

Will war be a family discussion topic? Children and adolescents awareness and family topic conversation on war news: a cross sectional study in Portugal following the emergence of the Russia-Ukraine conflict

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Abstract

Introduction and objective: Since the September 11 attacks took place, several studies have been carried out, looking at the impact that news about traumatic events has on the population not directly exposed. The aim is to determine to what extent children and adolescents have access to the news and whether the topic of war is discussed within the family. **Methods:** Cross-sectional, observational study, with questionnaires to parents of children and adolescents between five and 17 years old, between October and December 2022. The sample was divided into two groups: group I (GI) with children aged from five to 11 and group II (GII) with adolescents from 12 to 17. **Results:** We obtained 97 questionnaires (response rate of 91.5%) of which 46.4% were from GI and 53.6% from GII. More than half of the parents already permitted limited access to the news for their children, with differences between the groups (68.9% GI vs. 38.5% GII, $p = 0.003$), and the main restricted news items were those of a violent nature (74.5%). Nearly all the children and adolescents became aware of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, mostly through television (81.4% GI vs. 90.4% GII, $p = 0.204$), the internet (23.3% GI vs. 55.8% GII, $p = 0.001$), and school (74.4% GI vs. 53.8% GII, $p = 0.039$). The topic of war was addressed by 80.4% of the parents, and the most commonly expressed feelings by their children were sadness and concern, with GI frequently expressing fear and GII indignation. **Discussion:** The majority of the children and adolescents were aware of the ongoing conflict, and the issue was frequently addressed at home. Television continues to be the main source of access to information.

Keywords: Armed conflicts. Mental health. Media exposure.

Será a guerra um tema de conversa em família? Perceção das crianças e adolescentes e conversação familiar sobre a guerra: um estudo transversal em Portugal após o surgimento do conflito Rússia-Ucrânia

Resumo

Introdução e objetivos: Desde o atentado do 11 de setembro que se tem vindo a estudar a influência que notícias sobre eventos traumáticos têm na população não diretamente exposta. O objetivo é determinar como crianças e adolescentes têm acesso a notícias e se a temática da guerra é discutida em família. **Métodos:** Estudo transversal, observacional, com aplicação de questionários a pais de crianças e jovens entre os 5 e os 17 anos entre outubro e dezembro de 2022. A amostra foi

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dividida num grupo I (GI) com filhos entre os 5 e os 11 anos e num grupo II (GII) entre os 12 e os 17 anos. **Resultados:** Obtivemos 97 questionários (taxa de resposta de 91,5%), 46,4% do GI e 53,6% do GII. Mais de metade dos pais limitou o acesso a notícias aos filhos com diferenças entre os grupos (68,9% GI vs. 38,5% GII, $p = 0,003$), sendo as principais notícias restritas as de caráter violento (74,5%). Quase a totalidade das crianças e jovens tinha tido conhecimento do conflito Rússia-Ucrânia, maioritariamente através da televisão (81,4% GI vs. 90,4% GII, $p = 0,204$), internet (23,3% GI vs. 55,8% GII, $p = 0,001$) e escola (74,4% GI vs. 53,8% GII, $p = 0,039$). A temática da guerra foi abordada por 80,4% dos pais, e os sentimentos mais manifestados pelos filhos foram a tristeza e a preocupação, sendo no GI frequentemente manifestado o medo e no GII a indignação. **Discussão:** A maioria das crianças e jovens tiveram conhecimento do conflito decorrente, tendo sido frequente a abordagem do tema em casa. A televisão continua a ser a principal fonte de acesso à informação.

Palavras-chave: Conflitos armados. Saúde mental. Exposição aos media.

Keypoints

What is known

- There are currently more than 100 active armed conflicts spread across all continents.
- The conflicts between Russia and Ukraine and between Israel and Palestine are two of the biggest humanitarian emergencies since the Second World War.
- Exposure to news about armed conflicts can have consequences even on those not directly exposed to the conflicts (children included).

What is added

- More than half of the parents admitted to having already restricted the access to specific news items for their children.
- The topic of war had already been discussed at home by most of the families.
- The main feelings expressed by children when discussing the topic of war were sadness and concern.

