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HOW CHILDREN'S PLAY HAS CHANGED DURING WARTIME IN UKRAINE FROM THE PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE

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The article analyzes the results of the study on the peculiarities of preschool children's play activities in the conditions of war in Ukraine, conducted in different regions of the country, which significantly differ in the characteristics of military operations, the life activities of the population, as well as the forms of organization of the educational process in preschool educational institutions. The objectives of the study were as follows: to identify changes in the content, types, and organizational forms of play activities of preschool children during the war, based on observations of parents; to determine the peculiarities of preschool children's play in both general and regional contexts. The analysis of the study results allows us to highlight the following peculiarities of preschool children's play during the war in Ukraine, namely:

- 1) dominance of various war-life scenarios (most often – air raids, setting up bomb shelters, and staying in shelters) and military actions (fighting against occupiers, protecting loved ones, helping victims, working at checkpoints, etc.) in the content of children's play activities from different regions of Ukraine;*
 - 2) among favourite toys (amongst stuffed toys and dolls for girls and LEGO® construction sets for boys), there is a prevalence of toy weapons, military equipment, military robots, military construction equipment, soldiers of the Armed Forces of Ukraine for boys and stuffed cuddly toys (Hibuki dog, cuddly goose) for girls;*
 - 3) acquisition of certain characteristics in children's play, such as: greater degree of emotionality with manifestations of anxiety, worry, fear, cruelty, aggressiveness, which also manifests in the children's use of inappropriate language and their need to overcome complex emotional states through cuddly toys, thematic stuffed toys and anti-stress toys; - predominantly solitary nature of play when children entertain themselves alone, primarily due to the impossibility of a full-time kindergarten attendance and interaction with peers; play activities taking place indoors, which is typical for children residing both in urban and rural areas;*
 - 4) increase in time spent on playing games using gadgets (phones and tablets), including military-themed games*
- Keywords:** *play, war, preschoolers, parents, traumatic impact, preschool educational institution*

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1. Introduction

The large-scale war in Ukraine, which has been ongoing since February 24, 2022, has resulted in many negative demographic, social, economic, psychological, educational and other consequences, which are exacerbated because of long-term traumatic impact. Naturally, the priority task for various fields of scientific knowledge in Ukraine is to find effective ways to overcome these issues and counteract further traumatization, as well as to foster post-traumatic recovery and development.

In this context, one of the most effective, natural tools for human development is play, which is a leading activity in childhood and an indicator of health in adulthood. Play reproduces and projects the events happening in the life of a child and of the society, fixes them in the consciousness, and allows one to overcome destructive experiences; it is fundamentally important for all areas of development and is a natural activity for a child, reflecting their personal characteristics.

Therefore, studying the peculiarities of children's play during wartime, on one hand, allows us to explore the deep processes occurring both in their internal, mental world and in their external, social world, as children's play reflects it all. On the other hand, it opens up ways to find effective mechanisms to counteract traumatic impact not only on the personal level but also on the group (family) and collective (children's and adult collectives) levels.

2. Literature review

The analysis of scientific research, dedicated to children's play activities, indicates that despite the significant historical experience in domestic and foreign psychological and pedagogical science, the presence of fundamental psychological concepts of play and significant achievements in the study of Ukrainian folk play and Ukrainian play culture, accomplished by ethnologists and folklorists, as well as educators and psychologists, the

study of the peculiarities of children's play during war-time is noted for its relevance both in a general and comparative context and specifically concerning the ongoing war in Ukraine.

This is confirmed by a small number of scientific studies, dedicated to children's play in the context of wars and armed conflicts in different countries around the world, as well as by the few works (mostly by journalists), aimed at studying the play activities of Ukrainian children, primarily those who are forced migrants (internally displaced within other regions of Ukraine and migrants).

