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## How preschool children in Lithuania perceive the war in Ukraine: analysis of drawings

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Lithuanian society actively supports Ukraine and is very close to the threat of extended war. How to communicate with preschool children about cruel war events is a problematic question for many parents and educators.

**Purpose** — to study the attitude of parents to communicate with children about the war, to determine the ways of thinking and perception of military events by children through drawings.

**Materials and methods.** The study was conducted in 5 kindergartens in Vilnius with the participation of 113 parents of 36 children.

**Results.** Results revealed that 54.9% parents noted that they are talking about the war with their preschool-age child. 31.8% parents gave permission to speak and draw with their children about the war. The average age of children was 5.3±0.7 years. 72.2% of parents who permitted to talk about the war in Ukraine with their children indicated that they speak to their children about the war, and only 46.7% of parents who not gave permission indicated that they speak to their children about the war (p=0.006).

Data showed that even children not directly impacted by war violence often are aware of current war events. Children's drawings demonstrated a concrete understanding of war events and emphasized war's negative emotions and destructive consequences. The predominant theme of the drawings were weapons, war events, falling bombs, destroyed houses, dying people, soldiers, and frightened faces.

**Conclusions.** The study revealed that only half of the parents talked to their children about the war in Ukraine. Analysis of the form and content of the drawings show that the experienced war events left a robust impression on the children. It is essential to know the feelings and experiences of preschool children, to react appropriately according to their age and respond to their needs. It is necessary to talk to children about the war, trying to understand their worldviews, imaginations, and fears, because war experiences at an early age are a severe factor for the child's further development.

No conflict of interests was declared by the authors.

**Keywords:** children, drawing, preschool age, kindergarten, war, Ukraine, Lithuania.

### Як дошкільнята в Литві сприймають війну в Україні: аналіз малюнків

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Литовське суспільство активно підтримує Україну в умовах широкомасштабної війни. Як розповісти дітям дошкільного віку про жорстокі воєнні події — проблемне питання для багатьох батьків і педагогів.

**Мета** — вивчити ставлення батьків до спілкування з дітьми про війну; визначити способи мислення і сприйняття воєнних подій дітьми через малюнки.

**Матеріали та методи.** Дослідження проведено в 5 дитячих садках Вільнюса за участю 113 батьків і 36 дітей.

**Результати.** Серед опитаних батьків 39,8% дозволили говорити з дітьми про війну та малювати враження. Середній вік дітей становив 5,3±0,7 року. За отриманими даними, навіть діти, які безпосередньо не постраждали від війни, часто знають про поточні воєнні події. Аналіз форми і змісту малюнків засвідчив, що пережиті воєнні події справили на дітей сильне враження. Дитячі малюнки показали конкретне розуміння воєнних подій, підкреслили негативні емоції та руйнівні наслідки війни. Переважною темою малюнків були зброя, воєнні події, падаючі бомби, зруйновані будинки, вмираючі люди, солдати, перелякані обличчя.

**Висновки.** Образотворчі засоби виразності під час розмови з дітьми про пережиті події видалися дуже доречними й потрібними, дали змогу відчувати й зрозуміти сприйняття війни дітьми.

Автори заявляють про відсутність конфлікту інтересів.

**Ключові слова:** діти, малювання, дошкільний вік, дитячий садок, війна, Україна, Литва.

### Introduction

War causes stress and negative experiences, and children are especially vulnerable. Understanding and exploring what children perceive and understand about war is essential in helping them cope with direct or non-direct war exposure and the associated feelings and fantasies. As children grow up, they encounter battles and warring people in fairy tales, movies, computer games, and reality. It's a pity, but wars are happening in

the world now. Still, many beautiful and good initiatives are trying to help societies that have survived the horrors of war or war refugees. We all understand that peace is the best environment for children to grow up in, but many people deal with war experiences and consequences. There are relatively few scientific articles on these topics related to the war experiences of preschool age children [1,2,10,13,14].

