

# Teachers' assessment of the mental health of children with special educational needs during the war

Kateryna S. Dovhopola<sup>1</sup>, Olha O. Nabochenko<sup>2</sup>, Tetiana M. Kostenko<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> MYKOLA YARMACHENKO INSTITUTE OF SPECIAL PEDAGOGY AND PSYCHOLOGY OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES OF UKRAINE, KYIV, UKRAINE

<sup>2</sup> PUBLIC ORGANIZATION "SUPPORT THE CHILD", KYIV, UKRAINE

<sup>3</sup> ASSOCIATION OF EFFECTIVE PSYCHOLOGISTS OF UKRAINE, KYIV, UKRAINE

## ABSTRACT

**Aim:** To study the results of teachers' assessment of the mental health of high schoolers with special educational needs (SEN) after the 1.5 years of war in Ukraine.

**Materials and Methods:** Teachers' assessment of the mental health of high schoolers with SEN was conducted through an anonymous survey of teachers using the questionnaire developed by the authors. The research, conducted in 2023, involved 739 teachers working with high schoolers (ages 6-10) with SEN.

**Results:** It was found that 32.3 % of high schoolers were in the combat zone or on the temporarily occupied territory; 31.7 % of high schoolers were forced to leave their homes and were temporarily displaced, 17.7 % went through a separation from their parents, 15.8 % witnessed hostilities, and 3.8 % suffered bullying from their peers. In the educational process, high schoolers with SEN most often experienced anxiety (55.2 %), "emotional swings" (48.4 %), restlessness (44.8 %), fear (37.2 %). During the 1.5 years of war, 15.4 % of high schoolers began to study worse, 12.9 % began to spend more time playing computer games and on social media. It was found that 59.9 % of teachers need more information on maintaining the mental health of high schoolers with SEN.

**Conclusions:** The results obtained proved the negative impact of hostilities on the territory of Ukraine on the mental health of high schoolers with SEN, which necessitates the provision of adequate psychological support by teachers of such high schoolers in the educational process.

**KEY WORDS:** mental health, children with special educational needs, teachers, psychological assistance, war in Ukraine

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## INTRODUCTION

According to WHO [1], approximately one in five people in post-conflict situations suffer from depression, anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia. Ukrainians affected by the war since 2014 have the highest rates of these disorders: PTSD (32 %), depression (22 %), anxiety (17 %), etc. [2, 3]. According to the experts [4], about 15 million Ukrainians will need psychological support because of the war.

According to the research [5], about 5.7 million children remain inside the country under the threat of physical and emotional harm as a result of the ongoing hostilities in eastern and southern Ukraine and the constant threat of air strikes and shelling throughout the country. All these factors increase the risks for children to suffer emotional harm and mental health problems, including depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, which leads to emotional and physical symptoms, as well as risks and obstacles to children's development. More than half of all adult mental disorders begin be-

fore the age of 14, and three-quarters before the age of 18 [6]. The most vulnerable category is children with special educational needs (SEN) [7, 8].

Children with SEN perceive crises differently from children with normal development and are much more vulnerable to negative consequences due to their psychophysiological characteristics [9]. The reaction of a child with SEN to a traumatic event depends on several factors: developmental features, the nature of special educational needs, age, experience, the severity and proximity of the traumatic event to the child, as well as the level of support received from significant adults, specifically family members, and teachers. At the same time, children with SEN need psychological assistance that takes into account the peculiarities of their condition and the nature of their special educational needs [10, 11]. The authors of the article partially addressed this issue in 2022 when studying the condition of children in the acute phase of traumatic stress caused by the full-scale war in Ukraine [12]. However, there has been no research on the impact of a full-scale

high-intensity war with a high component of secondary trauma on children with SEN, and no scientifically proven technologies for working with children with psychological trauma as a result of the war against the background of special educational needs or their emergence against the background of such trauma, no research on the long-term results of psychological assistance and support by teachers of children with SEN in the educational process.

## AIM

The aim is to study the results of teachers' assessment of the mental health of high schoolers with SEN after the 1.5 years of full-scale war in Ukraine.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Teachers' assessment of the mental health of high schoolers with special educational needs was conducted through an anonymous survey of teachers using the questionnaire developed by the authors. The research, conducted in 2023 using a Google form, involved 739 teachers working with primary high schoolers (ages 6-10) with special educational needs.

