

УДК 364.013

**PROVIDING SOCIAL SERVICES FOR TRAUMATIZED
CHILDREN DURING THE WAR: EXPERIENCE OF UKRAINE AND
SWEDEN**

Chernysh Oxana, Ph.D. in Philology, Associate Professor, Pedagogical Technologies and Lifelong Learning Faculty Dean

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2010-200X>

E-mail: Chernyshoxana@gmail.com

Zhalinska Iryna, Ph.D. in Economics, Associate Professor of the Department of Psychology and Social Welfare

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1054-7803>

E-mail: zhalinska@gmail.com

Melnyk Anastasiia, Master's student, Zhytomyr Polytechnic State University

The problem of children's mental health is of special interest to scientists in view of its importance for the formation of a future healthy society. This issue becomes especially relevant in emergency situations, such as war, when the number of stressors and their impact is difficult to predict. This article has examined the experience as well as approaches of social services in Ukraine and Sweden in providing support to traumatized children during wartime. There have been outlined three phases in terms of working with traumatized children, i.e. identification, treatment, and prevention. The study has investigated and compared the practices of social workers in contrasted countries within these phases defined. The study presented is a collaborative effort between Sweden and Ukraine, investigating the support provided to war-traumatized children by social services. The research has been based on an inductive approach. The interviews conducted with social workers, psychologists, school counselors, and representatives of relevant organizations are at the core of this paper. The experts' opinions on the topic mentioned have been reviewed. Moreover, the similarities and differences in providing social support in compared countries have been highlighted. The main factors influencing the approaches to the work of social workers with traumatized children of the compared countries have been determined. The approaches to working with parents in terms of supporting war-traumatized children in contrasted countries have been considered. Various problems related to providing social and psychological support to traumatized children such as resources and the capacity of the social support system have been reviewed. The impact of other factors on the occurrence of psychological trauma in children, which experts emphasized, has been examined. In particular, special attention has been paid to social media's impact. The role of social workers at the stage of trauma prevention has been also considered, as well as the problems of the social support system that have arisen. The urgency of addressing the mental health of children and the importance of collaboration between authorities to provide effective support and treatment have been mentioned.

Keywords: children's mental health, social services, traumatized children, social work, war, unaccompanied children



**НАДАННЯ СОЦІАЛЬНИХ ПОСЛУГ ТРАВМОВАНИМ ДІТЯМ ЗА ЧАСІВ
ВІЙНИ: ДОСВІД УКРАЇНИ ТА ШВЕЦІЇ**

Черниш Оксана, кандидатка філологічних наук, доцентка, декан факультету педагогічних технологій та освіти впродовж життя, Державний університет Житомирська політехніка

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2010-200X>

E-mail: Chernyshoxana@gmail.com

Жалінська Ірина, кандидатка економічних наук, доцентка кафедри психології та соціального забезпечення, Державний університет Житомирська політехніка

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1054-7803>

E-mail: zhalinska@gmail.com

Мельник Анастасія, магістрантка, Державний університет Житомирська політехніка

Проблема психічного здоров'я дітей становить особливий інтерес для науковців з огляду на її важливість для формування майбутнього здорового суспільства. Особливої актуальності це питання набуває в надзвичайних ситуаціях, таких як війна, коли кількість стресових ситуацій та їх вплив важко передбачити. У статті розглянуто досвід та підходи соціальних служб України та Швеції до надання підтримки травмованим дітям під час війни. У роботі з травмованими дітьми виділено три етапи: ідентифікація, лікування та профілактика. Досліджено та порівняно практику соціальної роботи у різних країнах в межах визначених фаз. Представлене дослідження демонструє спільні зусилля між Швецією та Україною у підтримці, яку соціальні служби надають постраждалим від війни дітям. Дослідження базується на індуктивному підході. Інтерв'ю, проведені з соціальними працівниками, психологами, шкільними консультантами та представниками відповідних організацій, є основою цієї статті. Вивчено думки експертів із зазначеної теми. Крім того, було висвітлено схожість і відмінності в наданні соціальної підтримки в порівнюваних країнах. Визначено основні фактори, що впливають на підходи до роботи соціальних працівників з травмованими дітьми порівнюваних країн. Досліджено підходи до роботи з батьками щодо підтримки постраждалих від війни дітей у порівнюваних країнах. Розглянуто різні проблеми, пов'язані з наданням соціально-психологічної підтримки травмованим дітям, такі як ресурси та спроможність системи соціальної підтримки. Розглянуто вплив інших факторів на виникнення психологічної травми у дітей, на яких наголошували експерти. Зокрема, особливу увагу приділено впливу соціальних мереж. Також розглянуто роль соціальних працівників на етапі профілактики травматизму, а також проблеми системи соціального супроводу, що при цьому виникають. Зазначено нагальність звернення до психічного здоров'я дітей та важливість співпраці між органами влади для надання ефективної підтримки та лікування.

