

Race of Life

Operation of the ECI network in Ukraine
during the war



IMAGE: GETTY IMAGES

SUMMARY OF SURVEY RESULTS

The study was carried out by
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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
DESIGN AND METHODS	4
SURVEY RESULTS	5
What was the situation of families and professionals at the time of the study?	5
How were ECI services delivered and received at the time of the study?	6
How do parents view the ECI service?	7
ANALYSIS OF RESULTS	10
CONCLUSIONS	12
RECOMMENDATIONS	12

Introduction

During Russia's horrible and brutal aggression against the Ukrainian people, it is essential for professionals supporting families to maintain their ability to think about families and young children and understands what their current circumstances are and what kinds of help they now require.

Both professionals and families experienced acute stress and were traumatized by the war. Therefore, it is important to draw on objective evidence in order to to make sound decisions and offer effective support to the family and the child, despite the ongoing hostilities in Ukraine.

To this end, in May 2022, during the third month of the full-scale invasion by the Russian Federation into the territory of Ukraine, we carried out the survey study "Operation of the ECI network in Ukraine during the war".

The **purpose of the study** was to examine the context of early childhood intervention (ECI) service during the third month after the outbreak of large-scale hostilities in Ukraine.

The **objectives** were to:

- Provide a detailed description of the situation of families and professionals three months into the war;
- Describe specific aspects of ECI service delivery at the time of the study;
- Identify the key characteristics of the ECI service that were relevant for parents at the start of the war.

Design and methods

For the purposes of the study, two survey forms were developed, i.e. for parents and for professionals.

The **survey form for professionals** included items to help describe the life and work situation of ECI professionals at the start of the war and specific aspects of ECI service delivery during the war time.

The items included in the **parent survey form** were also designed to identify the specific aspects of their family situation in the early days of the war and the characteristics of the ECI service which, in their view, were relevant to them in the situation. In answering the question "What is ECI for you during this time?" parents were asked to complete a sentence. The results were processed based on the constant comparison method used to analyze qualitative data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This analytical method involved a sequence of steps: parents' responses to

each question were split in chunks and coded; the codes were combined into meaningful categories and grouped by themes. Depending on the number of chunks within each category, the saturation of the category was calculated and the category was described.

Survey results

I. What was the situation of the families and professionals at the time of the study?

A total of 76 professionals and 80 parents participated in the study. They represented Kharkiv, Zakarpattia, Odesa, Lviv, Donetsk, Lugansk regions and Vinnytsa city. Of the total number of respondents 52.6% professionals and 31.3% families had to relocate, mostly those living in the areas affected by active combat. Among those who fled, 17.1% professionals and 18.8% families were abroad. The geography of their stay was very broad spanning Germany, Poland, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Estonia, Georgia and the United Kingdom.

At the time of the study 27.6% professionals and 28.7% parents felt safe. They were living either in the western part of Ukraine with large distances between them and the borders with Russia, explosions, active warfare, or abroad. This feeling of safety was created by *“familiar environment where I know people around me and feel confident about them”*.

In terms of safety, 65.8% professionals and 67.5% parents noted that they felt only partially safe. Both parents and professionals highlighted that they were *“scared by air-raid alarms”*, *“the war concerns everybody who is in Ukraine”* and *“a missile can reach anywhere”*.

For those outside Ukraine their physical safety was important as well, but they also experienced anxiety and uncertainty due to *“the new conditions, new laws and lack of the language”* in the new country, *“explosions still sounding in your head, aircrafts flying, shooting”*, and *“total uncertainty in a foreign country, albeit being safe”*.

Despite the stress and the need to flee, 62 professionals (81.6%) continued their work, including 46 (74.19%) who still provided ECI services. Practically all of them (91.8%), even if they had to suspend their ECI practice at the time of the study, were willing to communicate with colleagues from other ECI teams at regular online meetings, such as workshops and trainings (81.6%) and discussion of cases (69.7%). From such meetings professionals expected sharing of experiences on how to work in the new context of the war (74.19 %) and support (17.18 %). Twenty-one professionals were prepared to try new formats of cooperating with colleagues from other ECI teams by joining them as team members to provide ECI services.

