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## Children in a situation of war

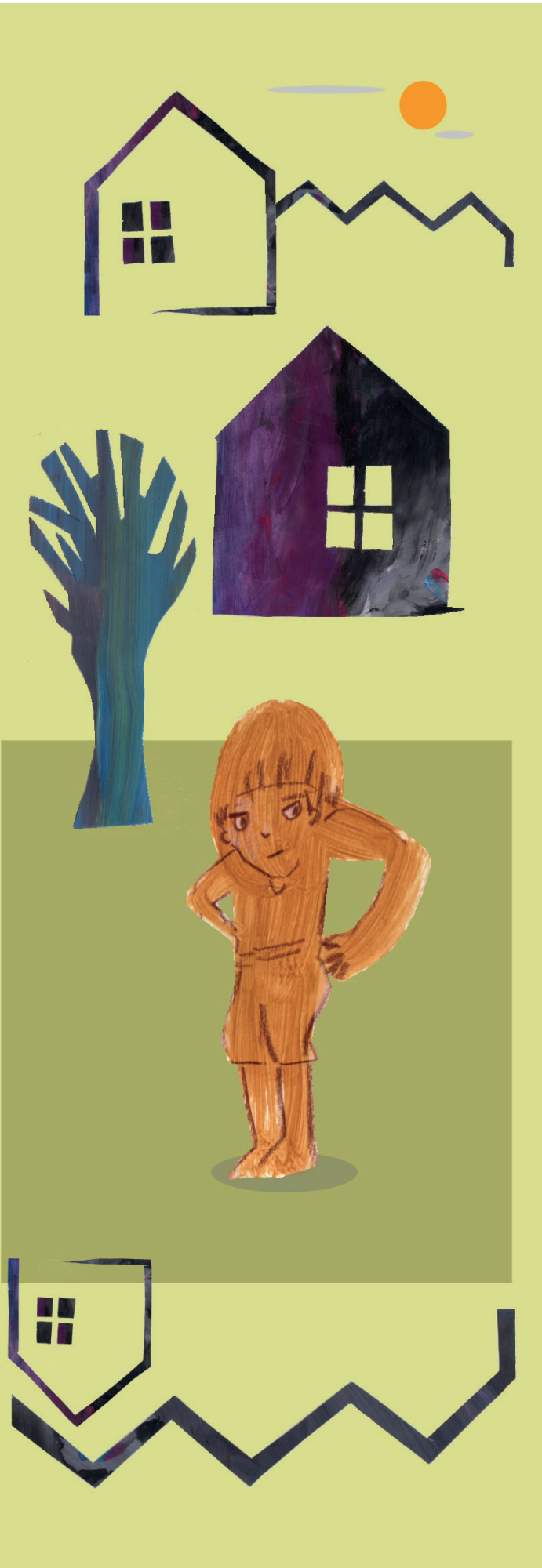
The war broke out. Despite political speculation, hardly anyone had expected it. Mothers with children hurriedly set off into the unknown in order to avoid death. It was the first wave of refugees from Ukraine to come to Poland. Others waited as long as they could, hoping that the war would end soon. It didn't. They hid in the subway stations, in cellars, in the basement of churches, heard shootings and bomb blasts. They were afraid to go out to flee. In the end, the fear of staying turned out to be greater than that of going. They came to Poland. Sometimes they stood in a long line at the border, sometimes there was an opportunity to cross in a humanitarian convoy. They are here. Exactly 2.7 million of them. They live in various places: schools, holiday centers, but also with ordinary citizens in their apartments, with their families. The initial joy of being saved is turning into fatigue of long waiting. Some are waiting to return home, others are learning the language and looking for a job. The children started going to school. They are trying to live a normal life. They have one thing in common - the experience of trauma.

After regaining the basic sense of security, after their body has been heavily mobilized to survive, their high level of anxiety decreases. But it turns out that the experience of trauma cannot be forgotten. It comes back in dreams, memories, and behaviors. One of the families that we managed to bring from Vinnitsa, located in the middle of the war zone, heard sirens howling one sunny day. It was only under the bed where everyone hid that they realized that the sound was coming from the television. Their 10-year-old son always locks himself in his room when a stranger comes home.

How long will it take? Is it possible to forget? Can we do anything to help them? And now, after the massacres in Bucha and Mariupol, we receive even worse information. The children and their guardians who are reaching our country now are in an increasingly serious emotional state.

### Security

Regaining sense of security is the most primal human need, a pre-condition for continued living. At first, with the influx of refugees, everyone eagerly opened their hearts and homes. The war was supposed to end soon, but it didn't. In places where children stay, many solutions have been developed that enable them to play and learn. These are valuable initiatives. However, many children are so anxious that they are unable to participate in these activities. After experiencing a sudden threat to life, every person needs good orientation in the environment first, so that they can feel safe. Simple information is





necessary to help them settle into the new circumstances. The sense of security grows when a person knows what is going to happen during the day, when the information they receive does not surprise them. Children should not be separated from their mothers even for the purpose of having fun. More important to them is the presence of the loved ones. When two or three families come together, it would be good if they could live close to each other, be in contact with one another.