Introduction

Most authors define armed conflict as any form of violence involving weapons that opposes governments, organized groups, and/or civilians within the same State or in different States, regardless of the intensity or cause of the confrontation¹.

Recently, Europe has been the site of some of the largest armed conflicts in history, with the conflicts between Russia and Ukraine and between Israel and Palestine becoming two of the biggest humanitarian emergencies since World War II. The conflict between Russia and Ukraine emerged in February 2022 and more than two years later, there are still 5.9 million refugees, of which 33% are children, and 14.6 million people requiring multisectoral humanitarian assistance².

However, since there are more than 100 armed conflicts currently active across all continents, most of which are in African territory, the attention given by the media to this conflict does not reflect the real dimension of the problem^{3–5}. It is a well-known fact that almost all individuals directly exposed to armed conflicts or other humanitarian emergencies will experience some type of psychological stress, with adolescents and young adults being the population

most susceptible to the subsequent development of depression, anxiety, and behavioral changes^{6,7}.

Given the important role assumed by the media in the 21st century (namely the television and social networks), which is even more visible in traumatic events such as armed conflicts and the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of studies on the impact that the images and the news transmitted may have on the mental health of people not directly exposed to those events has significantly increased. The greatest development in studies within this area occurred after the September 11 attacks in the United States of America, where a positive correlation was found between the number of hours spent watching the news and the development of depressive symptoms and post-traumatic stress^{8–10}. Also, a 2014 study carried out in the Gaza Strip after one of the periods in which more missiles were launched into the territory showed that, at that time, there was not only an increase in news consumption, but also a positive relationship between the time spent viewing the news and viewers' development of anxiety symptoms¹¹.

Since it is known that this increase in psychopathology also occurred in children and adolescents, a 2016 study proved that parents played an important role in reducing symptoms of anxiety and suffering in general when they mediated television exposure, which

corroborated their crucial role in children's responses to trauma¹².

Therefore, the objectives of this study were to determine to what extent children and young people had access to news of a violent nature (such as those referring to the Russia-Ukraine conflict) and to investigate whether the topic of war was discussed within the family.

Methodology

A cross-sectional, descriptive, observational study was carried out, which evaluated the approach to the topic of war between parents and children, as well as the reactions and feelings expressed by both and the way in which they access information. The study was carried out in the Outpatients Department and in the Pediatrics Ward of a Portuguese level I hospital, using a questionnaire to be answered by parents of children and adolescents during the period between October and December 2022. This questionnaire did not undergo a validation process and is available in Supplementary material. The inclusion criteria were having children between five and 17 years old and proficiency in the Portuguese language and the exclusion criteria were difficulty in mastering the Portuguese language and inability to respond to the questionnaire.

The questionnaires were delivered in person by the authors of the study in these two hospital areas to parents who met the criteria and who agreed to participate in the study after its purpose was explained to them. Written informed consent was also obtained. The questionnaires were later placed in two separate boxes, where the questionnaire and the informed consent were kept separately to ensure anonymity.

The questionnaire was divided into four sections: (1) sociodemographic identification of the father/mother, (2) sociodemographic identification of the child/adolescent, (3) forms of access to information/news, and (4) discussion of the topic of war at home.

The sample was subsequently divided into two groups, according to the age of the children, considering for this purpose the child they were accompanying during the consultation or hospitalization: Group I (GI) relating to children aged five to 11, and Group II (GII) relating to children aged 12-17.

The statistical analysis was performed using SPSS®, version 27.0. A descriptive analysis of sociodemographic variables was carried out and the Chi-square and Fisher tests were used. The value considered statistically significant was $\alpha = 0.05$.

The study was approved by the hospital's Ethics Committee.

Results

Sociodemographic characterization of the sample

One hundred and six questionnaires were handed out and 97 responses were returned, which represents a response rate of 91.5%. There were four parents of Ukrainian nationality among those who refused to respond.

The sample from the 97 participants had a median age of 43 years [39-46], 67.1% had secondary school education or higher and 81.4% were of Portuguese nationality. With respect to the children, 59.8% were male, with a median age of 12 years [8-15]. GI accounted for about 46.4% of the sample and GII 53.6% (Table 1).