Research methods: analysis and generalization of literary sources, questionnaire survey, statistical methods. 22 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 23 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/1eKYY-1jKV30PGuVEXKBBHKINcUQHP41z7efdsV1CNDnQ/edit?usp=sharing\\_eip\\_m&ts=6570b67e](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1eKYY-1jKV30PGuVEXKBBHKINcUQHP41z7efdsV1CNDnQ/edit?usp=sharing_eip_m&ts=6570b67e)). 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

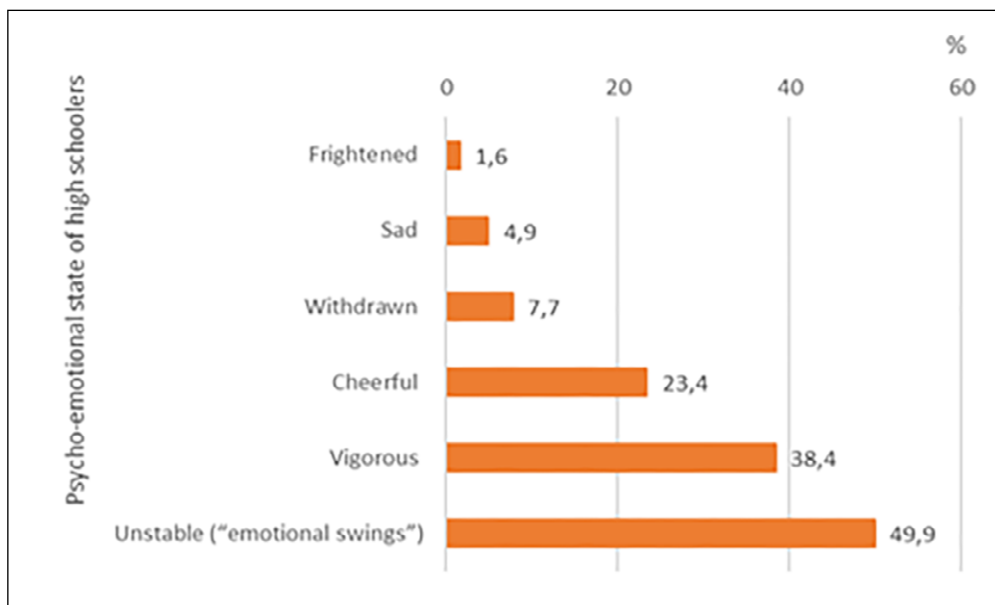
According to the survey of teachers working with children with SEN during the war in Ukraine, it was found that most of their high schoolers (32.3 %) were in the combat zone or on the temporarily occupied territory. This requires teachers to take this factor into account

when working with such children to provide them with better psychological support. It has been found that the emotional state of both teachers and their high schoolers with SEN is most affected by the situation in the country (76.1 % and 40.3 %, respectively), the situation in the family (17.4 % and 51.0 %, respectively) and the situation at school, in the team, in the classroom (3.2 % and 4.3 %, respectively). At the same time, the situation in the country is a more important factor in shaping the emotional state of teachers (76.1 %) than for high schoolers with SEN, whose psychological well-being is most importantly influenced by the situation in their families (51.0 %).

