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# Emotional condition of children in eastern Ukraine

*Stan emocjonalny dzieci we wschodniej Ukrainie*

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## Abstract

Aim of the study. diagnosis and prognosis of mental disorders of preschool children who live in eastern Ukraine during armed conflict. Materials and methods. 1308 children aged 5–7 years old of Donetsk region were studied in the period of 2014–2018 years. Observation, conversation, psychodiagnostics and statistical methods were used. Results. Most respondents had fears of different nature (61.2%), anxiety, concern, worry (53.2%), manifestations of aggression (36.7%) and low self-esteem (18.4%). The dynamics of these indicators over the years remained at a high level. Also, the emotional state of parents and family atmosphere affected on the state of children's health. Fathers' neglect causes the need for additional attention ( $r = 0.305$ ;  $p \leq 0.01$ ), while mothers' neglect causes anxiety ( $r = 0.322$ ;  $p \leq 0.01$ ) and neurotic states ( $r = 0.331$ ;  $p \leq 0.01$ ). Conclusions. Armed conflict, social and legal difficulties in Ukraine demoralize society and pose a threat to the full children's development. The results of the research emphasize the importance of organizing dynamic diagnostics of children's mental health, as well as regulating appropriate measures for the prevention and elimination of negative emotional manifestations among children through the implementation of the medical-psychological and pedagogical system accompanying them.

## Key words:

children, emotional disturbances, aggression, anxiety, war, Donbass, Ukraine

## Streszczenie

Cel badania. Diagnoza i prognoza zaburzeń psychicznych dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym mieszkających we wschodniej Ukrainie w czasie konfliktu zbrojnego. Materiały i metody. W latach 2014–2018 przebadano 1308 dzieci w wieku 5–7 lat z obwodu donieckiego. Zastosowano obserwację, rozmowę, psychodiagnostykę i metody statystyczne. Wyniki. Większość badanych miała lęki o różnym charakterze (61,2%), strach, zaniepokojenie, zmartwienie (53,2%), przejawy agresji (36,7%) oraz niską samoocenę (18,4%). Dynamika tych wskaźników na przestrzeni lat utrzymywała się na wysokim poziomie. Również stan emocjonalny rodziców i atmosfera rodzinna wpływały na stan zdrowia dzieci. Zaniechanie ze strony ojca powoduje potrzebę dodatkowej uwagi ( $r = 0,305$ ;  $p \leq 0,01$ ), a zaniechanie ze strony matki powoduje lęk ( $r = 0,322$ ;  $p \leq 0,01$ ) i stany nerwicowe ( $r = 0,331$ ;  $p \leq 0,01$ ). Wnioski. Konflikty zbrojne, trudności społeczne i prawne na Ukrainie demoralizują społeczeństwo i stanowią zagrożenie dla pełnego rozwoju dzieci. Wyniki badań podkreślają wagę zorganizowania dynamicznej diagnostyki zdrowia psychicznego dzieci, a także wprowadzenia odpowiednich działań w zakresie profilaktyki i eliminowania negatywnych przejawów emocjonalnych wśród dzieci poprzez realizację towarzyszącego im programu medyczno-psychologicznego i pedagogicznego.

## Słowa kluczowe:

dzieci, zaburzenia emocjonalne, agresja, lęk, wojna, Donbas, Ukraina



## Introduction

The importance of diagnosis and prediction of the preschool age children's mental health is due to intense changes in the present. Every day a contemporary child faces with various social and psychological challenges, one of which is living in the region of armed conflict that has existed in Eastern Ukraine for several years.

The civil conflict in all its forms leads to losses such as people, accommodation, and mode of life, families, health and stability. The most traumatic factors which related to military events for a child are a direct threat to life; own health and relatives' health change of permanent residence and negative influence of mass media information attacks. It means that life is accompanied by fears, anxiety, danger and loss of confidence.