Access to information

More than half of the parents (52.6%) admitted to having already allowed limited access to the news on specific topics for their children, with this limitation being greater in GI (68.9% GI vs. 38.5% GII, $p = 0.003$). The way they did this was essentially by changing the television channel (64.7%) or controlling social media content (52.9%). When asked about the main types of news items that were restricted, among four options given (news of a violent nature, news about natural disasters, news about health, and news of a sexual nature), the main types of restricted news items were those of a violent nature (74.5%), followed by those of a sexual nature (45.1%), with no statistically significant differences between the groups.

Parents admitted watching the news together with their children in more than half of the sample (68.0%), with no statistically significant difference between the groups (66.6% GI vs. 69.2% GII, $p = 0.787$). When there were news items related to armed conflicts/war or other types of violence, 52.5% of the parents did not switch channel and addressed the subject on their own initiative, 29.8% did not switch channel but only talked about the subject if their children raised questions, and 17.7% switched channels.

Almost the entire sample (97.9%) admitted that their children had become aware of the Russia-Ukraine conflict mostly through television (81.4% GI vs. 90.4% GII, $p = 0.204$), the internet (23.3% GI vs. 55.8% GII, $p = 0.001$), and school (74.4% GI vs. 53.8% GII, $p = 0.039$).

Table 1. Sociodemographic characterization of the sample

Group	Variable	
Sociodemographic characterization of the participants (parents)	Number of participants (n)	97
	Relationship of the accompanying person, n (%)	
	Mother	83 (85.6)
	Father	14 (14.4)
	Age (years)	
	Median	43
	Minimum	26
	Maximum	57
	Education, n (%)	
	1st cycle	5 (5.2)
Sociodemographic characterization of the children	2nd cycle	6 (6.2)
	3rd cycle	18 (18.6)
	Secondary	38 (39.2)
	Bachelor's degree	25 (25.8)
	Master's degree	2 (2.1)
	Unknown	3 (3.1)
	Nationality, n (%)	
	Portuguese	79 (81.4)
	Brazilian	7 (7.2)
	Other	2 (2.1)
	Unknown	9 (9.3)
	Gender, n (%)	
	Female	39 (40.2)
	Male	58 (59.8)
	Age (years)	
	Median	12
	Minimum	5
	Maximum	17
	Group, n (%)	
	GI (5-11 years)	45 (46.4)
	GII (12-17 years)	52 (53.6)
	Siblings, n (%)	
	Yes	78 (80.4)
	No	19 (19.6)

Discussion of the topic of war at home

The topic of armed conflicts had been addressed by 78 parents (80.4%). The approach to the topic was independent of the age group (77.8% GI vs. 82.7% GII, $p = 0.543$) and the presence of siblings (76.9% vs. 94.7%, $p = 0.079$). The main feelings expressed by the children when the topic was approached were sadness and concern, with GI also frequently expressing fear and GII displaying indignation (Table 2).

The subject was approached without difficulty by around 77% of parents, regardless of their children's age group (71.4% GI vs. 81.4% GII, $p = 0.299$) or their level of education ($p = 0.211$). About 20.5% of parents

found it difficult to answer their children's questions, and 2.6% had changed the subject. The questions most commonly asked by the children, among those presented in the questionnaire, are represented in table 3.

Out of the 19.6% who had not discussed the topic of war with their children, 61.1% justified this by pointing out that their children had not asked, 22.2% did not think it was appropriate, and 11.1% did not know how to approach the subject.

Discussion

In this study, we noticed that regardless of age, almost all children and adolescents were aware of the ongoing conflict, with television being the predominant means of accessing information, including among the adolescent population. This finding goes against some studies in the area reporting that the main source of news for this conflict was the internet, although it is important to highlight that these studies were not conducted using questionnaires or based on parents' perceptions¹³. Even so, most of the parents stated that they limited access to violent news, especially among the younger population.

Most parents had also chosen to address the issue of armed conflicts with their children when the first news about the Russia-Ukraine conflict emerged, and the ease or difficulty they had in approaching this subject had no relation to either the age of the children or the parents' level of education.