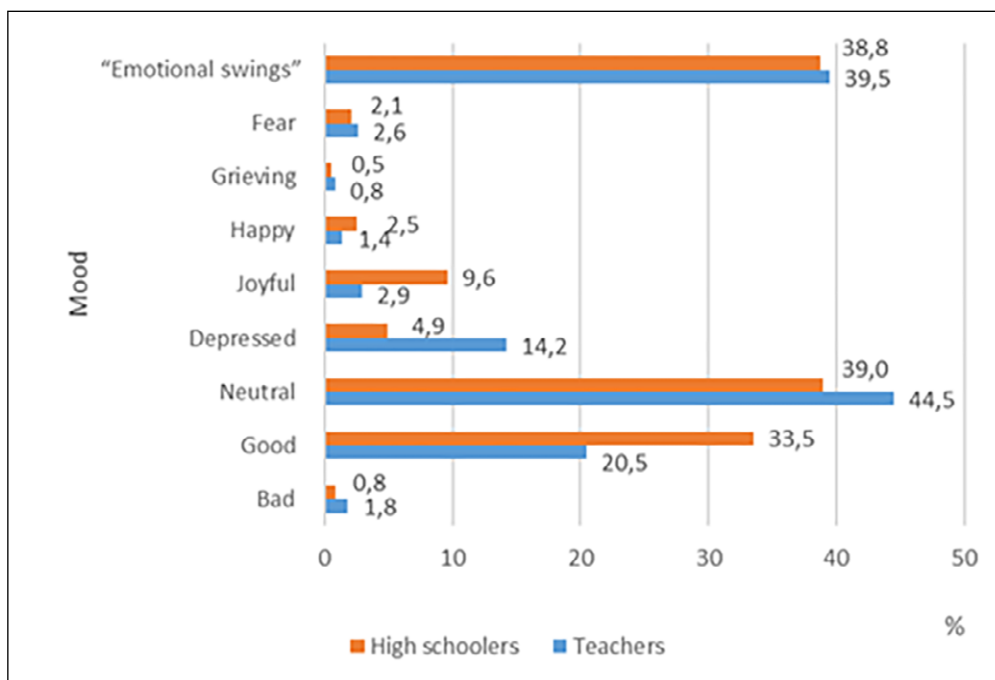
By interviewing teachers, we also identified stressful events and situations (psycho-traumatic factors) that their high schoolers with SEN had to go through during the 1.5 years of war in Ukraine. Thus, since the beginning of the war, 31.7 % of high schoolers with SEN were forced to leave their homes and move to another region of Ukraine or be temporarily displaced abroad, 17.7 % experienced one or more separations from their parents under various circumstances, 15.8 % witnessed hostilities, 12.0 % witnessed family conflicts, 4.6 % lost friends, 4.4 % experienced injury, illness or suffering of a close relative, 3.8 % of children were bullied by peers or other high schoolers one or more times, 2.9 % of children lost their homes (house or apartment), 2.4 % lost pets, 0.6 % were victims of physical violence. All of the above stressful events or situations have a greater or lesser impact on the mental health of children, especially those with SEN, which requires teachers or pedagogical staff working with such children to obligatorily take these factors (their severity, as well as the age and individual psychophysiological characteristics of high schoolers with SEN) into account to create a healthy climate in the student body, ensure the psychological well-being of such high schoolers in the educational process, provide them with personal psychological support and engage them in the educational process.

Assessing the psycho-emotional state of high schoolers with SEN in the educational process, we found that, according to teachers, some high schoolers are usually in a vigorous (38.4 %) and cheerful (23.4 %) state; some high schoolers (7.7 %) were withdrawn; however, most often almost half of the high schoolers (49.9 %) were in an unstable psycho-emotional state (the state of "emotional swings") (Fig. 1).

This is because the emotional and volitional sphere of primary high schoolers with SEN actively responds to emotional outbursts and situations around them, primarily provoked by the need to leave the zone of personal comfort (hostilities, systematic announcement of air alert, change of residence, deviation from



**Fig. 1.** Psycho-emotional state of high schoolers with SEN, in which they were most often in an educational institution (no more than two answers were allowed, %).



**Fig. 2.** The mood in which teachers working with high schoolers with SEN and their high schoolers mostly experienced during the war in Ukraine (no more than two answers were allowed, %).

the usual daily routine, etc.). It was found that over the 1.5 years of war, teachers working with high schoolers with SEN most often experienced anxiety (68.5 %), "emotional swings" (44.1 %), restlessness (42.5 %), fear (35.6 %), emotional pain (24.3 %), panic (14.4 %), and despair (10.4 %) among the negative emotions. Among the positive emotions, the most pronounced among teachers were hope (35.6 %), confidence in the future (12.3 %) and self-confidence (9.3 %) (Table 1). In the educational process, high schoolers with SEN most often experienced such negative emotions as anxiety (55.2 %), "emotional swings" (48.4 %), restlessness (44.8 %), fear (37.2 %), and sadness (21.0 %). Among the positive emotions of high schoolers with SEN, hope

(19.5 %) and joy (8.0 %) dominated. The above indicators demonstrate the dominance of primarily negative emotions in both teachers and children. These are natural reactions of the individual's psyche at any age to critical stressful situations provoked by war.

It was also found that most of the time during the war in Ukraine, teachers working with high schoolers with SEN were in a neutral mood (44.5 %) or a state of "emotional swings" (39.5 %), and their high schoolers were also mostly in a neutral mood (39.0 %), in a state of "emotional swings" (38.8 %), and in a good mood (33.5 %) (Fig. 2).