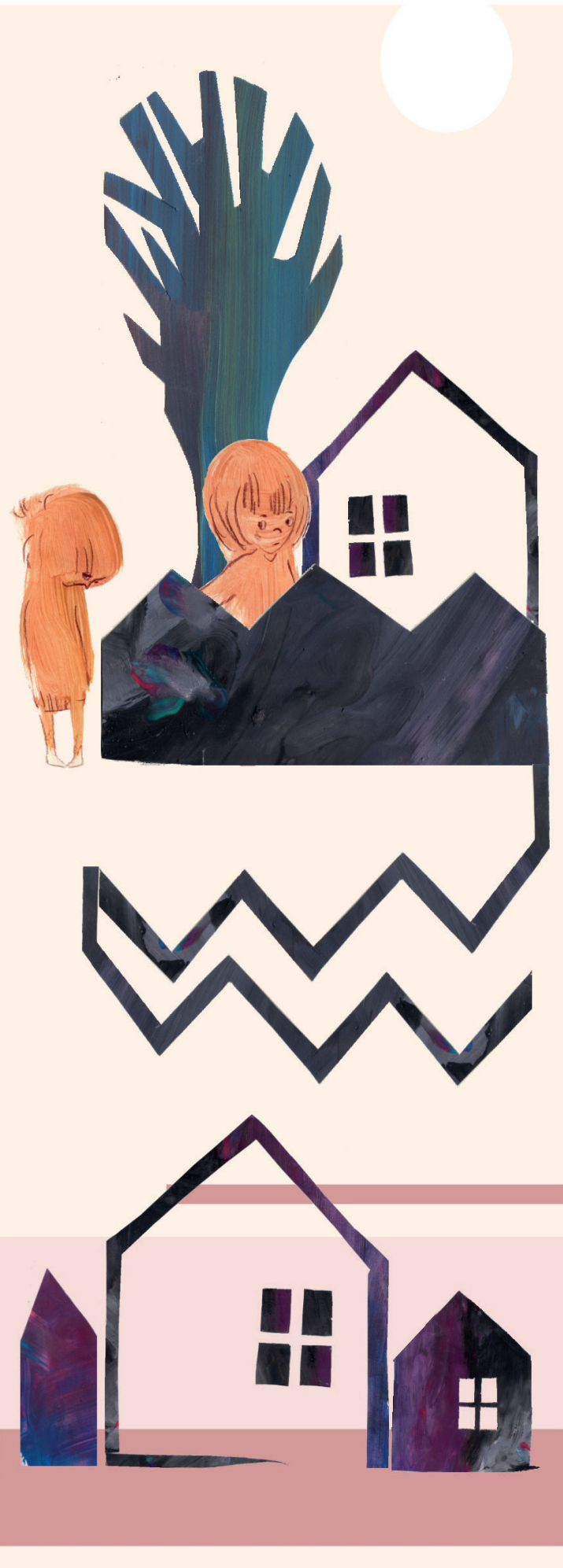
What happened in Poland regarding refugees amazed the world. There wasn't even a need to establish refugee camps because ordinary people invited the fleeing families to their homes. The proverbial Polish hospitality has materialized. Many people, wanting to make the time more enjoyable to their guests and to make them "forget about the war", offer them various activities. Notably, rebuilding a sense of security after an escape from the war zones requires peace, tranquility and a certain constancy. Too many attractions can overwhelm the person. I spoke to one mother of a primary school boy. He is afraid to leave home and there is no way he is going to school. But he likes to play football. The woman found out that there was a children's team in a nearby club and that several boys from Ukraine were already playing there. The boy's mom decided that they would go to the club together, because school is not a good solution for him right now. Going to the club with mom will allow the child to get to know the area, build relationships with friends and increase the sense of security enough to continue education in the following months. The boy in question came to Poland only a week earlier. He spent three weeks in the basement. Just going outside is difficult for him, and separating from his mother is out of the question.

## Stability

After a period of panic and a chaotic escape, constancy is an important element that builds the sense of security. If you managed to secure your housing situation, you can think about how to arrange the day so that as many tasks as possible are predictable. It's a good idea to take up even very simple activities that the family used to do together: family meals, praying before eating, afternoon walks, mom singing lullabies at bedtime. Despite the fact that they managed to escape from the war zone, many refugees still live in panic. They listen to the news, watch reports from the front, follow news on the Internet. Such actions, unfortunately, can re-traumatize them, and although children should not be deprived of information about the current situation, they must not be bombarded with the related news.