When the topic was approached, feelings of worry and sadness were very common in both age groups, with the younger age group expressing fear more frequently. An article reviewing the impact of terrorism on young people confirms that at younger ages it becomes more difficult for children to regulate their emotions after viewing traumatic images, and thus fear becomes a common feeling. The same article states that adolescents, despite being equally affected by the images, are able to develop more elaborate critical thinking addressing the themes of justice, politics and theology¹⁴. This explains why indignation was also more common in the 12-17 age group in our sample.

We realize that even the youngest age groups are becoming aware of the conflicts that are taking place today and feel the need to talk about them. Taking into account the studies that positively correlate exposure to these events through the media and the development of symptoms of depression and anxiety^{11,12}, it is essential to train parents to address these issues with their children in order to reduce the impact that these

Table 2. Feelings expressed by children when discussing the topic of war at home (n = 78)

Feelings	Group 1, (n = 35)	Group 2, (n = 43)	p
Fear	28.6%	4.7%	0.004
Concern	82.9%	62.8%	0.050
Empathy	31.4%	11.6%	0.031
Indignation	11.4%	32.6%	0.028
Indifference	0%	11.6%	N/A
Sadness	51.4%	44.2%	0.524

Table 3. Questions asked by children when discussing the topic of war at home, among those presented in the questionnaire (n = 78)

Questions	Group 1, (n = 35)	Group 2, (n = 43)	p
What is war?	40.0%	4.7%	<0.001
How long will it last?	54.3%	46.5%	0.495
Will they attack us too?	54.3%	39.5%	0.194
Are we going to die?	17.1%	7.0%	0.162
Why do wars happen?	57.1%	34.9%	0.049

news items could have on their mental health and to give them the support they need.

It has been proven that consumption of the news increases in times of armed conflict, so it is also up to us, as health professionals, not only to train parents to address the issue but also to inform them about the potential harmful effects of contact with these events through the media^{15,16}.

We cannot fail to mention some of the limitations of the study, such as the small sample size, the refusal to participate in the study of some parents who met the eligibility criteria, and the use of a non-validated questionnaire.

It is also important to say that the study took place at an early stage of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, at a time when images were not only frequently broadcasted but people also felt significantly impacted by them, a situation that has faded over time.

Supplementary data

Supplementary data are available at DOI: 10.24875/PJP.24000054. These data are provided by the corresponding author and published online for the benefit of the reader. The contents of supplementary data are the sole responsibility of the authors.

Author contributions

M. Sousa Santos: conception and design of the study, report and review; acquisition of data either from patients, research studies, or literature; analysis or interpretation of data either from patients, research studies, or literature; drafting the article; critical review of the article for important intellectual content; final approval of the version to be published; agreement to be accountable for the accuracy or integrity of the work.

A.C. Alves: conception and design of the study, report and review; acquisition of data either from patients, research studies, or literature; analysis or interpretation of data either from patients, research studies, or literature; drafting the article; critical review of the article for important intellectual content; final approval of the version to be published; agreement to be accountable for the accuracy or integrity of the work.

E. Machado Guimarães: conception and design of the study, report and review; acquisition of data either from patients, research studies, or literature; analysis or interpretation of data either from patients, research studies, or literature; drafting the article; critical review of the article for important intellectual content; final approval of the version to be published; agreement to be accountable for the accuracy or integrity of the work.

M. Manuel Zarcos: conception and design of the study, report and review; drafting the article; critical review of the article for important intellectual content; final approval of the version to be published; agreement to be accountable for the accuracy or integrity of the work.

Previous presentations

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Conflicts of interest

None.

Ethical considerations

Protection of humans and animals. The authors declare that no experiments involving humans or animals were conducted for this research.

Confidentiality, informed consent, and ethical approval. The authors have followed their institution's confidentiality protocols, obtained informed consent from patients, and received approval from the Ethics Committee. The SAGER guidelines were followed according to the nature of the study.

Declaration on the use of artificial intelligence. The authors declare that no generative artificial intelligence was used in the writing of this manuscript.

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