It is worth noting that emotional swings, as strong emotions, can change rapidly and are difficult to con-

**Table 1.** The feelings most often experienced by teachers and their high schoolers with SEN during the 1.5 years of war in Ukraine (no more than 3 options were allowed, %)

Feelings experienced by respondents	Teachers of high schoolers with SEN (734 answers)	High schoolers with SEN (723 answers)
Fear	35.6	37.2
Anxiety	69.5	55.2
Restlessness	42.5	44.8
Panic	14.4	13.1
Emotional pain	24.8	5.8
Grief	4.0	1.2
Joy	2.7	8.0
Hope	35.6	19.5
Self-confidence	9.3	3.9
Confidence in the future	12.3	4.7
Despair	10.4	4.0
Sadness	11.6	21.0
"Emotional swings"	44.1	48.4

tol. At the same time, sudden mood swings are protective manifestations of the individual's psyche in the face of prolonged critical stress or danger. Additional factors can also influence this situation: responsibilities (work, social, or family), individual characteristics of both teachers and high schoolers, ability to self-control, etc. It should be added that only 1.4 % of teachers and 2.5 % of high schoolers with SEN felt happy, 2.9 % of teachers and 9.6 % of high schoolers felt joyful; while 14.2 % of teachers and 4.9 % of high schoolers felt depressed. This is due to the impact of general social tension on teachers and high schoolers, which naturally affects all members of society and determines the dominance of depressed mood.

In addition, teachers note that some high schoolers with SEN became worse at school over the 1.5 years of war (15.4 %), started spending more time playing computer games and on social media (12.9 %), became withdrawn (7.9 %), tearful (6.7 %), indifferent (3.7 %), almost stopped communicating with peers and teachers (2.5 %), started behaving inappropriately (2.8 %), and began to commit risky acts (0.8 %). Such indicators are likely due to the emergence of compensatory mechanisms in children's psyches that become relevant in the face of rapid changes in the usual mode of life.

The results obtained indicate the presence of mental health problems in some high schoolers with SEN that require professional psychological assistance. At the same time, it is worth noting that according to the results of the survey, we found that more than 70 % of high schoolers with SEN worked with psychologists over the 1.5 years of war: constantly (52.8 %), occasionally (22.5 %). According to teachers, the most effective

ways to improve the mental health of high schoolers with SEN and provide them with psychological assistance are art therapy as a type of psychotherapy or psychological correction based on art and creativity (dance and movement therapy, music therapy, bibliotherapy, fine arts therapy) (66.2 %), development of emotional resilience skills in stressful situations or during traumatic events (52.9 %), classes on developing high schoolers' memory, thinking, attention, perception (46.1 %), development of the speech sphere (30.7 %), application of modern special teaching methods (16.4 %). At the same time, 59.9 % of teachers working with high schoolers with SEN need more information on maintaining or correcting the mental health of high schoolers with SEN and providing psychological assistance to such high schoolers in the educational process. In addition, they want to receive such information in the form of video lessons (during seminars, webinars, etc.) (53.0 %), short training (theoretical, methodological, and practical) classes via social media (46.2 %), consultations with subject matter specialists (42.9 %), specialized training courses (38.6 %), textbooks, articles, practical recommendations and other literary sources (25.1 %).

## DISCUSSION

According to the survey conducted by the Sociological Group referred to as the "Rating" from January 27 to February 1, 2023 [13], 60 % of children witnessed or participated in some war-related events. Most often, according to mothers, children experienced the following traumatic events: separation from family and friends (28 %), relocation to another region of the country

(25 %), shelling and bombing (24 %), and staying in a cold room for a long time (17 %). 11 % of children moved abroad, 8 % were under occupation, 6 % witnessed the death of relatives or friends, 5 % lost their homes, and 5 % experienced hunger and lack of water. At the same time, among the factors that can cause traumatic psychological states in children, mothers most often recorded fear of loud noises (especially for children under 9 years old). Also, irritability and apathy, indifference to learning, and past hobbies were recorded relatively more often (these manifestations are more common in children of middle and senior high school age). In addition, outbursts of anger and aggression are a relatively common problem (among all children). Such signs of anxiety as fear of the future, sleep problems, nightmares, memory, and concentration problems were more often recorded in older children (16-17 years old), and the reflection of traumatic events in games and creativity – among the youngest (3-9 years old) [13].

The studies conducted using the CRIES-8 questionnaire (Revised Child Impact of Events Scale) [14] revealed high scores on the "Avoidance" scale as a diagnostic criterion for disorders of the emotional and behavioral sphere of the studied children. According to the screening data, the actual form of children's experiences is the actualization of reactive experiences of a traumatic situation in the form of intrusion. The scientists [15] note the significant impact of trauma on children's condition and most often operate with such concepts as psychological trauma, acute stress, PTSD, maladjustment, grief (mourning, prolonged grief reaction), and traumatic loss. The author [16] notes that constant stress can lead to negative consequences, such as anxiety, depression, aggressiveness, sleep and concentration problems, decreased self-esteem, and other mental health problems.