The peculiarities of children's psychosocial development during wars, the consequences of psychological war trauma, and the factors (mediators) that mediate the impact of war-related traumatic experiences have been addressed in the works of L. Hazer, G. Gredebäck [1], J. Garbarino, K. Kostelny & N. Dubrow [2], I. Farajallah [3], M. S. Macksoud & J. L. Aber [4], A. L. Manzanero, M. Crespo et al. [5], F. Scharpf, L. Saupe, A. Crombach et al. [6], and others.

Researchers (R.-L. Punamäki, S. R. Qouta, K. Peltonen [7], W.A. Tol, S. Song, M. J. D. Jordans [8], and others) point to positive, reliable family relationships, parental support for the child, and attention to the child's needs as significant mediators of psychological trauma in children during war, and an important factor in their stress resistance (resilience).

The results of studies by A. A. M. Thabet, S. S. Thabet [9], and others prove that one of the coping strategies for children during war is play, which involves enacting war scenarios. Moreover, positive emotions and the effect of social contagion of positive emotions during play (laughter and smiles) have a mitigating impact on the manifestations of trauma in children related to war events and their consequences [10].

The peculiarities of children's play during wars and armed conflicts have become the subject of scientific research by P. Bankova [11], R. Caillois [12], G. Eisen [13], D. Feldman [14], M. Heikkilä [15], T. Hyder [16], Levin E. Diane, Nancy Carlsson-Paige [17] and others, which is more or less based on the works of the founder of the philosophy of play J. Huizinga [18], who emphasizes the clear reflection of war in play as in human culture, the close, ontological intertwining of war and play.

In this context, the results of the study by D. Feldman are extremely important, showing that:

1) war attacks children's play, especially free play, making it fragile due to the lack of a safe play environment;

2) war forces children to adapt their play to concretize and understand their own traumatic experience;

3) although war destroys play, making it impossible for many children for a certain time, children still play all kinds of games (sports, entertainment, creative, dramatic, etc.);

4) war causes the emergence of unique game plots that reflect the traumatic life experience of children, leading to the emergence of extreme kinds of play, in which children play with death, act out their own deaths and play at going beyond death);

5) war transforms play into a way of cognition allowing children to organize their lives in chaotic and dangerous conditions [14].

According to the results of a previously published study [19], conducted during the first year of the war in Ukraine (November-December 2022) with the participation of educators from preschool institutions in two regions – the eastern (frontline Zaporizhzhia region) and the southern (Odesa region) of Ukraine, the following peculiarities of children's play during the war were identified:

1) there is a significant change in play scenarios, with prevalence of military actions and children adopting new roles (mostly positive in nature), influenced by the new wartime reality;

2) children actively use toy weapons and substitutes for modern weapons in their play;

3) the daily activity of children experiences an increase in time spent on computer games, including military-themed ones, although overall playtime decreased;

4) children shift from noisy, active games to quiet, sedentary games, played alone;

5) during play, children's need for adult attention and their presence increases;

6) negative emotions and emotional excitement dominate in children's play;

7) the importance of creative activities (drawing, construction) in children's daily activities increases, including in play;

8) children's play has distinct characteristics, determined by the peculiarities of the region of Ukraine: namely, the nature of military actions, which in turn is defined by proximity/distance from the front line, and the form of preschool institutions attendance (full-time, blended, or remote) [19].

The mentioned changes in play activities are typical for both boys and girls of preschool age, and the identified gender differences are not statistically significant.

The results of scientific research, conducted by foreign scientists, which indicate the existing dynamics in children's play related to the further unfolding of military events [1, 2, 4, 7, 16], as well as the aforementioned conclusions of the previous study, and the continuation of the war in Ukraine, have necessitated further scientific exploration involving participants: a) from a greater number of regions in Ukraine; b) with a different role position (parents of preschool children); c) at a different time stage of the war (late 2023 – first half of 2024). This will open up opportunities for deepening and expanding the understanding of preschool children's play during the war in Ukraine and identifying its characteristic features at different stages of military actions and in different regions of the country.

3. Purpose and objectives of the study

The purpose of the study is to identify the peculiarities of preschool children's play activities in the conditions of war in Ukraine based on the results of observations of parents from different regions of Ukraine, which differ significantly in the characteristics of the course of military actions, the livelihoods of the population, and

the forms of organization of the educational process in preschool educational institutions.