Consequences of traumatic events are mild impairment of adaptation, post-traumatic stress disorders in clinical cases and severe mental disorders. Taking into consideration the totality of stress factors, it is not surprising that many children have some effects of traumatic events anyway [1]. These changes might turn into delayed effects of stress disorders and have a negative impact on the child's future life.

In the context of armed conflict, influenced by information and psychological war mental health problems come to the fore and they are characterized by violations of a wide range of deformations because of mental disorders and mental illness.

Results of the diagnosis of emotion dysregulation of Syrian refugee children indicated that 45.6% have developed PTSD with excessive risk for co morbidity with emotion deregulation [2].

The former forcibly recruited children and youth from the Acholi and Langi region in Northern Uganda are widely represented in a literature, which documents mental health issues, especially PTSD [3].

War is a traumatic event that leaves physical injuries and mental suffering. During the Chechen war (1999–2009) even non-specialists noticed how different were children, who left Chechnya at the beginning of the war, from those who left the republic in the midst of hostilities. The first were protected from severe psycho-traumatic situations. They retained their ability to play, communicate and have cognitive activity. And the others were constrained, annoyed and offended [1]

Traumatic events leave an imprint on the child's psyche; it remains in his/her memory. Children, who underwent an extraordinary event, have fears, feel nightmares and obsessive pictures of what they saw and these images form a persistent neurotic syndrome. Also, children have a lot of emotional changes. They become easily lachrymose, anxious, irritable and lustful [4].

The main symptoms of mental trauma acquired directly in an extreme situation are characterized by instability of an emotional state, inability to concentrate attention; partial or total memory loss; the complication of memorizing information; increased sensitivity to noise, light and smell; violation of logic and speed of thinking; violation of the critical perception of the situation and his/her actions; weakening of volition; visual and auditory hallucinations [5].

A child who became a victim of information and psychological war has a violation of the integrity of the individual, which leads to some interrelated changes in mental health, life and personal goal settings and general orientation of an indi-

vidual. The threat of the balance of a child's inner world has influence on reducing of self-confidence and self-determination and lack of understanding of his/her own abilities and interests.

During the studying of mental health of a child's emotional response to any situation is essential. The variety of emotional states forms a child's behaviour, his/her feelings and mood, creates his/her peculiarity and subjective attitude to reality including an individual personal assessment of received information.

"Inconsistency" between a child's aspirations, ideas, and possibilities to act often leads to the appearance of psychological problems, various sthenic and asthenic emotional disorders [6].

The parents of children, who survived in the war in Beslan in September 2004, described such demonstrations as refusal of food, behavioural disorders, and increased aggressiveness, fear of being alone and fear of loud sounds. Many children complained about the fact that they are haunted by images that reproduce certain episodes that they had experienced (flashbacks). Express diagnosis showed an increased level of anxiety, avoiding contacts with other people and that fact that the most of affected children have lethargy (up to stupor and total mutism) and depression [7].

In order to recover the negative experience and return to productive life a child must cope with emotional experiences and at the same time overcome the alarming and aggressive patterns of worldview because the threats that have been experienced make children expect to the similar ones in the future. In order to plan corrective measures you need to understand the existing problems and it is required diagnosis of the current state.

Therefore, research of mental health of preschool children who are in a tense socio-psychological environment, in particular military conflict, is one of the main problems of Ukraine which requires special attention from specialists and scientists.

## Organization of Research

Since 2014 on the basis of the state institution «Scientific and Practical Medical Rehabilitation and Diagnostic Centre of the Ministry of Health of Ukraine» studies of mental health of children in the Donetsk region has been conducted. Since 2016 this research has carried out within the research work on request of the Ministry of Health of Ukraine "Development of the system of medical and psychological care of children and adolescents who live in the anti-terrorist operation area" (state registration number – 0116U004162). The total number of respondents is 1,308 children (5–7 years old). There were 706 girls (53.97%) and 602 boys (46.02%) Work was carried out with children individually.

