

A STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE ON PSYCHOSOMATIC HEALTH OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN IN LITHUANIA: PARENTS' PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Lithuanian society supports Ukraine in its war with Russia. The two countries, Lithuania and Russia (the aggressor in the conflict) share a common border in the southwest of Lithuania, and Lithuanians are aware of the threat of an extended war. However, there is little information about how to discuss the events of the ongoing war with children. The aim of our study, which was conducted during the first months of the war, was to investigate the ways that parents talked about the war with their kindergarten-age children, together with their views on the impact of the war on their children's emotions, behavior, and psychosomatic health. Parents in 5 kindergartens filled out an anonymous 15-item questionnaire, developed by the authors, through which we collected general data about each respondent and their child, their ways of communicating with the child about war events, and the impact of the war events on the parent and on the child's emotions, moods, and behavior. Of the 116 parents who filled in the questionnaire, 93 (80.2%) responded that they had not talked about war with their children prior to Russia's invasion, 44.0% of parents responded that they do not talk about the war in Ukraine with their child, and 57.8% parents indicated that their child had asked them about the war. In regard to the war's effects on children, significant changes were reported in their behavior, play, and drawing. It is crucial to study the effects the recent war has had on children and find appropriate ways in which parents and educational institutions can contribute to their support. Preschoolers need to be informed and involved in the community life in age-appropriate ways. Drawing and play could be used to create relevant opportunities to talk in age-appropriate ways with preschool children about the ongoing war, to try to understand their perceptions, fears, and imaginings.

Keywords: war, preschool children, parents, drawing, psychosomatic health

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the ensuing war on the territory of Ukraine shocked people around the world. The perceived cruelty of the war has led many people worldwide to endorse programs to support Ukraine. The invasion also posed a threat to Lithuania and the Baltic countries in general. The war has affected the daily lives of Lithuanians: many refugees from Ukraine have settled in Lithuania, and Lithuanian children attend kindergartens and schools together with Ukrainian children. Support for Ukraine is visible in the Ukrainian flags that are flown in the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius, and the posters that are displayed. Extensive verbal and visual information about the course of the war is available, primarily through television, radio, the internet, and other media. Lithuanian volunteers actively help both Ukrainian families who fled the war to Lithuania and those who stayed in their homeland.

In Lithuania, the events of this ongoing war affect the daily lives of both children and adults and are a frequent topic of conversation. Unfortunately, little information is available to the general population about how to discuss it with children. In particular, how best to communicate with preschool children about the violence and upheaval of the war is problematic for many parents. O'Malley et al. (2007) reported that it is common for parents to choose the tactic of silence and avoid talking to their children about war events. However, children may overhear conversations among people around them who are concerned about the war; they may be aware of radio and television news reports, and find them shocking and frightening. The vivid imagination and symbolic thinking that characterize preschool children may be expected to influence their reactions to information about stressful events in ways that reflect their developmental traits, and investigations of their psychosomatic health have thus become highly relevant (Harris, 2021; Kushner et al., 2016). Relatively few scientific articles discuss how to build suitable ways of communicating with preschool children to determine their thoughts and experiences of war; suggested approaches are generally structured around drawing, storytelling, and play (Candy, 2000; Myers-Bowman et al., 2003; Slone & Mann, 2016; Walker et al., 2003). Research shows that it is necessary to talk to children about war, and try to understand their worldviews, imaginings, and fears, because war experiences at an early age have a large impact on a child's further development (Oztabak, 2020; MacMillan et al., 2015; Shaban & Al-Awidi, 2013).

The aims of this study are to investigate parents' ways of communicating about the war with their preschool children, and to consider how the war has affected the children's emotional, behavioral, and psychosomatic health.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania and its largest city, was selected as the location for this study. According to the Lithuanian Statistics Department, Vilnius had a population of 581,475 in 2022, including 29,805 children aged 4 to 7 (Valstybės duomenų agentūra, 2023). The study was

performed in 2022, from April to June, just a few months after the invasion of Ukraine commenced. Five kindergartens in Vilnius participated in the survey, with the permission of their respective administrations. Parents of children attending the five kindergartens filled out an anonymous questionnaire. All study participants were adults who voluntarily agreed to complete the questionnaire. A description of the study was provided at the beginning of the questionnaire, in which the respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and made aware of their right to refuse. The respondents were also informed that the information obtained from them was anonymous and secure, and would be treated with complete confidentiality. The only criterion for inclusion was that the age of the participants' children had to be from 4 to 7 years.