The objectives of the study were to:

1) identify changes in the content, types, and organizational forms of preschool children's play activities in war conditions based on parental observations;

2) determine the characteristic features of preschool children's play activities in the general and regional context.

4. Materials and methods

Between December 2023 and May 2024 (22 months after the start of the large-scale war in Ukraine), a survey was conducted among parents of preschool children attending preschool institutions in four regions of Ukraine: Vinnytsia (central Ukraine), Volyn (western Ukraine), Zaporizhzhia (eastern Ukraine), and Odesa (southern Ukraine). These regions of Ukraine have their own unique characteristics regarding the livelihoods of the population, the functioning of preschool institutions, and the organization of their educational processes. Below, we present some characteristics of these regions of Ukraine during the war, which, in our opinion, significantly impact the lives of their populations and, consequently, the play activities of children.

For instance, *Vinnytsia region*, due to its transit location and the fact that its territory has not been occupied (although it shares a border with the so-called "Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic", an occupied territory of Moldova), had accepted 146,802 internally displaced persons as of August 2024 (according to the "Information and Computing Centre of the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine" state enterprise, <https://www.ioc.gov.ua/dashboardVpo/>); it has also experienced attacks by missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles (according to <https://www.oporaua.org/viyna/vinnichchina-v-umovah-povnomasshtabnogo-vtorgnennya-roboty-politichnih-partiyta-organiv-miscevogo-samovryaduvannya-25237>). From the first day of the war, as at 07.08.2024, the total duration of air raid alerts was 53 days, 11 hours and 41 minutes (according to <https://alerts.in.ua/>). In the 2023–2024 academic year, most preschool institutions operate in full-time mode.

Since the beginning of the large-scale war, the *Volyn region* has not been among the regions where active combat operations have occurred or are occurring, and there are no territories within the region that have been or are occupied. Over the two years of the war, the Volyn region has not suffered significant infrastructure damage and has worked on increasing financial support and meeting the needs of the military, resolving security issues, and improving conditions for internally displaced persons (as of August 2024, 44,688 people are registered) and relocated businesses (according to <https://www.oporaua.org/viyna/politichna-karta-volins-koyi-oblasti-25250>). From the first day of the war, as at 07.08.2024, the total duration of air raid alerts was 28 days, 20 hours and 51 minutes (according to <https://alerts.in.ua/>).

In the 2023–2024 academic year, preschool institutions in the region operate in full-time mode.

The large-scale armed aggression of the Russian Federation in Ukraine has led to the temporary occupation of 72 % of the *Zaporizhzhia region*, with about 10 % of the territory in the combat zone as of August 2024.

Communities are shelled daily (up to 500 times a day), causing significant destruction of housing and infrastructure, including educational institutions. As of August 2024, 222,713 internally displaced persons have been registered, for most of whom the Zaporizhzhia region is a transit area (according to <https://www.ioc.gov.ua/dashboardVpo/>). From the first day of the war, as at 07.08.2024, the total duration of air raid alerts was 180 days, 4 hours and 13 minutes (according to <https://alerts.in.ua/>). The educational process in most preschool institutions in the Zaporizhzhia region is conducted remotely, involving different categories of children according to their actual place of residence with their parents: at their permanent place of residence in the territory controlled by Ukraine; at their new place of residence within Ukraine (internally displaced persons); at their new place of residence outside Ukraine (refugees); at their permanent place of residence within the temporarily occupied territory of Ukraine.

The *Odesa region*, which has a border and coastal location, has been subjected to regular attacks by Russian missiles (primarily from the Black Sea) and unmanned aerial vehicles since the first days of the full-scale war; there has been damage to civilian infrastructure, including educational institutions. From the first day of the war, as at 07.08.2024, the total duration of air raid alerts was 62 days, 17 hours, and 4 minutes (according to <https://alerts.in.ua/>). As of August 2024, 215,953 internally displaced persons are registered (according to <https://www.ioc.gov.ua/dashboardVpo/>). In the 2023–2024 academic year, most preschool institutions in the region operate in full-time mode.