## Method

Observation, conversation, psycho-diagnostics, statistical processing of data with the help of IBM SPSS Statistics 20. Psycho-diagnostic techniques such as "Locomotive" (S.V. Velyev) – determination of the emotional state of the child: normal or low mood, anxiety, fear, satisfactory or low adaptation in a new or familiar social environment, "Non-existent animal" (M.Z. Drukaevich) – study of psychomotor communication and mental state, revealing hidden emotions, "Cactus" (M.O. Panfilova) – study of emotional and personal sphere, questionnaire of fears (A.I. Zakharova) – identifying the number and group (type) of

children's fears, "Ladder" test (V.G. Shchur) – definition of children's self-esteem, "Picture of family" (G.T. Hometauskas) – research of family relationships, relationships with close relatives.

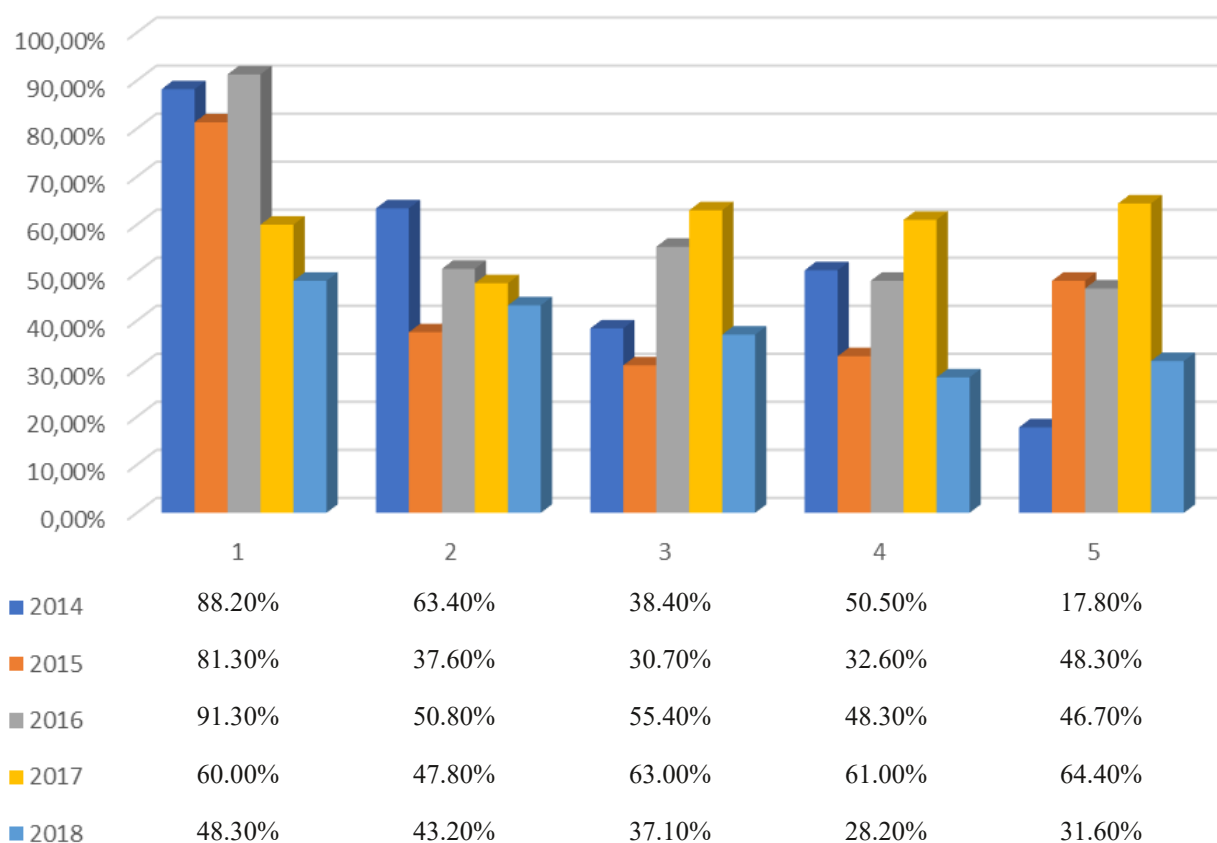
## Results

The presence of fears of different nature has been found among 61.2% of children, anxiety, concern, worry among 53.2%, demonstration of aggressiveness – 36.7%, low self-esteem – 8.4%.