Russia's sudden attempts to occupy Ukraine and the ongoing brutal war on the territory of Ukraine posed and continue to pose a threat to

Lithuania and the Baltic countries as well. The state of Lithuania and the people of Lithuania strongly support and help the people of Ukraine and their tenacious defense and brave fight for freedom in every possible way. In Lithuanian society, there are many actions of support for Ukraine, and a lot of verbal and visual information about the war's progress in the media, primarily through television, radio, and internet portals. Adults and teenagers actively help Ukrainian families who fled the war to Lithuania. How preschool children perceive the ongoing war in Ukraine has not been studied and paid little attention to. Communication with children about cruel war events is a problematic question for many parents and educators. Because a vivid imagination and symbolic way of thinking characterize 4–6-year-olds, the perception and understanding of this unexpectedly brutal war in Ukraine by preschool-age children still remains unclear. There is little information about how to discuss the events of the ongoing war with children. According to the W.P. Candy, «children's mark making and graphic symbol making appears to be a universal phenomenon; the preschool children's drawings and verbal accounts are related in a number of different ways» [2]. Drawing could help the child to depict imagination and serve as an appropriate way to ventilate and explain war-related worries and other emotional experiences [7].

The *purpose* of the research – to investigate how preschool children and their parents communicate about the war with each other. Also, to find out what symbols, details, colors, and motifs prevail in children's drawings about the war in order to understand how children feel after the start of the war in Ukraine.

### Materials and methods of the research

113 Parents in 5 kindergartens in Vilnius (with the agreement of the administrations) filled out an anonymous questionnaire developed by the authors. 15 item questionnaire comprised general data about the respondent and child, ways of communicating with the child about the war events, attitudes of parents, and impact of war events on the child's emotions, mood, general well-being, behavior, drawings, games, communication, appetite, sleep. Parents were asked permission to meet their children, discuss the war, and make drawings. Children were interviewed individually with open-ended structured questions about the war designed in a child-appropriate way. Children were interviewed in the kindergartens individually

in comfortable and quiet settings and were asked to draw the war. Quantitative and qualitative analyses of children's drawings were made in this study.

In addition, Ukrainian children who came to Lithuania also visited the kindergartens where the research was conducted. There were 9 of these children. With their parents' permission, we asked them to draw a war. When the children finished drawing, they were given emotional support. And as a final ritual, each child was asked to outline their palm on a piece of paper. Together with the pupils of the kindergarten from the colored palms of the children was drawing a Sunflower as a symbol of Ukrainian victory.

Continuous variables were expressed as the mean  $\pm$  standard deviation, and qualitative data were reported as numbers and percentages. Associations between qualitative parameters were tested using the  $\chi^2$  test or Fisher's exact test. The level of statistical significance was  $p < 0.05$ . Microsoft Excel 2010 was used for coding the procedures, and IBM SPSS 20.0 was used for statistical data analysis.

### Results of the research

113 Parents in 5 kindergartens in Vilnius filled in the questionnaires. 36 (31.8%) parents gave their permission to talk about the war with their child. Meanwhile, 77 (68.2%) did not give consent.

Results revealed that 62 (54.9%) parents noted that they are talking about the war with their preschool-age child, 3 (2.5%) respondents chose to answer «not know» and 1 (0.9%) didn't answer this question.

23 (63.9%) parents who gave permission to talk about the war with their children indicated their children were asking them about the war. Meanwhile, only 33 (42.9%) parents who not gave permission, indicated that their children ask about the war ( $p=0.106$ ). Furthermore, parents who permitted to talk about the war in Ukraine with their children significantly more often indicated that they speak to their children about the war (26 parents (72.2%)) compared to parents who did not give permission (36 (46.7%) parents) ( $p=0.006$ ).