The participation of parents from these regions of Ukraine, which have their unique characteristics in terms of functioning during the war, allows us to obtain data on the peculiarities of Ukrainian children's play activities in terms of its content, organizational forms and factors, as well as on the current needs of parents in facilitating these activities.

The survey was conducted using the original questionnaire, which consisted of 9 supplementary socio-demographic questions and 16 questions in the main section, as well as questions regarding consent for processing personal data.

The main part of the questionnaire included:

a) closed questions ("Do you think that your child's play has changed under military situation?"; "Have you discussed children's play with preschool educators under military situation? Indicate how often"; "Do you agree that play is an effective tool for supporting children's well-being in the current situation?" etc.),

b) open-ended questions ("What specifically, in your opinion, has changed in your child's play under military situation? Provide examples"; "What toys have been your child's favourites over the past two years?"; "What toys does your child most often take with them to preschool (or for a walk, etc.) in the current situation?"; "What new kinds of play (in terms of plot, characters, toys, etc.) do you observe children playing during military situation? Provide examples"; "What kinds of play do you most often observe your child and other children playing in shelters/safe places? Provide examples"),

c) projective questions ("Indicate which issues regarding your children's play, according to your observations, are most frequently discussed by parents" etc.), formulated according to the objectives of the study.

The method of filling out was electronic (using Google Forms). The study sample is a non-probabilistic convenience sample.

The study involved 758 parents of preschool children attending preschool educational institutions (hereinafter referred to as "preschool institutions") participating in the LEGO Foundation's "Promoting Education" project (according to the Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine and the LEGO Foundation for co-operation in the education and science sector, 2023). These include institutions in the Vinnytsia (20.3 % of respondents), Volyn (20.3 % of respondents), Zaporizhzhia (25.6 % of respondents), and Odesa (33.8 % of respondents) regions.

Among the parents of preschool children: 93 % are mothers, 5 % are fathers, and 2 % are grandparents; 48 % have 1 child in the family, 42 % have 2 children, 8.5 % have 3 children, 1 % have 4 children, and 0.5 % have 5 children; by age category: 24.7 % are under 30 years old, 60 % are between 31 and 40 years old, 13.2 % are between 41 and 50 years old, 1.1 % are between 51 and 60 years old, and 1.1 % are over 61 years old; by place of residence: 88 % of the parents live at their permanent place of residence (within the territory controlled by Ukraine), 9.6 % at a new place of residence within Ukraine, and 1.8 % at a new place of residence outside Ukraine; by location of the preschool institution: 81.1 % of the parents take their children to preschool institutions in cities of regional significance, 13.7 % to preschool institutions in cities of district significance, and 5.1 % to rural preschool institutions; by the preschool institution's age group, attended by the child: junior group (up to 3 years) – 16.6 % of the parents, middle group (4-5 years) – 39.2 %, senior group (5-6 years) – 42 %, mixed-age group – 2.2 %; by the form of attendance: 71.2 % of the parents – full-time form, 4.1 % – blended form, and 23 % – remote form.

The average participant of the study among parents of preschool children is: a 31-40-year-old mother who has one child aged 4-5 in the family, lives at her permanent place of residence in Ukraine, and whose child attends a preschool institution in a city of regional significance in full-time form.

5. Results and discussion

The results of the study provided data indicating the following:

1. According to the observations of most parents, the play activities of preschool children have undergone significant changes due to the war compared to the pre-war period. About 70 % of the respondents noted this, with a higher percentage among parents of preschool children from the Zaporizhzhia (77.32 %) and Vinnytsia (74.68 %) regions.