It is worth remembering that children who experienced the severe hazards associated with the attempt to escape from the war zone may still be in a state of very high agitation and mental alert. Such a state means constant vigilance. Various stimuli coming from the environment are seen as a possible threat.





In such a case, our cognitive abilities are decreased compared to the situation when we are calm. Order, small daily rituals, silence, peace and everything that is the opposite of the experience of chaos, rush or disorder, brings relief to the highly stimulated nervous system. War, flight, and fear mean agitation and high activation. Calm, order and consistency provide less stimulation and increase safety.

## A sense of well-being

When we are in state of emergency, our autonomic nervous system responds in order to protect us. All survival processes are mobilized: fight, flight and freeze (Porges, 2020). The autonomic nervous system activates to help us survive. The activation is reflected by shortness of breath, rapid heartbeat, sweating, tightness in one's throat, pressure around the diaphragm, scanning the area for danger, being ready to flee or fight, freezing when there is no other way out. Our natural reaction on the physiological level is to seek safety. Each person is able to attune to the environment and read the signs that inform them of their current situation. When they feel safe, they naturally seek connection with others. This is supported by facial expressions, deep gaze and a melodic prosody of voice. When we are in danger, however, the defense strategies emerge. The body prepares to fight or flight. And when one finds themselves in a life-threatening situation, the engaged defense strategy involves freezing, immobilization or shut-down. This level of activation may persist long after the threat has passed. When this happens to a small child, this type of activation may persist throughout his/her whole life. The developing nervous system cannot cope with the extreme arousal. When supporting a child after a traumatic experience, it is important to take care of their well-being not only at the level of emotions, but also at the level of physiology. Reducing arousal is a key activity for caregivers, educators and parents.

In the beginning, there were many children, among the refugees, who did not witness the war. They were running away from a country that was functioning normally and what made them terrified was the flight itself. Today, among the refugees there are mostly children who experienced the raids, sheltering in cellars for days, the death of their loved ones, or witnessed massacres in towns occupied by the Russians and saw brutal abuse and murder. Due to this these children are highly agitated, and many will exhibit a freeze reaction.

The pure fact that the children and their mother managed to find themselves outside the area of threat does not mean that they have reached a state of well-being and safety. It may take months for them to recover from what they have experienced. We need to remember that the fathers of these children, as well as other male relatives: grandfathers, older brothers, uncles, stayed in Ukraine and are still fighting. The images of their situation produced in such a case by one's mind can often be far worse than the actual reality. Children should be told

that their dad is doing all right or that he is sending his greetings. And if he dies, they should be informed about it.

When supporting a child who survived a trauma, you should remember about one important ground rule. Always take care of safety, constancy and well-being even in the smallest actions.

## School and continuing education

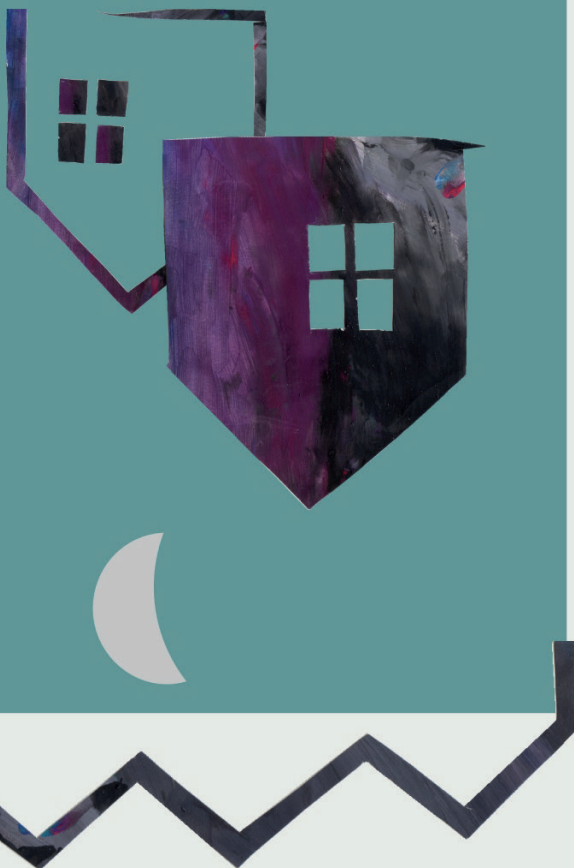
When the nervous system is under threat, it is only able to function at the level of its fight-flight reflex mechanisms. Mainly those areas of the nervous system are involved which allow us to survive. When we operate in a fight-flight mode, our mind does not have full access to our cognitive abilities. Depending on our emotional state, our IQ capabilities change. In a situation of severe anxiety, our cognitive abilities may be lower by even several dozen points (B. Perry, 2022).

Since the government in Poland made it possible for the children from Ukraine to continue their education, recommendations on children's intelligence and educational opportunities assessment were issued for psychologists.