Ключові слова: психічне здоров'я дітей, соціальні послуги, травмовані діти, соціальна робота, війна, діти без супроводу дорослих

Problem statement in a general form and its connection with important scientific and practical tasks. Over the years, the world has increasingly improved child and adolescent health and well-being. However, a lot of challenges persist. Many issues continue to endanger children and adolescents across the globe, putting them in a situation of constant stress and risk, which can lead to the appearance of traumas. Nowadays, one of the vast causes of trauma is the war in Ukraine. It affects people a lot: even listening to the news or watching pictures of Russian crime can lead to negative consequences (e.g., emotional disorders), not to mention the people

who lost their homes or nearest and dearest. It's challenging to keep a stable psyche, even for adults, to say nothing about the most vulnerable layers of society – children. Children's mental health is essential in forming a healthy society, so research on supporting traumatized children is crucial.

Analysis of recent research papers and publications. Focusing on social support to internally displaced persons in Ukraine, T. Semigina et al. [6] explored the social work interventions in the aftermath of violence available for this society category and the gaps therein. Their paper described the implications for the social work profession caused by the ongoing conflict in the country. Their research highlighted that modern social work comes from the fact that displacement violates the social ecology of humans, causes deprivation, and social exclusion, increases the risk of violence, and the emergence of psychological «catch of dependency», etc.

Ukraine's social work professionalization process has been actively developing. This process requires a solid knowledge base and the availability of appropriate levels of professional education in which social work practitioners and academics regulate development. Education plays a crucial role in social work professionalization [5]. Key achievements, specific challenges, misunderstandings faced in this way, and the factors that cause them were analyzed by O. Boiko et al. [3].

Social work with children who fled is the focus of foreign researchers. Sweden has experienced an influx of unaccompanied children due to the war in Syria, so previous research was done in this context. One of the most thorough studies devoted to the subject mentioned was done by Backlund et al. [1, 2]. Among other significant conclusions, they came up with the statement that the work with refugee children involves the need for new knowledge, collaboration with new actors, and facing issues different from those you are used to in traditional child protection services. Thus, the driving force behind specialization can be seen as a professional desire to develop knowledge and provide support based on the needs of this target group.

Due to the war in Ukraine, the experience of the work of social services with internally displaced children and refugees has a significant interest among foreign and domestic researchers. Given the challenges of war, studying and analyzing the experience of social workers dealing with traumatized children, as well as regarding how to provide social services to this target group, has evolved in Ukraine and abroad, is an urgent issue that remains insufficiently studied. The state of war makes it impossible to collect the data for researching the topic mentioned. However, some investigations have been done since the Armed conflict in eastern Ukraine erupted in early 2014.

Aim of the study. This research has explored the peculiarities of providing social services among different institutions and experts for traumatized children in Sweden and Ukraine to define the most appropriate approaches to deal with challenges caused by war.

Presentation of the key points of the study with a full justification of the obtained scientific results. The topic of social work with children is very urgent, especially in times of war. That is why some researchers have already done some studies and mentioned them in their articles. Simultaneously, it's difficult to find research on the comparative study of social work in different countries, as creating it inquires about international cooperation. That is the reason for the development of this research.

The study presented is the result of joint research of Sweden and Ukrainian students on the issue of investigating war-traumatized children and providing support for them from social services. To comprehend the social work of Sweden and Ukraine, some interviews were taken with social workers and pedagogues. Particularly a practicing psychologist and state social service worker (from the Ukrainian side) and a school counselor, a representative of Save the

Children, a worker of Social service for children and families, and a worker of the Swedish Migration Agency (from the Swedish side).