Tab. 1 shows the general results of the research of preschool children's fears in the period of 2014–2018. More than half of respondents have fear of physical damage and fear of war. Also, high percentages are diagnosed with social, medical, spatial problems, fear of animals and fear of darkness. The highest percentages of fears were diagnosed in 2014 and 2017 and the trend toward the maximum reduction of fears was observed in 2018 (Fig. 1).

**Table 1. The fears of the children of Eastern Ukraine**

Fears	Number of participants	%
Physical Damage	704	53.8
War	644	51.5
Medical	575	45.1
Social	564	45.1
Darkness	577	46.2
Fear of Animals	442	35.4
Open Spaces	361	31.3



**Figure 1. Types of fears of 5–7 years old children during the period of 2014–2018 (1 – fear of war; 2 – fear of physical injuries; 3 – fear of darkness; 4 – medical fears; 5 – fear of open space.**

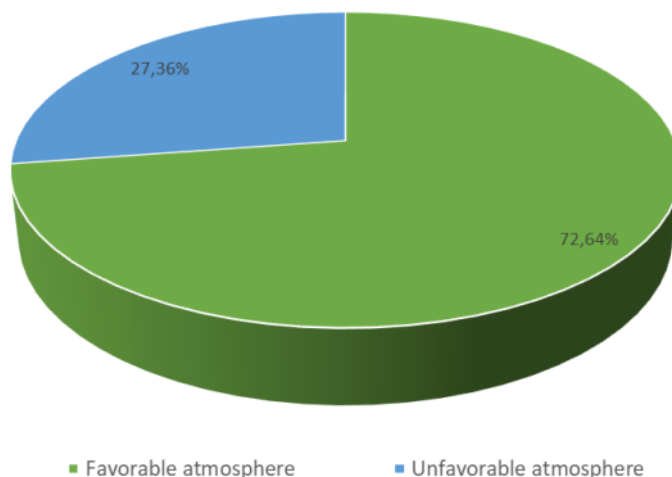


It has been statistically established that the presence of the fear of war lowers the children's self-esteem ( $r = -0.389$ ;  $p \leq 0.05$ ), the fear of death increases the fear of physical damage, such as: injuries, wounds ( $r = 0.767$ ;  $p \leq 0.01$ ), fear of aggression ( $r = 0.375$ ;  $p \leq 0.05$ ).

High percentages of anxiety were found out among the respondents throughout the study period. In 2014 the number of children who had anxiety was 54.4%; 2015 – 73.1%; 2016 – 41.9%; 2017 – 75.6%; 2018 – 51.2%.

Aggression in the psycho-emotional state of children also existed during the study period: 2014 – 34.2%; 2015 – 39.3%; 2016 – 39.4%; 2017 – 54.4%; 2018 – 23.1%.

There is a sense of loneliness and insecurity among 57.4% of children in their families. During the studying of parent-child relations it was established that 966 people have a favourable family setting and 342 people have an unfavourable internal family situation (Fig. 2).



**Figure 2. Interfamily climate according to the research of the method “Picture of family”**

According to the research “Picture of family”, a detailed study of the picture, conversations with the children took place. It has been established that unfavourable family setting creates feeling of loneliness and insecurity among children that has an influence on self-esteem, perception of yourself and your possibilities. The correlation analysis has established direct links between adult aggression and child self-aggression, between insufficient attention from parents and the presence of the need for additional interaction with them. It has been statistically proved that the more aggression adults show, the higher the level of self-aggression children have ( $r = 0.702$ ;  $p \leq 0.01$ ), then they do not feel themselves as a part of their family ( $r = 0.835$ ;  $p \leq 0.05$ ). Fathers’ neglect causes the need for additional attention for children ( $r = 0.705$ ;  $p \leq 0.01$ ), while mothers’ neglect causes anxiety ( $r = 0.722$ ;  $p \leq 0.01$ ) and neurotic states ( $r = 0.631$ ;  $p \leq 0.01$ ).