The analysis of the changes in children's play activities during the war, reported by the parents, reveals the following peculiarities of children's play activities in Ukraine during wartime. The most typical games chil-

dren play today in all four regions of Ukraine include the following scenarios:

- playing "air raid" (the child gathers belongings, goes to a shelter, helps others – adults, dolls, pets – get to the shelter);

- playing "Armed Forces of Ukraine" (the child fights occupiers, hunts and shoots enemies, digs and destroys enemy trenches and weapon depots, protects loved ones, dolls, pets, etc.);

- playing with pretend military equipment (the child constructs tanks, planes, drones (including naval), anti-aircraft warfare, etc.);

- playing with military weapons (the child constructs cannons, rifles, pistols, mines, etc., or plays with toy weapons);

- playing "house" during the war (the child dresses pretend "children" during air raids, stays with them in a bomb shelter – calming and feeding them, playing with them and explaining what is happening);

- playing firefighters, rescuers (the child extinguishes fires, clears blockages, searches for and rescues victims, delivers food and medicine to the front line);

- playing "shelter" (the child builds and sets up a hideout/bomb shelter, stays in it – prepares food, puts "children" to sleep, plays games, draws and reads books, plays electronic games);

- playing missiles and air defense (the child imitates the launch and flight of a missile, the moment of hitting an object, and air defense operations);

- playing blockhouses and document checks (the child builds a blockhouse and checks the documents of passersby or provides their own documents when passing a blockhouse);

- playing military bases (the child sets up a base, trains soldiers, and sends them to the front line);

- playing doctors at war (the child searches for the wounded, helps, treats, and rehabilitates them);

- playing evacuation to another region of Ukraine or abroad (the child packs belongings, travels to a new place, and sets up a new home);

- playing setting up a cemetery for fallen soldiers (the child selects a site, digs graves, buries the bodies, and cares for the site).

Among the children's games that do not directly involve war scenarios, according to about 20 % of parents' observations, are games with toy characters from the "Paw Patrol" animated series (which depict the adventures of a rescue team), as well as various board games (in shelters) and pop-it (anti-stress) games.

According to parents' observations, their children's play:

- has become more emotional (showing manifestations of anxiety, worry, and fear, to a lesser extent – cruelty and aggressiveness);

- involves the use of inappropriate language – swear words and harsh reactions toward the occupiers and their actions;

- mostly takes place using gadgets – tablets and phones;

- mostly takes place indoors (even among children residing in rural areas);

- is repetitive (with war scenarios being prevalent and recurring).

The comparison of responses from the parents in different regions of Ukraine reveals certain regional differences in the play of preschool children, namely: children's play activities in the Zaporizhzhia region are more solitary, as noted by about 90 % of the parents: "the child does not play with peers, always alone", "there is not much play activities with other children," "lacks playing with peers," etc. Additionally, about 40 % of the parents in the Zaporizhzhia region note that their children's play activities have become more monotonous and repetitive in terms of scenarios, with military themes dominating – playing Armed Forces of Ukraine, playing with military weapons and equipment, playing shelter and evacuation. No other significant regional differences in preschool children's play activities were identified in the study. Meanwhile, playing "air raid" is typical for children from all regions of Ukraine, regardless of the different frequency and duration of the alerts.

As examples of changes in children's play, observed by the parents from different regions of Ukraine, here are some responses to the question: "What specifically, in your opinion, has changed in your child's play under military situation?"

Vinnitsia region

Mother of a 2–3-year-old girl: "My daughter plays 'air raid', sending toys into the 'shelter' (a box). She explains the reasons for the alarm to the dolls".

Mother of a 4–5-year-old boy: "My child plays 'air raid' and hides in the corridor. Toys, associated with military equipment or in khaki colour, are called russian, and he hits them".

Mother of a 5–6-year-old girl: "My daughter rejects everything russian; for example, our 'children' (dolls) are forbidden to speak the enemy language, and there are also play activities about funding and donation campaigns for our Seals".

Mother of a 5–6-year-old girl: "When my daughter plays 'house', the 'mother' takes the 'children' to the shelter whenever an air raid starts, which happens all the time during her play".