The social pedagogues' questions were:

- What is your specific role in working with children?
- In what ways do you identify traumatized children?
- What are the most common traumas among children? What causes them?
- What methods are used for support and prevention?
- Do you work only with problems in school, or do you also work with problems at home?
- How do you meet up with war-traumatized children?
- How do you collaborate with other professionals (social services workers, psychologists, medical workers)?
- Do you observe the changes in traumas before and during the war?
- In what forms do children show their traumas?
- How does the school staff help internally displaced children get along with their peers?
- How would you improve your organization's work working with traumatized children?

The questions discussed with social workers were slightly different, particularly:

- What is your specific role in working with children?
- How do you meet up with war-traumatized children?
- How do you communicate with parents to prevent children from being traumatized?
- How can parents identify that their children are traumatized? What most common signs of trauma can you list? Do you share any information for parents on this topic? In what ways?
- How would you improve your organization's work working with traumatized children?

Similar questions were put to other interviewees from Sweden's side.

The research outlined some similarities and differences in supporting children by experts in the contrasted countries.

In the research context, we outlined three phases of working with traumatized children: identification, treatment, and prevention.

First and foremost, traumas should be identified. Identifying traumatized children may not be easy. As every child is unique, not many common signs could mean a child is traumatized. Experts said, «Everyone is far from different and does not show the same, but similar, symptoms.» Moreover, «children's stress comes from different causes,» so traumas can have different shades and symptoms. Among the most common signs of trauma that Ukrainian and Swedish professionals aligned with are sleep disturbance, poor appetite, chronic fatigue, closeness, intense emotions, excitement, worry, and others.

To understand whether a child is traumatized, you must compare their current behavior with the usual one. «That is, such children go to extremes, or the whole school knows this child, and it attracts maximum attention (swear words, aggression), or on the contrary, the child has always been active and now sits quietly and inconspicuously, is silent, misses lessons or gets sick a lot. The most common signs are the child's introversion or vice versa, increased emotionality, and hyperactivity that is not characteristic». It is essential «not to fall into the trap that if a child is hyperactive, you should not immediately think it is an injury because it could simply be a transfer of emotions».

School psychologists need to decide how to help when the trauma is identified. «Since, according to the law, it is written «Participants in the educational process are students, teachers, and parents,» there should be no educational process and providing psychological sessions without parents».

The most crucial people that children are influenced by are parents. They grow their children, help them form their worldview, and learn about the world around them. Children love their parents no matter what, and that's why it is so crucial for parents to take an active part in the development of their children.

When children are little, people pay them colossal attention, but then they grow older and start attending school, so parents focus more on their work and other issues. And then we get a problem. «The lack of contact between parents and the child already leads to trauma. Parents are busy with what, in their opinion, is the most important thing – financial support. They do not worry about the psycho-emotional state». In the literal sense, we can see «Maslow's pyramid – parents see only the first three levels: safety, food, and clothing. Then they cannot understand. Why? Due to the lack of communication, they do not have feedback from the children. They make decisions based on their parental experience of understanding what is important for the child».

For now, educational institutions in Ukraine try to involve parents in paying more attention to their children, especially if they ask for psychological help from school personnel. As experts say, «if the parents are not involved in the work, then there will be no effect».

Work with parents includes individual meetings when some psychological information is conveyed to parents. The psychologist speaks administratively with general information. It is mandatory, and has already entered into practice, information about the peculiarities of the child's development of a certain age period and the peculiarities of the child's response to certain situations at school and home. There are two types of consultations. That is the general reaction of children, the characteristics of a certain period of their life, and the individual characteristics that a child may have. Also, there is some «educational work with parents so they do not get lost when children cry when they ask, «What is war? Why did we see soldiers at the checkpoints?» Working with mom and dad or another guardian comes first. In case they agree, individual work goes with children».