**Parents' notes about how kids' drawings changed in the ongoing war context.** Parents have noted in the questionnaires that they have noticed a change in their children's drawings regarding the context of the war in Ukraine. According to the parents' most frequent answers in their

Table

**Characteristics of preschoolers' drawings**

Characteristics		%	n
<b>War action 61.1% (n=22)</b>			
Planes, drones, bombs, bullets		27.8	10
Tanks		38.9	14
Fire		19.4	7
Dead people lying on the ground		13.9	5
Destroyed, demolished houses in war action danger, frightened people		16.7	6
Helpless, running people in war attack situations		30.6	11
Fighting soldiers, attacking people		36.1	13
<b>Other contents 38.89% (n=14)</b>			
Human figures and emotions		2.2	8
Only Ukrainian flag		5.5	2
Undefined chaotic lines		5.5	2
Little peaceful symbols without people and big empty space		5.5	2
<b>Shapes</b>			
<i>1. Brightness of the line:</i>		%	n
Bright line		94.4	34
Medium line		5.4	2
Pale line		0	0
Chaotic, unfinished line		0	0
<i>2. Intensity of colors:</i>		%	n
Intense color line		94.4	34
Dull/pale color line		5.6	2
<i>3. Number of colors used in a drawing:</i>			
One		2.8	1
Three		5.6	2
Five		11.1	4
Seven		13.9	5
Two		8.3	3
Four		11.1	4
Six		36.1	13
Eight		11.1	4
<i>4. Paper sheet filling:</i>			
Fulfilled paper sheet		66.7	24
Incompletely filled paper sheet		33.3	12
Centered paper sheet filling		0	0
<i>5. Colors:</i>			
Blue		88.9	32
Green		72.2	26
Brown		41.7	15
Orange		30.6	11
Purple		38.9	14
Yellow		80.6	29
Black		69.4	25
Red		75.0	27
Pink		55.6	20
<b>Dominant other than war action images in drawings:</b>			
Ukrainian flag		33.3	12
Clouds		33.3	12
Hearts		8.3	3
Rain		5.6	2
Usual home living		2.8	1
Lithuanian flag		8.3	3
Sun		25.0	12
Flowers		8.3	3
Butterflies, birds		5.6	2

children's drawings, «appeared more hearts and blue-yellow colors», «the child started to draw Ukrainian flags», and «child mostly uses blue-yellow colors in his drawings, often draws Ukrainian flags».

An interview was conducted with 36 children, and all children made their drawing. The average age of children was 5.3±0.7 years.

Each child's drawing was studied, examining the filling of the page space, choice of tools, colors, represented symbols according to content, form, and prevailing themes, and the child's verbal descriptions or comments while drawing, if

there were any. The content and characteristics of drawings are presented in Table.

**Content, symbols and characteristics of the drawings**

*Comparison of boys' and girls' drawings.* Both boys' and girls' drawings show action and military equipment – tanks, rockets, shotguns, bullets, falling bombs and soldiers in action. Boys depicted more air military equipment – aeroplanes, drones, and girls depicted more land military weapons – tanks, shotguns. In all children's drawings dominate bright colors – blue, green, yellow, and red. In girls' drawings, orange, pink, and purple

colors were also noticeable. Boys used more cold colors like blue, black and green. Moreover, many children drew scared people with hands up and sad faces. The girls drew burning houses, fire and people running away from them more often. Also, more symbols like the sun, rain, clouds, and hearts are seen in girls' drawings. Although the children were asked to draw a war (in general), most of them drew the ongoing war in Ukraine. The drawings of all children often depicted Ukrainian flags.

*Comparison of drawings of children who talk and do not talk about the war with their parents.* Considerable differences were not noticed when comparing drawings of children who talk about the war with their parents and who do not talk. Children see war images on television in the pictures of both subgroups' dominated war images – soldiers in action, running, leaving home, and military equipment (tanks, rockets, aeroplanes). Both groups also portrayed burning houses and destroyed houses with broken windows; such views were often shown on the news.

*Children's verbal thoughts and statements during the drawing process.* 19 children expressed their thoughts during the drawing process. Most often: «during the war the sky is red», «I am angry because Russian soldiers destroy houses», «Russia is a «bad country», so I color it in black in the map», «people running from a war», «a house is on fire and people leaving their home», «I am angry and I draw an angry face», «Scared people», «I drew a rain, sad sun and sad people». One child drew a war drone and told stories about Bayraktar. Children also told how they or their families are helping Ukrainian refugees.

All examined children's drawings are presented in Figures 1–4.