Data Collection

The original anonymous questionnaire, written in the Lithuanian language, was developed for research purposes by the authors. It consisted of 15 items divided into five separate sections:

- General data about the respondent and their child: gender of parent, age of child, gender of child;
- How parents communicate with their children about war: Do you talk to your children about the war in Ukraine? Are your children asking about the war in Ukraine? Do you have difficulty talking to your child about the war? Do you easily find appropriate ways to talk to your child about the war events in Ukraine?
- The impact of the war on the psychological and emotional well-being of parents: How did the war in Ukraine affect your emotional well-being and life?
- The impact of the war events on the child's emotions, moods, well-being, behavior, drawings, games, communication, appetite, and sleep: What do you think, has your child changed in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine?
- Open form question: Please feel free to share your thoughts and opinions. Is there anything you would like to express?

During the second part of the project, which is not presented in this article, parental agreement was obtained to conduct semi-structured interviews with some of the children, in which they were asked to draw a picture of war. In this article, only the parents' questionnaire responses are presented and analyzed.

Statistical Analyses

In order to simplify the interpretation of the results of the statistical tests and avoid groups with low numbers of respondents, all demographic variables were transformed to binary. Continuous variables were expressed as the mean plus or minus the standard deviation, and the qualitative data were reported as numbers and percentages. Associations between qualitative parameters were tested using the chi-squared test or Fisher's exact test. The level of statistical significance was set at $p < .05$. Microsoft Excel 2010 was used for coding the procedures, and IBM SPSS 20.0 was used for statistical data analysis.

Results

The questionnaire was answered by 116 parents: 84 mothers (72.4%) and 32 fathers (27.6%). Their children (mean age = 5.46, $SD = 0.84$), comprised 59 girls (50.9%) and 57 boys (49.1%).

Communication About War

Four out of five (93) parents responded that they had not talked about war with their children prior to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Asked whether they speak with their child about the ongoing war in Ukraine, 51 (44.0%) parents replied that they do not talk about the war with their children, whereas 65 (56.0%) said that they do. More than half the parents (67; 57.8%) indicated that their child had been asking them about the war in Ukraine, while 49 (42.2%) reported never receiving such questions. Almost half the parents (52; 44.8%) stated that their children asked about the war at least once a week, and 15 (12.9%) indicated that their children asked about it on a daily basis.

Most (98; 84.5%) parents stated that they have no difficulty discussing the war theme with their children. However, when answering the subsequent question, “Do you easily find appropriate ways to talk to your child about the war events in Ukraine?”, 44 (37.9%) parents admitted that finding an appropriate way to speak about the war was challenging for them.

How Girls and Boys Communicate About War

Boys and girls asked their parents about the war in Ukraine to an equal extent. Also, parents talked equally often with their sons and daughters about the ongoing war. See Table 1.

Table 1. *Do Children Ask About the War in Ukraine, and Do Parents Talk to Them About the War, by Gender of Children.*

Gender	Are your children asking about the war in Ukraine?						Do you talk to your children about the war in Ukraine?			
	Total		Yes		No		Yes		No	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Boys	49.1	57	57.9	33	42.1	24	56.1	32	43.9	25
Girls	50.9	59	57.6	34	42.4	25	55.9	33	44.1	26
<i>p</i> -value	$\chi^2 = 0.01, p = .977$						$\chi^2 = 0.01, p = .982$			

How Younger and Older Children Communicate About War

Of the 64 children aged 4 or 5, more than half (35; 54.7%), had asked their parents about the war in Ukraine, while a slightly larger percentage of the 32 children aged 6 or 7 (61.5%) had done so ($\chi^2 = 0.55, p = .458$). The parents of 34 children aged 4 or 5 (53.1%) indicated that they had talked with their children about the war in Ukraine, while the parents of 31 children aged 6 or 7 (59.6%) responded that they had done so ($\chi^2 = 0.49, p = .484$). No statistically significant difference was found between the age groups.