The reasons that prevented professionals from working in ECI included emergency disruptions in the functioning of their organizations due to the hostilities, personal challenging

situation and lack of emotional resources, technical barriers and no opportunity to keep in touch with the team, loss of contact with the families who received the ECI service before the war, and displacement. In the view of professionals, to resume ECI service delivery it was necessary to resolve organizational and financial issues, ensure stability in their own life, take additional training, receive support from ECI trainers, re-establish contact with the families who already participated in the ECI and involve new families.

Professionals who continued to provide ECI services pointed to the need to gain new knowledge on supporting families and children in war time, knowledge about trauma and how to address it (96.1%), financial and material needs (53.9%), the need for emotional support and preventing emotional burnout (40.8%).

II. How were ECI services delivered and received at the time of the study?

Of the families involved in the study, 33.8% received the ECI service face-to-face, 33.8% online and 32.5% participated through mixed modalities. To receive the ECI service remotely online platforms were used such as Viber (91.9%), Zoom (21%), Telegram (9.7%), WhatsApp (8.1%), and Skype (3.2 %). The leading messenger applications included Viber and Zoom that are commonly used in Ukraine for personal and professional communication.

The key problems encountered during online meetings both by families and professionals, related to poor connection (23.8%), lack of funds to pay for the services of Internet providers (13.0%), not having enough gadgets for all family members who worked or studied remotely (6.3%).

The frequency of meetings with families did not change as compared to the pre-war period, i.e. in most cases they took place on a weekly basis, or the frequency could vary depending on the family's needs. Having to meet with families who were staying at bomb shelters led to challenging and totally new situations and such meetings were either disrupted or cancelled due to air-raid alarms. Importantly, the regular nature of meetings with families was preserved, which strengthened stability and predictability in the situation of chaos and uncertainty which prevailed at that time.

With the outbreak of the war, the meetings to a large extent were focused on emotional needs of parents and children. Professionals noted setbacks in some skills in children and emotional difficulties in parents. *“Children’s behavior changed a lot and these challenges are partly associated with the trauma they experienced. Besides, parents also require support”*.

Professionals were under stress too. The situation of displacement and sudden, unforeseen changes due to the war was typical both for families and professionals. *“There are your own emotions which affect your work more than usual”*. The overwhelming majority of professionals

(92.1%) found resources to cope with such emotions in interacting with their teams and in sharing with colleagues from other teams.

A new reality emerged in working with families. Professionals could sense that “*Families became more open, there was partnership, now the ECI service proved more relevant to them than before*”; “*Parents can feel our support and commitment, and, in turn, they support professionals as well*”; “*During the war I am feeling strong support from families*”; “*In the peaceful times I felt that it was mostly me giving emotional support, whereas now it is rather an equal mutual emotional support*”; “*We support one another – the families and myself – because we all are under the same circumstances*”. Hence, support from families appeared to be another important resource for professionals.

“During the war, partnership with families receiving the [ECI] service achieved a new level of trust and now we support one another – professionals offer support to parents and parents support professionals”.

III. How do parents view the ECI service?

An analysis of parents’ responses to the question “**How is ECI helpful at present?**” suggests that an important outcome of the ECI at the time of the study for parents was associated with stronger feelings of confidence and self-efficacy, competence in the matters related to the development and parenting of their children, and the ability to understand the child’s mental state and behavior.

CATEGORY	PARENTS’ RESPONSES
<p>PARENTAL CONFIDENCE AND SELF-EFFICACY:</p> <p>CONTROL OVER THE SITUATION AND THE ABILITY TO INFLUENCE IT</p> <p>(category saturation 57.1%)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ECI helps “<i>understand how to act in current circumstances</i>”, “<i>find solutions to challenging situations</i>”, “<i>know that I do everything right</i>”, “<i>see own mistakes</i>”, “<i>realize that our efforts are needed, important and meaningful</i>”.