*Comparison of Lithuanian and Ukrainian children's drawings.* Ukrainian children's drawings in Vilnius (Lithuania) reflects the immediate encounter with traumatic war situations and events that are difficult for them to depict, the lines of the drawing are blurred, shaky, different from the bright drawings of Lithuanian children, which reflect their vivid impressions about the war events



Fig. 1. Children's drawings



Fig. 2. Children's drawings

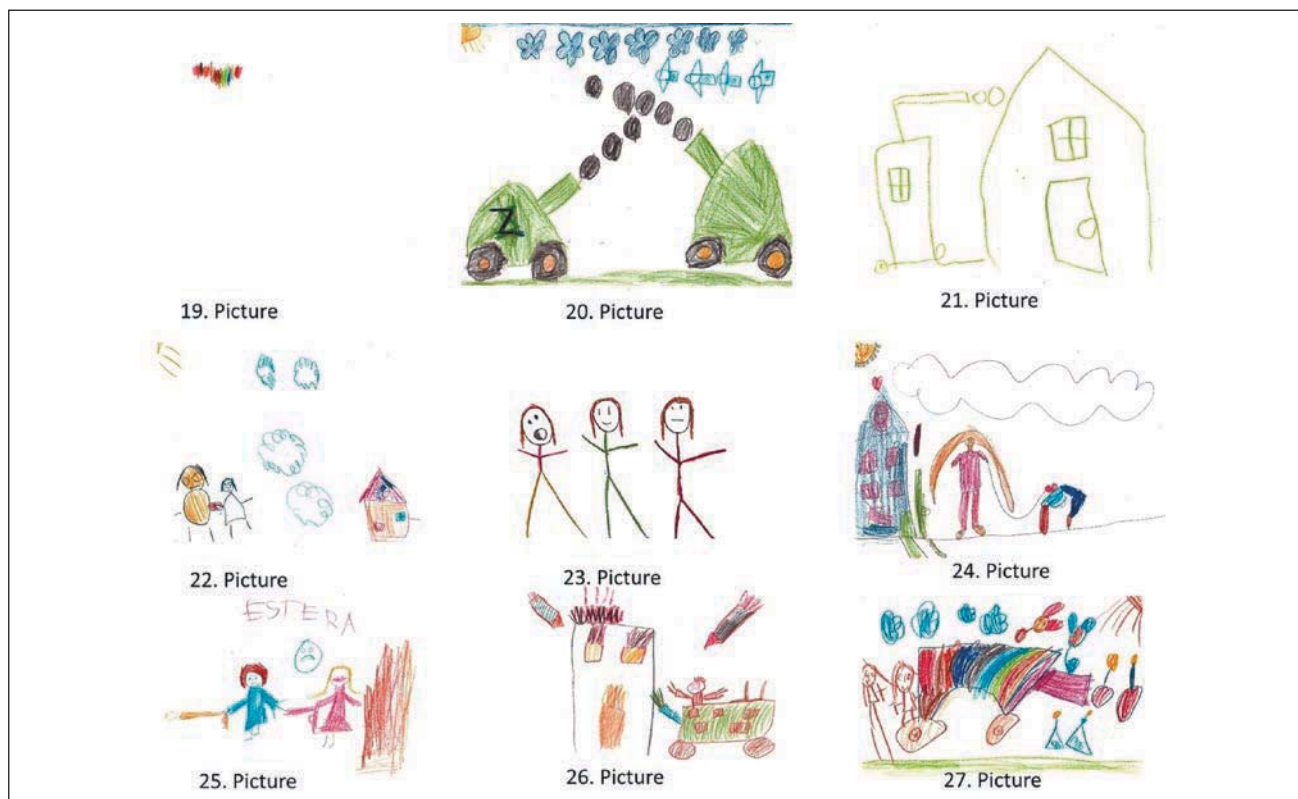


Fig. 3. Children's drawings

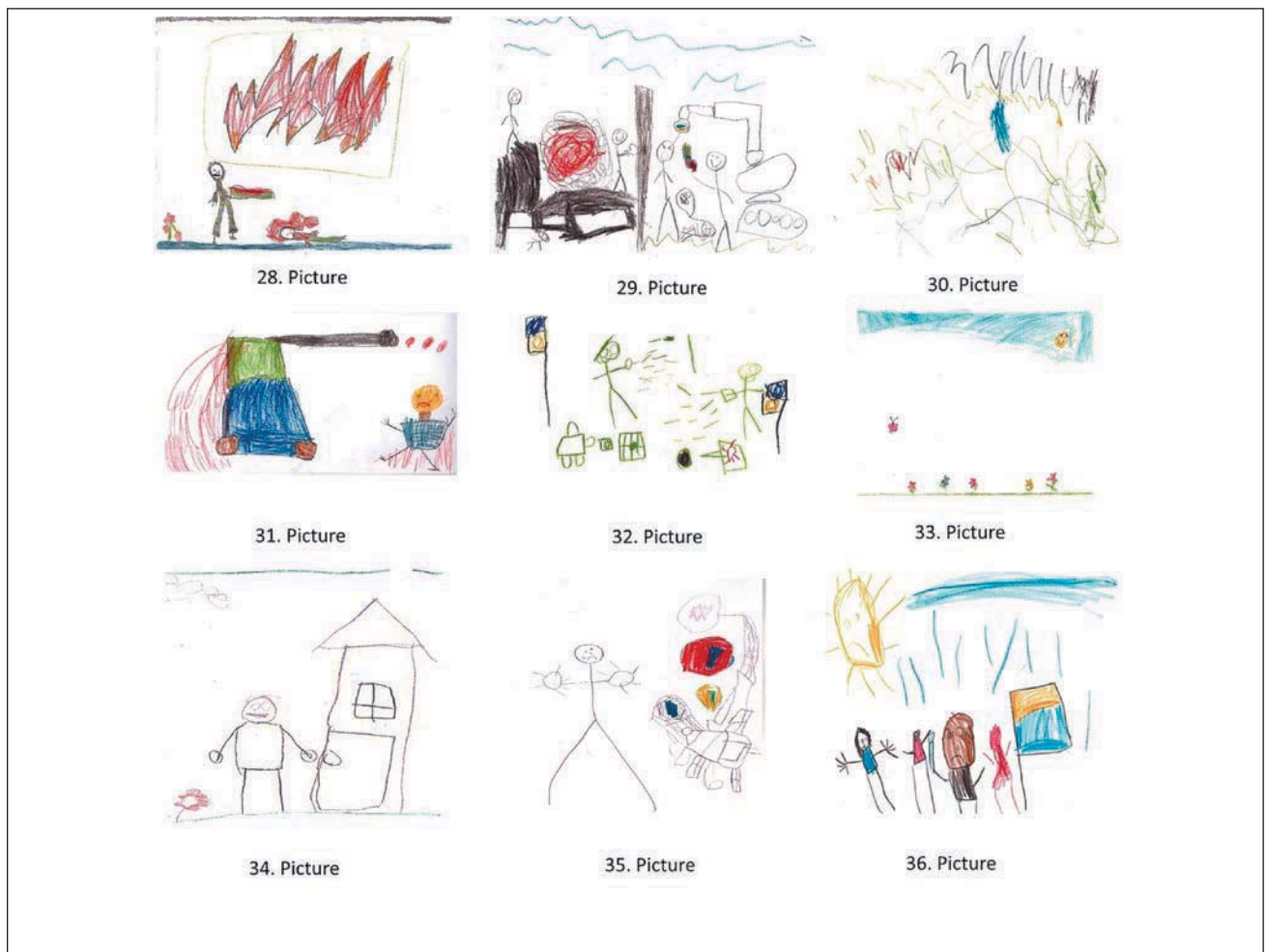


Fig. 4. Children's drawings

from the media. Ukrainian children's drawings are presented in Figures 5, 6.