How Parents Talk About War With Their Children

Also, no significant differences were observed between fathers and mothers in their responses regarding their communication about the war with their child. Half the fathers and slightly more than half the mothers had talked about the war in Ukraine with their children. A majority of both fathers and mothers reported that they were able to do so without difficulty. Indeed, some 60% of both fathers and mothers indicated that it was easy for them to find appropriate ways of talking with their children about the war. More detailed information on these comparisons is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. *Gender Comparison: How Parents Talk About the War in Ukraine With Their Children*

Gender	Do you talk to your children about the war in Ukraine?				Do you have difficulty talking to your child about the war?				Do you easily find appropriate ways to talk to your child about the war?					
	Total		Yes		No		Yes		No		Yes		No	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Mothers	72.4	84	58.3	49	41.7	55	15.5	13	84.5	71	63.1	53	36.9	31
Fathers	27.6	32	50.0	16	50.0	16	15.6	5	84.4	27	59.4	19	40.6	13
<i>p</i> -value	$\chi^2 = 0.65, p = .419$				$\chi^2 = 0.01, p = .984$				$\chi^2 = 0.14, p = .877$					

How the War Affected Parents

Of the 116 parents in the study, 34 (29.3%) stated that the war in Ukraine had not affected their emotional well-being or daily life, while just over half (64, 55%) reported either little or moderate impact. However, 18 parents (15.5%) indicated that the events of the war had had a strong effect on them. Of the 34 children whose parents stated that the war in Ukraine had not affected them, 15 (44.1%) had asked their parents about the war; whereas of the 82 children whose parents indicated that the war had affected them to any degree, 52 (63.4%) had asked about the war, a statistically significant proportion. Irrespective of the degree to which the war had affected them, almost exactly the same proportion of parents who reported that their children had asked about the war also stated that they had talked about it with their children. More detailed information on the comparisons is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. *Parents’ Reactions and Their Communication With Their Children About the War*

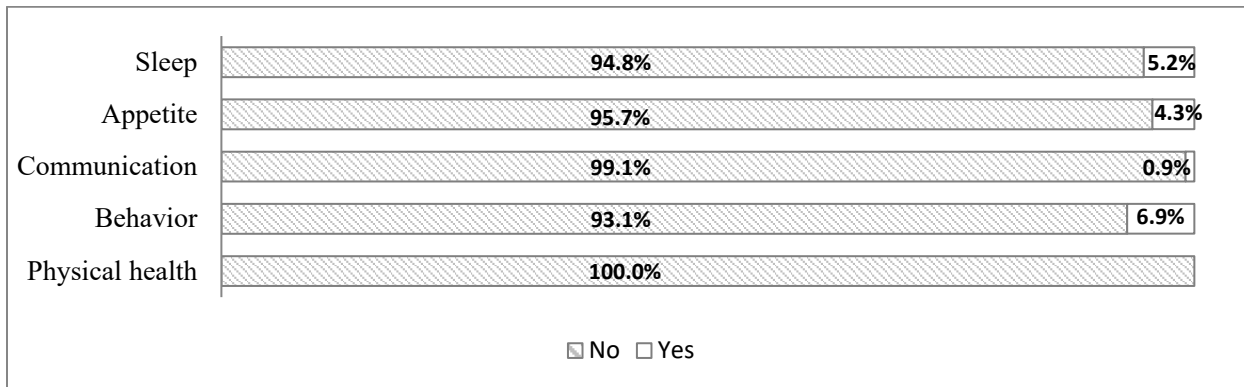
Reaction	Are your children asking about the war in Ukraine?				Do you talk to your children about the war in Ukraine?					
	Total		Yes		No		Yes		No	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Parents indicated that the war did not affect them	29.3	34	44.1	15	55.9	19	44.1	15	55.9	19
Parents indicated that the war affected them (little, moderate, strong affects)	70.7	82	63.4	52	36.6	30	61.0	50	39.0	32
<i>p</i> -value	$\chi^2 = 3.87, p = .044^*$				$\chi^2 = 2.97, p = .072$					

**p* < .05 Statistically significant

Parents’ Responses About Changes in Their Children’s Well-Being During the War in Ukraine