However, it should be remembered that the results of tests performed with a child who is in a state of heightened anxiety or agitation do not necessarily reflect their intellectual abilities. Rather, it will be a short bullet-point description of the child's current condition related to the experience of trauma. Bruce Perry draws attention to the sequential processing of information by our brain. Children who experienced the trauma of war, fleeing and becoming a refugee in foreign country, did not necessarily achieve a state of peace just because they managed to escape their country. The mobilization of their nervous system can still be at a level of fight, flight, freeze, or alertness. Under such circumstances the ability to process information is changed, and the results of psychological tests do not fully reflect the cognitive abilities of such children, only the condition of their mind in the current state of arousal.

Our brain develops from the lowest to the highest structures. We distinguish three functional areas of the brain which constantly cooperate with one another: the brainstem (the so-called reptilian brain), the limbic system (the so-called mammalian brain), and the neocortex (the human brain). In his latest book Bruce Perry explains how our brain processes information:

*"All experience is processed from the bottom up, meaning, to get to the top, "smart" part of our brain, we have to go through the lower, not-so-smart part. This sequential processing means that the most primitive, reactive part of our brain is the first part to interpret and act on the information coming in from our senses. Bottom line: Our brain is organized to act and feel before we think. This is also how our brain develops sequentially, from the bottom up. The developing infant acts and feel, and these actions and feelings help organize how they will begin to think."* (Bruce Perry s. 29)







For teachers and educators this means that the condition of the child taking part in the schooling process should be taken into account. Especially during an educational or intellectual assessment conducted by a psychologist.

## Trauma in young children (0-3)

When trauma occurs early, many people think it doesn't really matter. After all, the child is small and does not remember what had happened. However, this is not true. The younger the child, the greater the effects of the trauma can be, as the immature nervous system may react in such a way that the child's further development will change in many areas. The child's further life choices and actions may be associated with recreating maladaptive patterns of trauma-related behavior. When faced with such a difficult experience as childhood trauma, it is important to remember that one person's pain is not comparable to that experienced by another. The reaction of young children to trauma can be long-lasting due to the fact that their nervous systems are still developing.

## Condition of the mother - condition of the child

Babies and toddlers are dependent on their immediate caregiver, the mother, to regulate their emotions. If the mother is emotionally well, so is the baby. Many children from Ukraine were born in shelters during air raids, or on the way, during the escape. The conditions we provide for the mothers of these children will determine their path to health. Let us remember that the attachment system in children is developing at this time and its quality depends on the good condition of the mother. Hence, they all require a lot of care. Ukrainian mothers of infants should not be sent to work immediately, they should be able to look after their children in a safe place. Putting a scared infant in the care of a nursery may aggravate his/her dysfunctions in the central and autonomic nervous system. In the case of children aged 0-3 years, this condition will adversely affect the development of the attachment system.

The smaller the child, the greater may be the activation of the nervous system in response to trauma, due to the child's small developmental resources. For young children, the parent is the greatest resource for regulating and regaining a state of well-being.

## Helping children with developmental challenges

Children from orphanages also came to Poland as refugees. It should be remembered that while growing up in institutions, they had already been traumatized by abandonment or violence in the first years of their childhood, and that they had experienced the effects of early trauma before the war. Many of them



Illustrations: Joanna Zająć-Słapnićar

may have inadequate attachment styles or more severe symptoms due to early developmental neglect. These children may find it difficult to function normally. Moreover, if life-threatening events overlap with their experiences, their behavior may be difficult to understand for those around them. Many families that accepted refugees into their homes hoped that the war would end soon and that their guests would return to their homes promptly. However, this did not happen. We have to take into account that the conflict may still last a long time, and that prolonged uncertainty will be frustrating. While taking care of children brought without their parents, we must remember about their adverse developmental experiences, including attachment disorders.

Children raised in institutions since early childhood may, in addition to effects of war trauma, exhibit difficulties in behavior and emotional regulation, due to traumatic experiences in early childhood leading to such problems as attachment disorders. When offering help to them, it is important to be aware of the impact of early trauma on the child's development.

This group may also include children with disorders resulting from prenatal exposure to toxins, such as the Fetal Alcohol Disorder Spectrum (FASD). Children with brain injuries experience the same emotions as everybody else in a threatening situation, but they have limited ability to cope with their condition. They also need to have a situation explained to them in a clear way. Due to cognitive limitations, they have fewer resources to deal with their current situation, to understand the facts, and may have less ability to inform about their own well-being in a comprehensible way. They need a safe adult to help them regulate their emotional states in an appropriate manner.

#### When you provide support to a child with brain damage:

- speak in plain language;
- do not use metaphors, figurative language or condensed expressions;
- check if they understand what you said and if they understand the message;
- check if they are safe.

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