COMPETENCE IN MATTERS RELATED TO CHILD'S DEVELOPMENT

(category saturation: 17.3%)

ECI helps to “set priorities for my child’s development”, “see how to find sound solutions to problems in bringing up the child”, “apply practical knowledge to provide appropriate support to the child”, “cope and interact with the child effectively”.

MENTALIZATION:

the ability of parents to understand the child, be responsive to his or her mental states and interpret behavior

(category saturation: 14.8%)

“I began to understand my child”; “understanding the child’s behavior is support in itself and it is helpful at any time”; “having a better understanding of how our child develops”; “understand how to respond to a child with autism”.

The ECI service **offered a broad range of supports to overcome the war-related crisis**, including emotional, informational and resource crisis.

CATEGORY

PARENTS' RESPONSES

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

(category saturation 50.6%)

ECI was helpful to “stay calm”; offered “psychological support” and “an opportunity to recover your psychological balance”, “not to lose touch with reality”, “keep the balance and be calm”, “mentally fight the fears”, “not to succumb to depression”, “to keep my sanity”; “maintain the feeling of connectedness to what was before the war”; nurtured hope to “grow even stronger and more courageous”, “believe that everything will be fine”; and created the opportunity “just to be a mum, in good spirits” and “be in a resourceful state”.

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INFORMATION SUPPORT

(category saturation 16.7%)

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- ECI made possible to “*receive professional and timely answers to questions that arise in the process of interacting and communicating with the child*”; to obtain “*information that is relevant to me*”; offered “*tips on working with other professionals and agencies*”.

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MATERIAL SUPPORT

(category saturation 8.11%)

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- “*Help with food packages, diapers and hygiene items*”; “*financial, humanitarian support*”.

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The ECI service **supported different domains of child’s development** (category saturation: 86%), learning of skills that can be applied in practice, which, in turn, enhances and deepens child’s participation in real-life situations. Such learning and development play a key role in a stressful situation as they prevent regresses in the child, loss of his or her prior skills due to stress, fear and disruptions of family routines.

Parents reported that the ECI service **had an empowering effect** on them. It could be said that a child suddenly had “different parents” or “parents with different set of capabilities”, i.e. parents who “know how to communicate and help their child develop”; “resolve parenting issues”; “know how to act in critical situations” and “overcome difficulties of daily living”, in other words they became “resourceful mothers”. Parents who benefitted from support had more potential to address the difficulties arising in their lives independently, including difficulties associated with their child.

During the early stage of the war **among the most valuable aspects parents highlighted the continuity of the ECI service** (26.47%), relationships with professionals (63.95%) and professionals’ qualities (9.3%). In describing their relationships with professionals, they stressed the importance of communication, flexible approach, willingness to give a helping hand, compassion and humanity, trust and understanding, and feedback. Parents value the understanding and support offered through the process of ECI.

The professionals’ qualities, which were essential to parents, included those related to professional knowledge (“*professionalism*”, “*experience and knowledge*”), their empathy, moral values (“*taking great care of our family, supportive words and actions*”, “*warm-hearted attitude to each of us*”, “*being considerate and committed*”, “*worm attitude, attentiveness and compassion*”).

When describing continuity as a valuable aspect of ECI, parents pointed to on-going communication and sharing of feelings and ideas with professionals, noting that *“stability is also supportive in itself”*; *“it is good that they continue to work rather than stay closed during the war, and so there is a place where you can turn to for help”*; they also appreciated *“the opportunity to continue meetings with professionals”*; *“staying in touch, we were not left behind”*; *“consistency and continuity in our interaction”*; and the fact that *“each time we set a new objective for our development”*.

Analysis of results

The outbreak of the war posed challenges for parents and professionals by creating a totally new and unpredictable situation that caused a huge scope of changes. Parents and professionals experienced stress and were traumatized.