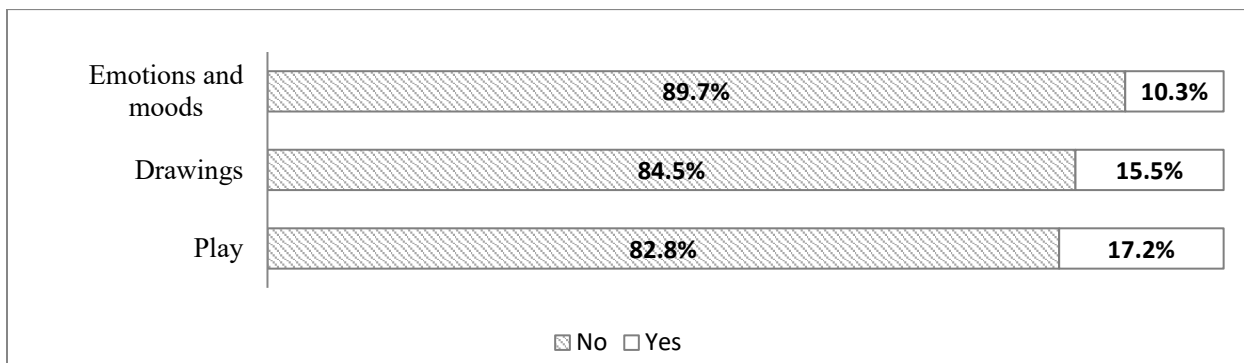
Most parents did not note any essential changes in their child’s physical health, behavior, communication, appetite, or sleep during the ongoing war in Ukraine; see Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Parents’ Responses About Changes in Their Children’s Physical Health, Behavior, Communication, Appetite, and Sleep During the War in Ukraine*



However, as Figure 2 shows, more parents observed changes in their children’s emotions and moods, their drawings, and their play. Nearly one out of five parents (20, 17.2%) indicated that their children’s play has changed.

Figure 2. *Parents’ Responses Regarding Changes in Their Children’s Emotions and Moods, Drawings, and Play During the War in Ukraine*



Statistically significant changes in children’s sleep, appetite, communication, behavior, physical health, play, and drawings were not found. However, the parents who had talked with their children about the war in Ukraine were significantly more likely to indicate that their children’s moods and emotions had changed after the war started than were those who did not talk about the war in Ukraine with their children. More detailed information on these comparisons is presented in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4. *Parents' Responses About Changes in Their Children's Sleep, Appetite, Communication, and Behavior During the War in Ukraine According to Whether They Talked About It With Their Children*

Changes in...		Talking about the war		No talking about the war		χ^2	<i>p</i>
		%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>		
Sleep	Yes	3.1	2	7.8	4	1.32	.250
	No	96.9	63	92.2	47		
Appetite	Yes	3.1	2	5.9	3	0.45	.460
	No	96.9	63	94.1	48		
Communication	Yes	0.0	0	2.0	1	1.29	.265
	No	100.0	65	98.0	50		
Behavior	Yes	7.7	5	5.9	3	0.46	.703
	No	92.3	60	94.1	48		

Table 5. *Parents' Responses About Changes in Their Children's Emotions and Moods, Drawings, and Play During The War in Ukraine According to Whether They Talked About It With Their Children*

Changes in...		Talking about the war		No talking about the war		χ^2	<i>p</i>
		%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>		
Emotions and moods	Yes	15.4	10	3.9	2	4.05	.044*
	No	84.6	55	96.1	49		
Drawings	Yes	20.0	13	9.8	5	2.27	.095
	No	80.0	52	90.2	46		
Play	Yes	23.1	15	9.8	5	3.26	.060
	No	76.9	40	90.2	46		

* $p < .05$ Statistically significant

Parents Who Permitted the Researchers To Meet Their Children

More than a third (37.9%) of parents permitted the researchers to meet their children, discuss the war with them, and have them make drawings. Of those 44 parents, 26 (59.0%) indicated that they spoke to their children about the war significantly more often than did the 29 parents (40.2%) who did not give such permission ($\chi^2 = 7.45, p = .006$).

Open Question

In their answers to the open question, where they were given a chance to add to their previous answers, some parents indicated that their young children had exhibited high sensitivity to information about the war, and that the amount of information viewed by children about the war on television or the internet should therefore be limited. However, some parents stated that it is essential to talk about the war with children, as this can calm them down and help them stabilize their feelings. In many cases, moreover, it is presumably the parents who are best positioned to help their children grapple with complex current affairs information and issues.