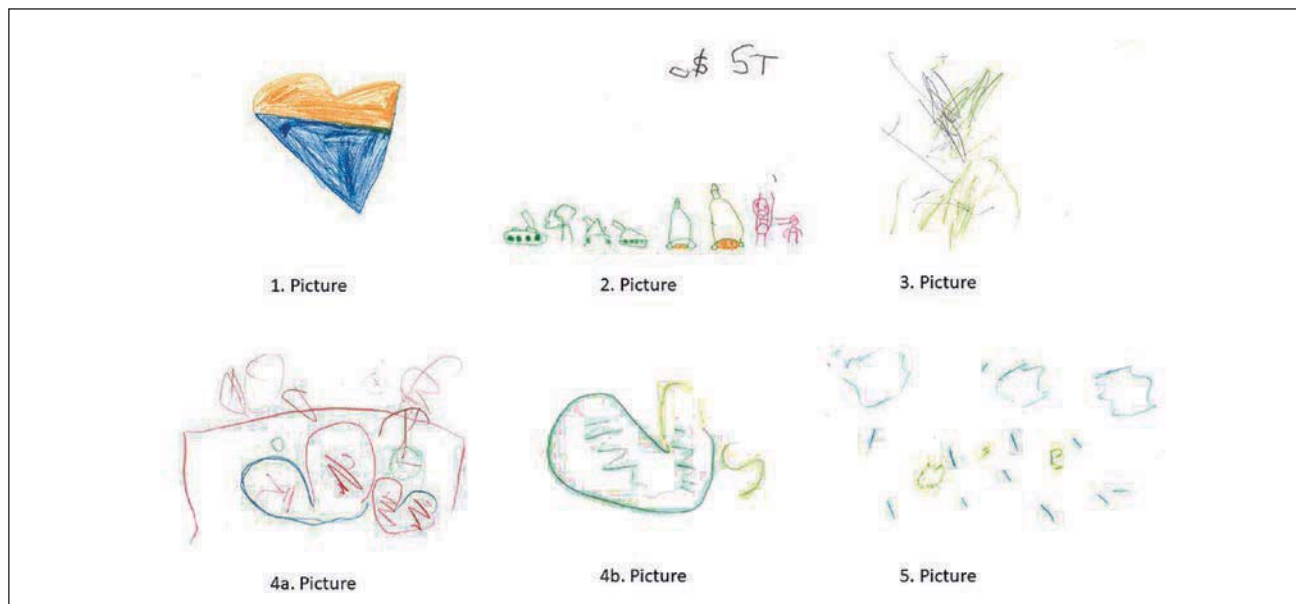
### Discussion

In our study, similar to the results of other studies [3,13] of children's war drawings they presented depictions that reflected a concrete understanding of war events and emphasized the negative emotions and destroying consequences of war. The recent outbreak of war in Ukraine, frequent and frightening reports of war events in the media and the great concern of the country's public reflected in children's drawings in this study. Most children drew bright, solid lines and colored intense pictures of war events illustrating their vivid impressions. The dominating themes identified in the children's war drawings: war as armed and dangerous activity; war as an expression of aggressiveness and conflict; war destroying houses and daily living of people; and death.

The horrors of Russia's war against Ukraine have affected millions of Ukrainians and their supporters worldwide. Some of the people who were forced to flee from the terrible events of the