The self-assessment study during 2014–2018 showed that 660 children (51.8%) had average (adequate) self-esteem, 455 children (32.4%) had high self-esteem, and 186 children (11.9%) had low self-esteem. Only in 2018 high (69.9%) and adequate (27.1%) levels of self-esteem started to dominate and there was almost no low level of self-esteem (3%). In its turn, during 2014–2017 the average and low levels of self-esteem prevailed, while a high level of self-assessment was almost not determined. According to the age of child’s development the highest self-esteem is a norm for preschool children.

Correlation analysis established inverse relationships between self-esteem and dependence, uncertainty ( $r = -0.429$ ;  $p \leq 0.01$ ),

striving for protection ( $r = -0.642$ ;  $p \leq 0.01$ ), need for support ( $r = -0.843$ ;  $p \leq 0.05$ ). It was also established that the higher the fear of war in children, the lower their self-esteem ( $r = -0.753$ ;  $p \leq 0.01$ ); the higher the alarm, the lower the self-esteem ( $r = -0.866$ ;  $p \leq 0.01$ ).

## Discussion

The recent study has established the state of mental health and psychological well-being of children of the specified region, as well as to determine the features of the psycho-emotional state and establish certain interdependence.

The fear of a war that is not a natural feature for this age, as well as the fears of physical damage, darkness, spatial and other fears show that children of 5–7 years old have to start exploring the world but they should perceive the problems of modern Ukraine (to the best of their understanding) and they feel a threat of war. These children are waiting for physical suffering, fears of danger, trembling and uncertainty during their communication with coevals or adults.

The study of parent-child relationships showed that even in a favourable family setting the child may not feel the level of safety and comfort that his/her individual psychological or psycho-emotional states require. It should be emphasized that a family plays an important and an indisputable role for a child during the first years of life (preschool period). This fact becomes especially relevant under unfavourable social conditions. Therefore, any emotion of children (and, especially one that arises under stress) appears under the influence of information

processing by parents of some events occurring in the environment.

Currently, Ukraine has various projects, programs for correction of the psycho-emotional state of children but systematic and composite nature of these measures is absent. Effectiveness is found in the studies of 2018 in which the reduction of negative psycho-emotional manifestations and existence of high levels of fear, anxiety, insularity and aggressiveness among children are shown.

When an organism feels a threat, there are some changes which prepare a body to fight or escape from danger. And it explains the sequence of a protective reaction demonstration in an organism. The presence of the above-mentioned psycho-emotional characteristics of children can cause deformation of their psycho-emotional state with the further development of complex mental and psychological problems such as contraction of communicative skills, development of neuroses, psycho-traumatic and stress disorder. Therefore, we have found out that the mental health and psychological well-being of children who live in a tense environment are under threat. Therefore, this problem requires an urgent comprehensive solution by the development of therapeutic, rehabilitation, correctional and recreational areas for preventing and eliminating the factors of mental disorders in the latter.

## Conclusions

1. Armed conflicts, social and legal difficulties in Ukraine demoralize society and endanger full development of children. The results of the study showed that more than 50% of children in the East of Ukraine have fear of a war that is not a natural feature for preschool age.
2. Some children have problems of psycho-emotional state such as fears (61.2%), anxiety (51.2%), aggressiveness (23.1%) and unfavourable family setting (27.3%). Violation of the relationship with a father forms the child who needs additional attention, while violation of contact with a mother creates anxiety and neurotic conditions. Thus, the provision of security needs, devotion and respect are violated.
3. The results of research emphasize the importance of organization of dynamic diagnosis of children's mental health, as well as the regulation of appropriate measures for prevention and elimination of negative emotional actions of children through implementation of the medical-psychological and pedagogical system of the latter.

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