In the Swedish interviews, working with parents has been identified as less common since unaccompanied children arrived in Sweden alone. Therefore, real experience or knowledge of how to work with parents to help and support their children upon arrival in Sweden is needed. This is a significant difference between the Swedish and Ukrainian situations, which leads to different approaches. Sweden has received unaccompanied children and youth without parents, while in Ukraine, there have been internal relocations within the country involving the entire family. In Ukraine, efforts are made to involve parents as much as possible. However, there are cases in Sweden where working with parents has been done and a social worker highlights, «Communication with parents whose children have experienced trauma is an important part of the job and was important to me. I think it is a significant part of a social worker's role to be able to help children and their families. Then it is important to remember that we are not psychologists but only sociologists or social workers. I always start by creating a safe and respectful environment. It is important that the parents feel safe and respected, and this may mean for me to meet them in a place where they are safe so that I can ensure that their privacy is respected. Also that when they talk, show empathy for their situation. Also, to make yourself understood. Explain clearly. They may need clear information about how trauma affects their children and tell them how we can help them. Also, to tell about the support that is available for parents. Parents can also be easily forgotten, but telling them what resources, advice, and support are available. And most importantly, I think, create a plan to develop and help them deal with their traumatized children. I can only refer to other professionals or organizations who can provide more support than I can».

In the research context, some respondents have mentioned working with parents of unaccompanied children and youth. When asked, one of the social workers responded, «I only

work with unaccompanied children and their asylum process and not with parents. If they bring it up independently, I can talk to the kids about their parents. Otherwise, we don't discuss it».

It is a well-known fact that war causes a lot of psychological traumas. A lot of people lose their nearest and dearest, their homes. Most vulnerable to all the war events are children. They don't know what to do and how to react, so psychological support is crucial for them. The easiest way to get it is to reach a school psychologist. Hence, unfortunately, not every educational institution in Ukraine has a psychologist, especially in small villages. «Rates are provided for psychologists, but no people who, according to professional standards, meet or want to work in the institutions as psychologists».

It is worth noticing that not only children who have experienced the terrible consequences of war need help, but also kids and teenagers who have changed their place of living.

It's crucial to be mindful that not only war causes trauma, so the right to additional psychological assistance should be available to any child. As a result, a great need for specialists who provide psychological help appears. Also, traumas caused by war are severely different from those caused in peaceful times and should be considered. A common conclusion for both countries is that more experts in this field are needed.

What concerns Sweden, «There is also often a lack of psychologists, long care queues in Sweden, and above all, unaccompanied children are not prioritized as others are, unfortunately». In Ukraine, teachers try not to highlight internally displaced children among other schoolgoers, as it can cause feelings of inequality. Sometimes children may feel ashamed to ask for psychological help. That's why psychologists' hours and some questionnaires are permanently held at schools. In such a way, school psychologists may identify children who need help and continue working with them individually.

On the other hand, psychological trauma is accompanied by some physical disorders. Ukrainian school psychologists work closely with therapists or other doctors in such cases. In Sweden, the situation is slightly different. «The school does not provide trauma treatment. We send them to BUP (in English – Child and Adolescent Psychiatry) for processing» [4].


Experts refer to other causes of the emergence of trauma among children, highlighting social media's impact.

Nowadays, social media is a potent tool. It affects a lot of people. Especially vulnerable to its influence are children who don't have developed the capacity to understand the real world. Children can not fully understand what they see and hear. Sometimes they just copy phrases they hear and the behavior they see. It can prevent them from forming a worldview and their opinions on some things.

Not many parents control the content their children watch, but they should not forget that explicit content from the Internet can affect children's health. What concerns physical issues, examples are sleep disturbance, anxiety, and worse physical activity because of screen time.

On the one hand, the world is shown as a perfect place to live in many social media. Everybody smiles and shows only the best moments of their lives. If a child that has experienced (or is experiencing) some troubles (war, parental issues, abuse, etc.) is constantly watching the perfect life shown on social media, they can get frustrated. They may lose self-confidence and feel lonely and isolated, leading to emotional damage, depression, or other mental issues.

Moreover, social media contain some «sensitive content». When children see such a warning, it may attract them even more. They would want to watch it because they know they are not allowed to do so. In most cases, by such warnings, violent content is hidden (that can be pictures of death, murders, or naked bodies). After watching it, children's mental health (especially the nervous system and psyche) can be affected.