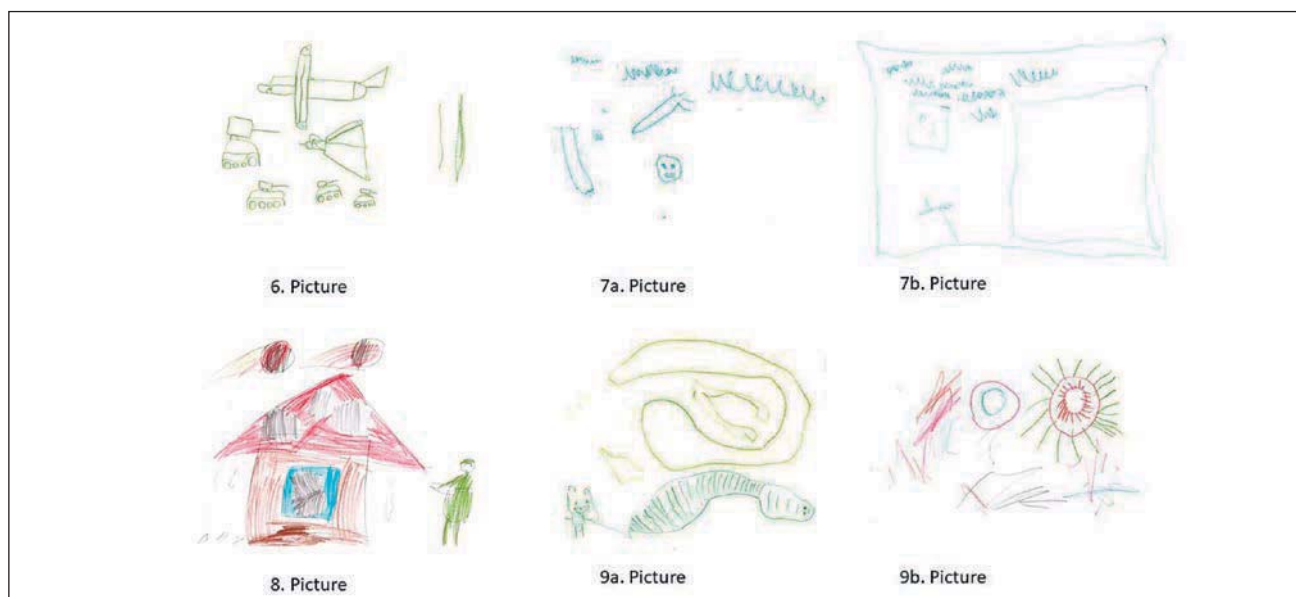
war stayed in Lithuania. The events of this ongoing war affect the daily lives of children and adults and are a frequent topic of conversation. It was essential to investigate how parents in Lithuania talk about the war events with preschool children. Assuming that less than half of parents permitted to speak and draw with their child about the war demonstrates that they are not sure what and how to talk with the child and that finding appropriate ways for a conversation about the ongoing war is challenging. While refusing to give their consent, parents noted their will to protect their children from the severe painful information.

Data from this study revealed that children see war events in media and know about the ongoing war; content and symbols of the ongoing war events were depicted in children's drawings. Thus, the possibility to draw the war expands the child possibility to communicate perceptions, imagination and worries. Research data shows that even children not directly impacted by political violence often are aware of current conflicts and report feelings of fear, anxiety, anger, sadness and confusion. Although not directly in harm's way,



Note: \*Pictures marked with the letters a or b represent the same sheet, only different sides of it.

**Fig. 5.** Children's drawings



Note: \*Pictures marked with the letters a or b represent the same sheet, only different sides of it.

**Fig. 6.** Children's drawings

children exposed to war through the media or other sources must try to make sense of the information they receive [14].

It is important to understand what and how children perceive and imagine the ongoing war and encourage parents and educators to find appropriate ways for such communications with preschool children. It is essential to know the feelings and experiences of preschool children, to react appropriately according to their age and respond to their needs. Research shows that it is necessary to talk to children about the war, trying to understand their worldviews, imaginations, and fears, because war experiences at an early age are a severe factor for the child's further

development [7,11,12]. Visual means of expression appeared to be very appropriate when talking to children about their experiences of war events because verbal information alone is not enough. Drawing is a suitable and helpful way to talk with a child about difficult experiences, helping them explore, understand, react, process and integrate experiences into the life narrative they create.

Parents and educators of the preschool children demonstrated a big interest in the ongoing study and drawing as a relevant communication form with the child on challenging themes. W.P. Candy notes in her dissertation, «teachers of young children should understand that there is a significant relationship between children's

drawings and their verbal accounts [2]. Young children use their drawings and associated talk as a way of communicating to each other and adults. It is not only important to provide opportunities for children to create spontaneous art and listen to their stories but also to observe children as they draw. Sometimes it is only through attentive observation, coupled with sensitive questioning that a sound interpretation of the child's story is possible» [2]. Data of our study also revealed that children's verbal thoughts and statements during the drawing process naturally took place in a mutually complementary interaction.

