine.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The Authors declare no conflict of interest

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

Nataliia Liakhova
Poltava State Medical University
23Shevchenko st., 36000 Poltava, Ukraine
e-mail: NataNew2017@ukr.net

ORCID AND CONTRIBUTIONSHIP

Olha O. Nabochenko: 0000-0002-9347-3864 **A** **B**

Kateryna S. Dovhopola: 0000-0002-5306-4505 **B** **D**

Tetiana M. Kostenko: 0000-0002-4976-1236 **D**

Larisa L. Stakhova: 0000-0002-0540-0674 **C**

Liliia M. Rudenko: 0000-0003-1655-5708 **E**

Iryna M. Omelchenko: 0000-0002-4698-0273 **B**

Nataliia Liakhova: 0000-0003-0503-9935 **F**

A – Work concept and design, **B** – Data collection and analysis, **C** – Responsibility for statistical analysis, **D** – Writing the article, **E** – Critical review, **F** – Final approval of the article

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