One more widespread phenomenon today is bullying via social media. Some unpleasant comments, sending threats, or posting incriminating photos/videos affect children/teenagers a lot. They may feel humiliated, which can lead to depression and emotional problems. Following the expert's opinion, «They [social media] are exposed in various ways or are afraid of being exposed. It's everything from pictures, exposure accounts, and films to sending videos of yourself and being afraid of spreading to having expectations, you see others posting pictures of themselves, and there are so many celebrities who, in various ways, inspire less favorably. A lot, in junior high school, is that it is often about expectations in relationships, especially sexual relationships».

Treating traumas is crucial; however, approaches to preventing children from getting traumatized are not less important.

Conducting the research concluded that it is challenging for social workers to engage in preventive work when interacting with children, as much of the collected material focuses primarily on identifying various stressors and traumas in children. Typically, preventive work involves encountering and addressing something before it progresses. However, in this case, it is challenging because the children have already come into contact with various social workers interviewed. Therefore, it may instead be a matter of competence, knowledge, and preparation for social workers, in this case, as a form of preventive work. The social worker mentioned, «I worked extensively with my staff on being updated and engaged. I called for us to have a trauma-informed approach. We all need to know how trauma affects children and use individual strategies to adapt. Also, in diligent work with a safe environment, all children must feel safe and build trust. It can be having private spaces, enough staff, and the staff are trained and competent. Individual treatment plans are adapted to each child's individual needs and experiences. We could improve the work all the time. Continue to educate ourselves about trauma and treatment to offer the latest and most effective methods. But building positive relationships, creating a safe environment, developing treatment plans, offering continuing education, evaluating and improving staff and the work are things I think about».

In the interviews, the social workers talk a lot about the time they spend with the children, and many of them wish for more time to continue working with preventive efforts. It, therefore, becomes clearer to us that it is impossible for one authority to do all the work, and the importance of the authorities' cooperation and collaboration is of importance.

«We would need much, much more time with the children. Really. Time is always a contributing factor. We have a fairly high percentage of counselor positions at this school, but we want more time. It would have helped incredibly more. There has been a lot of criticism towards us because we cannot handle the number of asylum applications and long processing times. Also time. We wish we had more time with the children. It is difficult to give each child as much time as is needed for them to settle into their asylum process in another language in another country. There may not always be an interpreter available in time, meaning the child receives limited information. I immediately think of the long processing times for asylum applications, and this really creates a great deal of uncertainty and stress for many. There is also often a lack of psychologists, long care queues in Sweden, and above all, unaccompanied children are not prioritized».

The Swedish experts, as well as Ukrainian ones, stress that the lack of contact between parents and the child already leads to trauma. Parents are busy with what, in their opinion, is the most important thing – financial support. They do not worry about the psycho-emotional state. The difference in values between parents and children, if it is greater, the greater the reason for stress, anxiety, and improper development of the child in the family.

Treatment of trauma demands a lot of time and effort. Experts can't just take one pill or say, «Don't worry! Everything will be okay!». They need not only follow the instructions written in psychology books but also consider the child's individual features. No single document or

manual will solve all problems. They require different approaches and not just following a pattern. That requires time and freedom, unusual decisions by psychologists who work with children. It's a good idea «to allow education workers to express their opinion, which does not coincide with certain regulatory documents and orders of the ministry».

Conclusions of the study. and prospects for further research in this direction. The mental health of children is an urgent issue for the entire society. Many children are traumatized yearly, even during peaceful times, to say nothing about the war period. To find modern and helpful ways of supporting children, the work of social services in Ukraine and Sweden has been analyzed. There are differences as Ukrainian psychologists deal with children in their motherland, where the war occurs. Meanwhile, Swedish experts help Ukrainian refugees and other children. Moreover, these two systems had some differences even before the world started due to some peculiar features of each country. At the same time, some similarities should also be mentioned. On the stage of identification, experts from compared countries outlined several common signs of trauma and added that the main mark is the deviations from the usual behavior. Speaking of treatment, Ukrainian specialists notice they need to get an allowance for sessions with a school psychologist from parents or guardians. Meanwhile, Swedish professionals point out that they highly appreciate children's privacy, so parents do not always know about that issues. Concerning prevention, it is difficult to outline much information. However, according to the sayings of interviewed experts, professionals in Sweden need more time with children concurrently in Ukraine – freedom to make decisions.