Mother of a 5–6-year-old boy: "My son likes everything related to military equipment now; he goes to sleep hugging Patron the dog (a stuffed toy resembling a Ukrainian explosive-sniffing dog, which is the mascot of the State Emergency Service)".

Odesa region

Mother of a 2–3-year-old boy: "He plays war, with missiles flying around".

Mother of a 2–3-year-old boy: "His play includes mentions of military equipment names, reenacting situations (such as shelling and its consequences, which he has seen) or events (in our case, escaping the occupation). The child remembers everything and constantly recreates it in LEGO® play".

Mother of a 4–5-year-old boy: "When my son plays, he says the Shaheds and missiles are coming, arranges soldiers, and plays the war between russia and Ukraine, singing the Ukrainian anthem and 'Oi u luzi chervona kalyna'..."

Mother of a 5–6-year-old boy: "My son draws rockets and war, builds tanks, and digs trenches. He often plays war and frequently shouts inappropriate words about the occupiers during play".

Mother of a 5–6-year-old girl: "I often hear my daughter telling her dolls, 'Attention! Air raid alert! Immediately proceed to the shelter!' and taking them to boxes, for example, which imitate these shelters. Her first question when she wakes up in the morning is, 'Mom, is there an air raid alert now?'".

Volyn region

Mother of a 2–3-year-old girl: "My daughter is worried about whether she will be able to sleep well in kindergarten without air raid alerts. She constantly asks if I will pick her up in case if the missiles start flying again".

Grandmother of a 2–3-year-old boy: "My grandson takes my umbrella and 'shoots' enemies with it".

Mother of a 4–5-year-old boy: "In the first days of the war, children played bomb shelters, although they didn't really understand the meaning of the word; now they understand well what those are and skillfully build them out of anything available. Children have started playing war, even though they didn't have such play activities before. They want to be like Ukrainian soldiers, and my son is no exception".

Father of a 5–6-year-old boy: "The play activities now have a patriotic nature. In almost all kinds of play, my son looks for the symbol of Ukraine – the flag. He often asks about the country's history and pictures the flag on every drawing".

Zaporizhzhia region

Mother of a 2–3-year-old boy: "He plays attack, like 'boom', 'shoo-shoo', 'vroom-vroom', sings the alert, and corrects others on how to say it properly".

Mother of a 4–5-year-old boy: "The play includes drones, missiles, destroyed buildings and cars made from LEGO®, and wounded Ukrainian soldiers. The child destroys buildings with explosions. He plays evacuation to Poland and returning home".

Mother of a 4–5-year-old girl: "Children started playing bomb shelter, where they hide when missiles are flying; my daughter sits in her bomb shelter – a hovel – watching to see if missiles or Shaheds are coming. She asks if it's necessary to clear the blockage, left from a destroyed house, if there is enough money and weapons, and if it's necessary to raise funds for the military".

Mother of a 5–6-year-old girl: "Without kindergarten, my child has forgotten how to play with other children, how to be part of a team; she constantly plays alone sitting with a phone".

Overall, among the changes in their children's play, the vast majority of parents noted the following: the reenactment of military events and scenarios and the prevalence of electronic games on phones and tablets. More than half of the parents agree (fully and partially) that their children draw and construct more; they play fewer active games; they do not have the opportunity to play outside; they do not have the opportunity to play with peers and other children; and that their play activities have become more violent.

2. According to parents' observations, the kinds of games preschool children most often prefer to play in shelters (safe places) are: games on tablets and phones; drawing, building, and puzzle solving; various board games; pop-it (anti-stress); play activities with stuffed toys, especially with Patron the dog; play with toy cars and dolls.

3. According to parents' observations, the new favourite toys of children during the war, apart from soft toys and dolls for girls, and LEGO® for boys, include: toy weapons (pistols, rifles, guns, swords), military equipment (tanks, ships, planes, cars), military robots, military construction equipment, and figures resembling soldiers of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (toy soldiers) for boys (21.1 % of the parents noted this), and stuffed cuddly toys (Hibuki dog, cuddly goose) for girls.