Discussion

Preschool children often have volatile, sensitive imaginations and a willingness to perceive events as having magical qualities (Carrick & Ramirez, 2012; Petkova & Cain, 2017). Over one third (37.9%) of parents stated that it was challenging for them to tailor their responses appropriately for their preschool children when discussing the war in Ukraine. Although, overall, parents had not noted significant changes in their children's physical health and communication since the onset of the war, 4.3% reported a change in appetite, 5.2% in sleep quality, and 6.9% in behavior. More parents observed changes in the child's emotions and moods (10.3%), play (17.2%), and drawing (15.5%). Also, parents who talked with their children about the war in Ukraine were more likely to indicate that their children's moods and emotions had changed than those who did not. This could reflect the tone and intensity of discussions in Lithuanian society, and in the Lithuanian media, after the unexpected beginning of the war in the spring of 2022. This study was conducted during the first months of the war, when both adults and children were adapting to considerable changes in their society due to the decreased safety and unstable situations of countries near Ukraine, including Lithuania. During the first years of the war, a large number of Ukrainian families fled to Lithuania, where Lithuanian families welcomed them into their homes. At that time, media broadcasts were heavily focused on the war. Events aimed at raising money for the defense of Ukraine began to take place. These dramatic events were new and unusual for the people of Lithuania, and all the more frightening because of the proximity of the war. As long as the war continues, longitudinal data will be needed to determine ongoing changes in children's psychosomatic health and behavior. This study captured the initial reactions of the parents and their preschool children.

Those parents who did not observe any impact of the war on their children tended to talk less with their children about the ongoing war, and their children tended to ask their parents less about the war. This could demonstrate denial of the war, in a manner characteristic of the grieving process, or a tendency in families not to talk about frightening or painful things. Many adults tend not to discuss serious topics with children: in a study of Australian youth aged 12 to 17 living with a veteran parent with PTSD, McGaw and Reupert (2022) found what they described as an "intergenerational silence" (p. 24). Some parents avoid talking about painful events, such as death, war, and destruction of cities, with their children to avoid frightening or hurting them. A study conducted in Canada indicated that parents were less elaborative, used less emotionally negative words and explanations, and were less supportive of their children's autonomy while reminiscing about events that were painful rather than those that were just sad (Pavlova et al., 2019).

In our study, 44.0% of the parents responded that they do not talk about the war with their preschool-age child, and those parents also tended not to allow us to communicate with their children about the war. An international study, conducted in the United States and Northern Ireland, that assessed how children talk to their parents about war found that "children ages 7 to 11 are more likely than younger children to report talking to their parents about war, and they address more topics than do the younger children in their reports of what their parents said about

war” (O’Malley et al., 2007, p. 1639). The results of our study revealed that a considerable proportion of adults try to hide the war’s painful themes from their children, and to protect them from discussions about the war’s events and any resulting changes in daily life.

In our view, parents’ reluctance to speak about the war with their preschool children may also stem from avoidance and a lack of awareness of the extent to which their children understand and perceive the events. Nevertheless, at times when the war has a direct effect on everyday life, it becomes necessary to talk to children about the brutal events that are occurring, and the consequences of the war. Of course, care must be taken to use appropriate language and suitable scenarios according to the age of the children.

Children, especially those of preschool age, are curious and apt to raise many questions. In our study, over half the children (57.8%) had asked their parents about the war. Children grow and function in social environments, and it is difficult to protect them from news about the war, especially since Lithuania is also actively involved in helping Ukraine and preparing for possible attacks from Russia. Even if parents do not discuss with them the events of the war, children may still hear this information from other sources — from other children in their kindergarten, media reports, or elsewhere. Parents and educators should therefore be prepared to answer any questions children have by presenting information that is suitable for their age and sensibilities. According to UNICEF, it is important to find out what the children know and how they feel about the situation: “Some children might know little about whatever is happening and might be uninterested in talking about it, but others might be worrying in silence” (UNICEF, 2022, para. 5).

It is often difficult for children of preschool age to express their emotions in words. Nevertheless, it is essential to know the feelings and experiences of preschool children, in order to react in an age-appropriate fashion, and to be able to respond to their needs (van der Pol et al., 2015). Parents and educators are therefore encouraged to work to understand what young children know about the war in Ukraine and how they imagine it in order to find appropriate ways of communicating with them about it. Previous studies suggested that verbal information is not enough when discussing war events with children and is best complemented with visual means of expression (Oztabak, 2020; Shaban & Al-Awidi, 2013). Drawing is a suitable and helpful adjunct when speaking with a child about difficult experiences, one that helps them explore, understand, react to, process, and integrate experiences into their life narratives (Katz et al., 2014). Our results also show that, for our participants, their children’s drawings and play changed with the beginning of the war in Ukraine.