In the research the concepts of war and peace are often investigated and explored together [3,4,9,11]. Research findings indicate that developmental differences between children were evident via their drawings and knowledge of peace and war, confirming that children's understanding of war precedes their understanding of peace [6]. Understanding the enemy concept also is described as an essential component of picturing war in preschool children [8,9]. Our study didn't investigate peace concepts and drawings of peace or enemies. A brief ritual was elaborated at the end of the communication to help the child to close the interview in a more positive way and provide the possibility to be active and do a symbolical thing to help Ukraine and Ukrainians to defend their country. Children were doing this willingly and participated in this symbolical play: they drew counters of their hands then cut off, researcher wrote their wishes to Ukrainians, and put them into a circle as a sunflower (often associated with Ukrainians). This symbolical ritual appeared to serve as a helpful ending tool. It enabled children to be active participants and contribute to helping people in war while sending them personal regards. The literature indicates that taking into account the creative imagination of children, the elements of play and drawing can be successfully combined when studying children's inner well-being and emotional experiences [8,9,14].

It is crucial to study the impact of the recent war in Ukraine for children and find appropriate ways in which parents and educational institutions can contribute to the proper support of children during the events of the war. Hence, preschoolers need to be informed and involved in community life in an age-appropriate way when trying to help Ukraine live in peace. Children of preschool age have a sensitive, magical, symbolic perception of the world, so it is often uncomfortable for adults

to talk to them about the problematic experiences of war, death, the destruction of cities and other disasters. Or adults are avoiding, not knowing how much children understand, or how to tell them about the war events. When bereavement occurs, there is often a desire to protect children from sad, painful experiences. It is impossible to protect children from news about the war, but what and how adults tell them is important. Even then, if the children are not told about the war, they hear about it from those around them in kindergarten, society, on the radio, on television. To what extent and how children understand the ongoing war, how much they need to feel involved depends on sociocultural traditions and age characteristics of children. In our study, participants were five year olds; all knew about the ongoing war in Ukraine and willingly communicated about the events, demonstrating empathy and understanding of war-related difficulties. Families of some children were actively involved in helping war refugees, and children told about this.

It is difficult for children to formulate and express their emotional states in words, so it is easier and more informative to translate and describe their attitude through drawing [7]. While drawing and playing, or moving, children have the opportunity to relax, create and convey what is important to them and what they would not be able to describe and name in words [1,2,12]. Seeing children's drawings makes it easier for adults to feel and understand their inner world and imaginations and find ways to appropriately respond to the child's individual needs. By drawing, playing, and talking, children can express and understand their experiences and safely return to them, process them, and react.

In conducting this study, authors also noted the importance of creating safe environment for communication with the child. Like other researchers [8,12,13], we also chose a semi-structured form of interview, communicating with the child in the preschool educational institution he or she attends (where the child is already accustomed) and creating a supportive, cooperative relationship. During the interview the investigators built connection with the children and created conditions for them to express themselves, to feel accepted, safe and calm, and children found a desire to communicate and draw.

Adults tend not to discuss serious topics with children, but when sad events directly affect everyday life, talking about difficult war events becomes

necessary. Children should have the opportunity to talk about their experiences, expectations, and imaginations and think about the causes, effects, and goals of war according to magical, symbolic thinking characteristics. Children who have experienced difficult experiences of war and migration are at a higher risk of having psychosocial development difficulties later in life, therefore complex support services and programs are being developed and implemented in various countries in order to cover all areas of life, especially in the early years of the child [5,9].

### Conclusions

Children's perception of ongoing war events and their representation is shaped by their immediate experience, the nature of the events themselves, and the images they see in media. The predominant theme of the drawings were weapons, war events, falling bombs, destroyed houses, soldiers, dead people, and frightened faces. The opinions and statements of parents, and family members, and the nature of public information tools and media broadcasts news were important for children's understanding of ongoing war events. When a child is drawing war experiences and depicting war events, it is essential to be close to the child,

talk to him, and discuss the depicted symbols, creating conditions and opportunities for the child to express safely arising thoughts and frightening associations. Empowerment of the children to participate actively in experiencing their reactions in a safe and supporting environment was helpful using drawing, talking and creative symbolic play elements. It is essential to know the feelings and experiences of preschool children, to react appropriately according to their age and respond to their needs. It is necessary to talk to children about the war, trying to understand their worldviews, imaginations, and fears, because war experiences at an early age are a severe factor for the child's further development. Parents and educators need to be counselled on how to talk to their children about the war in appropriate and acceptable ways, taking into account their age and experiences.

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