According to parents' observations, while attending preschool institutions, on walks, visiting friends, etc., children most often bring with them such toys: stuffed toy animals, including Patron the dog and cuddly toys; toy cars and robots; fashion dolls and baby dolls; military equipment (tanks, military vehicles, planes) and weapons; figurines of superheroes, books, pop-it and other anti-stress toys, and individual LEGO® figures.

On the one hand, this correlates with the results of pre-war (2019-2022) scientific studies (I. M. Omelchenko, V. V. Kobylchenko [20]), in which the most common groups of favourite toys among Ukrainian preschoolers were identified as follows: for boys – technical transport vehicles used on land, water and in space (cars, lunar rovers, helicopters, airplanes), as well as anthropomorphized animal stuffed toys (bunnies, mice, bears, cats, giraffes, dogs), and for girls – toys resembling people (fashion dolls and baby dolls) [18], and additionally, board games and puzzles (N. Lutsiv [21]). On the other hand, it highlights the new reality of the child's life, their new experiences – the military themes that are transferred to play and favourite toys.

The authors of the article are aware of a certain limitation of the results obtained due to the use of the expert survey method and plan to conduct further included observations of children's play during wartime in Ukraine.

Since the conducted research is longitudinal in nature, the prospects for further research consist in determining the further dynamics of the content and forms of children's play activities in terms of comparing gender and age characteristics, characteristics of child-parent relations, as well as the place of residence of children and their parents (in Ukraine, abroad).

6. Conclusion

1. The analysis of the study results highlights the following peculiarities of preschool children's play during the war in Ukraine:

1) *the prevalence of various wartime life scenarios* (most often – air raid alerts, setting up bomb shelters and staying in shelters) and *military actions* (fighting occupiers, protecting loved ones, helping victims, operating blockhouses, etc.) in the play activities of preschool children from different regions of Ukraine;

2) *among favourite toys* (amongst stuffed toys and dolls for girls and LEGO® construction sets for boys), there is a prevalence of *toy weapons, military equipment, military robots, military construction equipment and soldiers of Armed Forces of Ukraine* for boys, and *stuffed cuddly toys* (Hibuki dog, cuddly goose) for girls;

3) *the children's play has acquired such features as:*
– *greater emotionality* with manifestations of anxiety, worry, and fear, and to a lesser extent – cruelty and aggressiveness, which are also evident *in the child's use of inappropriate language* – swear words and harsh reactions toward the occupiers and their actions. This also reflects *a deep, natural need for the child to overcome their complex emotional states through cuddly toys, thematic stuffed toys, and anti-stress toys.*

– *predominantly solitary nature, when children entertain themselves alone*, primarily due to the impossibility of a full-time kindergarten attendance and interaction with peers.

– *it takes place indoors*, which is typical for children residing both in urban and rural areas;

4) *there is an increase in time spent on playing games using gadgets* (phones and tablets), including military-themed games.

The peculiarities of preschool children's play during the war in Ukraine, identified in this study, fully correspond with the results of our previous study, conducted with the involvement of preschool educators at the end of 2022 [9].

2. According to the results of the study, the regional characteristics of play activities of preschool children are defined as: a more uniform, repetitive plot and the predominance of playing alone by children of the frontline region, compared to other regions of Ukraine. No other significant regional differences in preschool children's play activities were identified in the study. Meanwhile, playing "air raid" is typical for children from all regions of Ukraine, regardless of the different frequency and duration of the alerts.

The results of the study guide further scientific exploration, including in a regional comparative aspect, and also point to the need for the development and implementation of educational measures to prepare preschool educators and parents to facilitate children's play during wartime and post-war periods. These measures aim to support children's well-being, counteract traumatic impacts, and harmonize post-traumatic development.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest in relation to this study, including financial, personal, authorship, or any other, that could affect the study and its results, presented in this paper.

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Availability of data

The manuscript has associated data in the data repository

Use of artificial intelligence

The authors confirm that they did not use artificial intelligence technologies when creating the presented work.

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