In turn, the researchers [18] identified four domains of prognostic variables that can help identify children and adolescents at greatest risk of further problems: aspects of traumatic exposure (including perceived life threat, death of a loved one (especially if the death was violent and witnessed by a child), parental post-traumatic distress, loss of property and disruption of daily routines (especially moving from home, school and community), proximity to the event, physical trauma, as well as duration and intensity of life-threatening events), child's previous features, characteristics of the recovery environment and child's psychological resources. The studies have also noted that children with academic (learning) difficulties before traumatic events, poor academic performance, and attention span problems are at greater risk of posttraumatic problems [18]. The experts [19, 20] suggest that resilience to the

negative impact of posttraumatic experience may also be associated with average or higher intelligence, good communication skills, a strong belief in self-efficacy, internal locus of control, and adaptive coping skills, which are quite low in children with SEN, including children with intellectual disabilities. Our research confirms the conclusions of many scientists [2, 5, 7, 9, 11, 21, 22] and supplements and expands on them with the results of teachers' assessment of the mental health of children with SEN of primary school age (6-10 years old) after the 1.5 years of war in Ukraine, and confirms the need for teachers to provide psychological support and assistance to such high schoolers in the educational process.

## CONCLUSIONS

The survey of teachers working with children with SEN during the war in Ukraine found that 32.3 % of their high schoolers were in the combat zone or on the temporarily occupied territory; 31.7 % of high schoolers were forced to leave their homes and relocate to another region of Ukraine or were temporarily displaced abroad; 17.7 % experienced one or more separations from their parents under various circumstances; 15.8 % witnessed hostilities; 12.0 % of children witnessed family conflicts, 4.6 % lost friends, 4.4 % experienced injury, illness or suffering of a close relative, 3.8 % of children were bullied by peers or other high schoolers once or several times, 2.9 % of children lost their homes (house or apartment), 2.4 % lost pets, 0.6 % became victims of physical violence. In the educational process, high schoolers with SEN most often experienced such negative emotions as anxiety (55.2 %), "emotional swings" (48.4 %), restlessness (44.8 %), fear (37.2 %), sadness (21.0 %); among positive emotions, hope (19.5 %) and joy (8.0 %) dominated. High schoolers with SEN were mostly in a neutral mood (39.0 %), in a state of "emotional swings" (38.8 %), and only 2.5 % of high schoolers felt happy and 9.6 % joyful. In addition, during the 1.5 years of war, some high schoolers with SEN began to study worse (15.4 %), began to spend more time playing computer games and on social networks (12.9 %), and became withdrawn (7.9 %). It was found that 59.9 % of teachers working with high schoolers with SEN require more information on maintaining the mental health of high schoolers with SEN and providing psychological assistance to such high schoolers in the educational process.

It was found that high schoolers with SEN may experience manifestations of psychological trauma, the intensification of which may be associated with the child's age and type (category) of special educational needs (difficulties), severity and type of trauma (including

staying in the temporarily occupied territories, staying in the war zone, forced displacement, additional stressful events, and situations (traumatic factors), including the loss of loved ones, injuries, loss of friends, relocation, etc.), the psychological state of family members (their emotional state and factors influencing it), the availability of professional psychological support or assistance, and teachers' awareness of psychological support for high schoolers in the educational process in war.

The results obtained proved the negative impact of hostilities on the territory of Ukraine on the mental health

of high schoolers with SEN, which necessitates the provision of adequate psychological support by teachers of such high schoolers in the educational process, as well as the involvement of psychologists in the restoration and maintenance of the mental health of such children.

## PROSPECTS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

It is planned to develop practical recommendations for teachers to provide psychological support to high schoolers with SEN.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The Authors declare no conflict of interest

### CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

**Tetiana M. Kostenko**

Association of Effective Psychologists of Ukraine  
12 Kozhumiatska st., 04071. Kyiv, Ukraine  
e-mail: tanya\_t.k@ukr.net

### ORCID AND CONTRIBUTIONSHIP

Kateryna S. Dovhopola: 0000-0002-5306-4505 [A](#) [D](#) [E](#)

Olha O. Nabochenko: 0000-0002-9347-3864 [B](#) [C](#)

Tetiana M. Kostenko: 0000-0002-4976-1236 [B](#) [D](#) [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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