Having compared the work of social services in both countries, we can conclude that systems of contrasted states should be temporarily changed to adapt to the current situation. This includes: increasing the number of psychologists and making sure they are ready to deal with traumas caused by war, giving more space for making decisions to experts who work with children, not forcing the therapy needs time, and creating algorithms of actions that correspond to wartime.

REFERENCES

1. Backlund, Å., Eriksson, R., Greiff, K. von, Åkerlund, E. (2014). Socialtjänstens arbete med ensamkommande barn och ungdomar -erfarenheter från Stockholms län. *Forskningsrapport, vol. 3*. URL: https://www.fou-nordvast.se/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Socialtj%C3%A4nstens-arbete-med-ensamkommande-barn-och-ungdomar_2014.pdf.
2. Backlund, Åsa., Thorén, K., Lundström, T. (2021). Socialtjänstens respons på 'flyktingkrisen': Mottagandet av ensamkommande barn. *Socialvetenskaplig tidskrift, Vol. 28 (1), 75-94*. doi.org/10.3384/SVT.2021.28.1.4075
3. Boiko, O., Kabachenko, N. (2016). Social Work Formation in Ukraine. *Renastere: International Journal for Transformative Social Policy and Practice, Vol. 1, 35-40*. URL: <https://ekmair.ukma.edu.ua/server/api/core/bitstreams/c1c58b57-af39-419a-8207-80ba92b2f353/content>
4. BUP.se – Barn-och ungdomspsykiatri. URL: <https://www.bup.se/about-us/new-to-sweden/>.
5. Povidachyk, O., Vynogradova, O., Pavlyuk, T., Hrabchak, O., Savelchuk, I., Demchenko, I. (2022). Research Activities of Students as a Way to Prepare Them for Social Work: Adopting Foreign Experience in Ukraine. *Revista Romaneasca Pentru Educatie Multidimensionala, vol. 14 (1Sup1), 312-327*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18662/rrem/14.1Sup1/553>.
6. Semigina T., Gusak N. (2015). Armed Conflict in Ukraine and Social Work Response to it: What Strategies Should be used for Internally Displaced Persons? *Social, Health, and Communication Studies Journal, 2 (1)*. URL: <https://journals.macewan.ca/shcsjournal/article/view/269/383>.



СПИСОК ВИКОРИСТАНИХ ДЖЕРЕЛ

1. Backlund, Å., Eriksson, R., Greiff, K. von, Åkerlund, E. Socialtjänstens arbete med ensamkommande barn och ungdomar -erfarenheter från Stockholms län. *Forskningsrapport*. 2014. Vol. 3. URL: https://www.fou-nordvast.se/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Socialtj%C3%A4nstens-arbete-med-ensamkommande-barn-och-ungdomar_2014.pdf.
2. Backlund, Åsa., Thorén, K., Lundström, T. Socialtjänstens respons på «flyktingkrisen»: Mottagandet av ensamkommande barn. *Socialvetenskaplig tidskrift*. 2021. Vol. 28 (1), P. 75–94. doi.org/10.3384/SVT.2021.28.1.4075
3. Boiko, O., Kabachenko, N. Social Work Formation in Ukraine. *Renastere: International Journal for Transformative Social Policy and Practice*, 2016. Vol. 1, P. 35–40. URL: <https://ekmair.ukma.edu.ua/server/api/core/bitstreams/c1c58b57-af39-419a-8207-80ba92b2f353/content>
4. BUP.se – Barn-och ungdomspsykiatri. URL: <https://www.bup.se/about-us/new-to-sweden/>.
5. Povidaichyk, O., Vynogradova, O., Pavlyuk, T., Hrabchak, O., Savelchuk, I., Demchenko, I. Research Activities of Students as a Way to Prepare Them for Social Work: Adopting Foreign Experience in Ukraine. *Revista Romaneasca Pentru Educatie Multidimensionala*. 2022. Vol. 14 (1Sup1), P. 312–327. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18662/rrem/14.1Sup1/553>.
6. Semigina T., Gusak N. Armed Conflict in Ukraine and Social Work Response to it: What Strategies Should be used for Internally Displaced Persons? *Social, Health, and Communication Studies Journal*. 2015. Vol. 2 (1). URL: <https://journals.macewan.ca/shcsjournal/article/view/269/383>.