Both target groups made efforts to resume the work in this totally new and unpredictable environment by planning flexible meeting schedules, using phone and email communication and working in bomb shelters. Parents and professionals looked for opportunities to purchase digital devices to ensure more stable connection. Thanks to these efforts the arrangements improved and parents showed more interest in regular contacts with professionals.

The experience from the preceding COVID-19 pandemic was used to adapt the ECI service to online way of work taking into account its specific nature and in keeping with its basic principles. On the other hand, such pre-war experience made it possible to avoid disruptions in the ECI service delivery, which were likely with the start of the war, and to maintain the frequency, duration and the structure of meetings. Thus, the setting was preserved, which offered a sense of predictability and stable relationships. The ECI service helped parents to stay connected to what had been before the war and maintain continuity between their past and present..

The stability in the ECI service delivery and the quality of communication with professionals helped stabilize the developmental environment around the child, re-build impaired foundations and create new ones; it supported the learning of new skills and competencies to improve and deepen the child’s participation in daily activities. Even during the war the ECI service was responsive to parents’ expectations as to facilitating the development of their children.

In the war context, the ECI service created a supportive environment for parents by helping them cope with helplessness and confusion, regain confidence and control over their own life and that of their child, enhance their competence and self-efficacy. It became a resource for parents that they drew on to maintain a degree of emotional stability and care for their children and themselves.

The ECI service ensured that parents received timely information, helped them remain emotionally stable, responsive, be able to “see” their child and understand his or her real needs; it strengthened the existing resources of families and prompted them to look for new ones in order to survive traumatic events associated with the war.

A war undermines social relationships and breaks the connections which, under normal circumstances, create a support network around a family. In such a situation losing any of these connections can be an added stress factor for the family and the child. However, the professional–parent relationships, their quality and continuity offered both parents and professionals a source of support and resources to cope with stress.

The resources which helped professionals cope with the situation and continue to deliver ECI included communication with colleagues. Such exchanges provided emotional support, fostered a sense of professional community, and created opportunities to share information, experience and good practices of delivering ECI in the war context. They served as a source of peer support in overcoming possible challenges.

The new reality of the war brought together professionals and parents who were united by their common experiences. Support from parents was another important resource for professionals in this new situation.

As a response to collapse of some teams as a result of the war, professionals were willing to experiment with new formats of inter-team cooperation and to provide ECI as part of other teams. Professionals viewed these options as opportunities for capacity-building and growth, although this approach was entirely new and carried certain risks.

SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS

1. The experience of the war brought together parents and professionals and created a new context for forging partnerships and for mutual support.
2. The ECI service ensured continuity and offered a broad range of support to families, including emotional, informational and material support; it helped to maintain social contacts and fostered a sense of stability in a situation of dramatic changes.
3. The ECI service responded to parents' expectations regarding the development of their children, even in the circumstances of the war, and helped avoid regresses in children's development.
4. The ECI service helped to keep and increase the levels of parents' competence and self-efficacy in a situation characterized by inadequate safety, instability and a change of familiar environment.
5. Professionals need informational, financial and emotional support to prevent emotional burnout and continue to explore new formats of inter-team cooperation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

on ECI service delivery during the war

1. Given the instability and undermining of normal family foundations and their negative effects on the development of a young child, it is important to focus on accessibility and stability of ECI service delivery, flexible strategies to complete the tasks agreed with parents as to the time frames, amount of work and content of the service. The stability of ECI service delivery and the quality of communication with professionals supports families in re-building their existing family foundations and creating new ones, which reduces a negative impact of stress on the development of a young child.
2. It is necessary to implement family-centred participatory practices of support. In the view of changes resulting from the uncertain situation and considering the stress experienced by parents, the ECI service offers a supportive environment for parents and helps them cope with helplessness, confusion and to regain confidence and control over own life and that of their child, increase their competence and self-efficacy.
3. Priority should be given to supporting ECI professionals by organizing regular opportunities for professional exchanges, education and trainings on trauma and addressing its consequences, for discussions of cases and supervision. It is important to explore new cooperation formats between ECI teams from different regions of Ukraine and look for opportunities to ensure financing and material resources to support their work.