

Mental Health of Children in Ukraine During War

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“If we are to teach real peace in this world, and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with the children You must be the change you wish to see in the world.”
— Mahatma Gandhi

“There can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children.”

— Nelson Mandela

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Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has taken the news world by storm. The world is constantly kept up to date about the mass devastation, damage, and deaths of thousands of innocent citizens. According to UNICEF, 90% of displaced Ukrainian refugees are women and children. Unaccompanied and separated children are vulnerable to child abuse, violence, trafficking, and exploitation. Their lives are totally disrupted. The physical wreckage is horror enough, but what about the emotional damage? An important topic that often goes unnoticed is children’s mental health in Ukraine. Being caught in the middle of a war is traumatizing for adults, but what toll does it take on young, growing minds? Children are killed, abandoned, and forced to flee their homes daily. Because of the Russian-Ukraine war, children as young as infants are experiencing not only physical trauma but mental trauma as well.

According to Paul Wise, a pediatrics professor at Stanford University, “Children are extremely vulnerable to insecurity, not only the physical trauma but the psychological trauma, and it can reverberate and have repercussions for a long time” (ABC News.). How children are treated by their parents determines how they view things as they grow up. Because their parents are struggling with trauma themselves, children will not be able to receive the support they look for in a guardian. Kids are easily impressionable and will mirror what they see around them. In this case, they live in a war zone, meaning the children will reflect depression, anxiety, and

self-isolation. A happy childhood is essential in the development of a person. These children have seen things that most adults will never know. This can damage a whole generation of young Ukrainians, who will grow up with unresolved trauma and a lack of childhood. Every child reflects trauma differently. Some may seem agitated, while others may be quiet and closed off. It is important not to assume a child is okay based on their physical behavior. According to Dr. Jack Shonkoff, director of the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, “Some children in these circumstances tend to be more withdrawn. They are not crying as much, they are not demanding much attention” (ABC News). Due to the war, a generation of Ukrainian children will display signs of PTSD, depression, anxiety, and other mental disorders. PTSD in children at war-inflicted zones is around 47%, depression around 43%, and anxiety disorders around 27%. According to Relief Web, “Previous studies have shown that more than 22% of conflict-affected people may end up with some form of mental health disorder. In the context of Ukraine, that would mean 4,595,591 people, 1,531,864 of them children, and the number is growing daily”. However, children are surprisingly resilient and will be able to cope, given enough support.

Conclusion:

With the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, thousands of children risk long-lasting mental health disorders. The impact of this is under-appreciated by society at large but may have significant consequences for the people of Ukraine for many years to come. Immediate intervention is essential to prevent significant harm.

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Psychosocial interventions for war-affected children should be multileveled and specifically targeted toward their needs. Interventions need to be trauma-informed and strength- and resilience-oriented. The first step is to screen and assess the mental health needs of each child and decide what resources are needed. Immediate supportive interventions should focus on providing basic physical and emotional resources for these children to regain a sense of security. Intervention modalities could be creative-expressive, psycho-educational, and cognitive behavioral strategies. Examples of creative-expressive approaches are interactive activities such as drama, music, role-playing, and drawing. Psychotherapies could be trauma-focused, interpersonal psychotherapy, and traumatic grief psychotherapy. Treatment strategies could use specialized services, non-specialized group services,

community group services, and social activities. Specialized services use psychologists, psychiatrists, and mental health nurses. Focused nonspecialized group activities could use school as a platform for classroom-based intervention, group psychotherapy, and other interventions. Community and family support strategies include social networks, supportive child-friendly spaces, recreational activities etc. Creating awareness among the international community through various social media platforms is important. Efforts should be made to educate and train medical professionals to recognize, screen, and treat mental health issues in war-affected children.

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