As stated above, war experiences at an early age may have long-term consequences for children’s development (Oztabak, 2020; MacMillan et al., 2015; Shaban & Al-Awidi, 2013). Military conflicts, terrorist attacks, and forced displacement can negatively affect children’s emotions and mental health (Bürgin et al., 2022; Kadir et al., 2018; Murphy et al., 2018). Such disasters can also negatively affect children’s behavior, sleep, emotions and moods, appetite, health, and communication (Catani et al., 2023; Kadir et al., 2018; Jayuphan et al., 2020), which

may manifest as sleep disorders, including refusal to go to sleep alone, nightmares, frequent awakening, and the desire to sleep with parents. Sleep disorders can also occur in children who have been indirectly affected by a military conflict (Slone & Mann, 2016). Since hearing upsetting news on the radio and television, or seeing gruesome images, may trigger children's imaginations, frighten them, and disturb their sleep, it is essential to limit preschoolers' access to news (Bürgin et al., 2022; UNICEF, 2022). Slone and Mann's (2016) review of 35 studies on the effects of war on children found that children experienced increased anxiety, which was reflected in various behaviors, such as being irritable, nervous, and easily startled; overreacting to noise; manifesting fear and easily developing new fears; changes in eating habits; demanding behavior and attention-seeking; and aggressiveness. Emotional reactions included sadness and prolonged periods of crying (Slone & Mann, 2016). When it comes to military conflicts, it is important to explain to children that there are many people and world-wide organizations working to end the conflict, and trying to make sure that people can feel safe (UNICEF, 2022).

Military conflicts can affect not only children's mental health, but also that of adults. Adults may experience fear for the future, for their own safety, and that of loved ones; a sense of uncertainty; and anger about the situation (Hollifield et al., 2018; Lim et al., 2022). These feelings were also reflected in the responses of the parents who participated in our study. The fact that less than half of the parents permitted us to meet their children, discuss the war, and make drawings could suggest that they were not sure how to talk about the war with the child, and that finding appropriate ways to have a conversation about the war was challenging for them. While refusing to give their consent, parents sometimes emphasized their desire to protect their children, writing in the questionnaire such remarks as: "I do not want that, for my child, this war situation would be overemphasized", "Constantly communicating only negative things on the radio does not help you feel better", and "Why should 5- to 6-year-old children be overburdened with additional stress, have their childhood damaged; in Africa, also, some children are starving". This type of reasoning could reflect the parents' anxiety and their inclination to deny the existence of the problem.

It is normal for adults to feel sad or worried when war breaks out in their vicinity. Children are affected by their parents' emotions, and they are also affected by environmental processes and reactions (Meyer et al., 2014). Therefore, it is essential not to overshare fears with children, to speak calmly, and to be mindful of body language, including facial expressions (UNICEF, 2022). Parents' emotional management skills are important for the well-being of their children, especially management of the anxiety arising from military conflicts (Bürgin et al., 2022; Panter-Brick et al., 2014). Investigations taking place 10 years after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in the United States concluded that, "Parents who are having difficulty coping themselves generally have children who are experiencing difficulty as well" (Schonfeld, 2011). In a study of families exposed to the World Trade Center attacks, adverse changes in parenting, increased tension between parents, and parents' increased anxiety regarding their parenting correlated with the number of children's post-traumatic stress symptoms (Slone & Mann, 2016).

We believe that in times of adversity, children should be encouraged to expect that good will eventually triumph over evil. Family love and togetherness, helping victims with charitable donations, and making drawings can help children feel less troubled and more secure (Scrimin et al., 2018). In our opinion, it is thus necessary to create age-appropriate conditions in which children can feel that they are making an active contribution and are helping people from attacked countries.

Conclusion

This study was conducted during the early months of the war in Ukraine, and captured the initial reactions of parents and preschool children. Our data show that parents usually do not talk much about war with their preschool children during times of peace. It is essential to raise awareness on how parents can, and should, talk about war events with their children in age-appropriate ways. Empowering children to participate actively in experiencing their reactions in a safe and supportive environment could be helpful to them. Their participation could be encouraged through drawing, talking, and creative symbolic play, activities in which parents reported changes after the beginning of the war. Regular investigations of changes in preschool children's psychosomatic health, emotions, and behavior are needed as the war goes on in order to inform efforts to mitigate the stressful experiences they may undergo. Talking with children about the war makes it possible to better understand their worldviews, imaginations, and fears. Given the urgent consideration that war experiences at an early age can have large negative effects on children's further development, further research is needed to determine how those effects can best be detected and addressed.

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