



Main contributor and related people

ANASTASIIA*, 8, PSYCHOSOCIAL STATE, UKRAINE

- Bohdan* – 9, Anastasiia`s* brother
- Veronika* – 36, Anastasiia`s* mother
- Yana* – facilitator at the Child Friendly Space Anastasiia* and Bohdan attend, Child Protection Expert from Charity Fund «Posmishka UA» - Save the Children partner in Ukraine

Story summary:

When the full-scale war began, Anastasiia, 8*, and her family were forced to leave their small hometown in Zaporizhzhia region and move to Zaporizhzhia city. At the time, they believed it would be temporary. Today, their hometown is occupied, and the family's apartment there has been completely destroyed.

Now Anastasiia* lives in Zaporizhzhia with her parents and her older brother Bohdan, 9*. The city remains under constant threat: air raid sirens sound frequently, often several times a day or even more than a day long, and nights are regularly interrupted by explosions from drones and missile attacks. Over the past weeks, alarms have become almost continuous, leaving families in a state of constant tension.

Anastasiia`s* mother, Veronika, 36*, says the war has changed their lives. At night, when explosions or the buzzing sound of a drone can be heard, her children – Anastasiia* and Bohdan* – often wake up and ask: “Mom, what was that? Was it far away?” The family moves to the corridor, lies on mattresses, and waits together until it becomes quiet again.

Like many children in frontline cities, Anastasiia* has learned to live with fear, day by day adapting to the war reality. Her brother Bohdan* can already distinguish by sound whether a drone, a missile, or a guided bomb is flying overhead.

School is another part of Anastasiia*s and Bohdan`s* daily lives shaped by the war. They study offline in an underground school, where deep shelters protect children from shelling. Her mother says that while studying underground is far from normal, it gives her children something essential: a sense of safety and real human contact. In the shelter, they do not hear explosions. They sit at a desk, see their teachers in front of them, talk to classmates, and feel like it's a regular school day again. This makes the level of knowledge better, and children improve their socializing skills, like how to make advice or why it is important to share your stationery with others.

While the emotional tension exists. Continuous air raid sirens, nights without proper sleep, and constant alertness exhaust children's nervous systems. Veronika* explains that children feel fear even more deeply than adults, and parents try to hide their anxiety so as not to pass it on.

A place of relief and stability for Anastasiia* and her brother Bohdan* is the Child Friendly Space, run by Charity Fund “Posmishka UA” together with Save the Children, with the support of Swiss Solidarity. They have been attending the Space for several years, since the time when schools were fully online.

Here, children can feel like children again. They draw, play board games, attend creative and educational activities, learn English, and spend time with other children in a safe environment. Yana*, the facilitator of the Child Friendly Space, says that since it is in a shelter and there are no windows, children do not hear the explosions that may be in the city at that time. Anastasiia* has learned how to sew and proudly shows the toys and a candle holder she created here to her mother. The Space gives children live communication, emotional support, and a feeling of safety.



While children are in the Child Friendly Space, parents also get a moment to breathe. Knowing their children are safe, supported, and cared for allows adults to briefly step out of survival mode – to rest, meet a friend, or have a coffee on their own.

Like many children in Ukraine, Anastasiia* and Bohdan* have learned to adapt to war. While – as Yana* mentioned – some of the children are getting sick more often or even have gastrointestinal disorders.

Anastasiia* dreams of not hearing explosions anymore anywhere in the world: “So that there is no such shelling, air raid alarm, so that everything is peaceful”. Veronika* has the same dream to have a future where Anastasiia* and Bohdan* do not get up because of explosions, do not distinguish the sound of drones, missiles, or guided bombs, and do not associate safety with being underground. A future where her children can grow, learn, dream, and build their lives without fear.

Strong quotes:

Anastasiia*: *“If we are at home and hear explosions, we go to the corridor. We have a mattress [at our corridor], if there are shelling at night or in the morning, we go there and take a mattress. Well, it's okay for me to sleep in the corridor, I'm already used to the mattress, because I sleep there all the time. I can just not hear the air raid alarm sometimes, well, I can just skip it, and in general, when I hear the air raid alarm, well, I just calm myself down by drawing. I can go to my brother or parents [when I don't feel ok]. Well, either we play cards, or we play with my brother.”*

Anastasiia*: *“[I dream] about peace in Ukraine, well, in all the countries. So that there is no such shelling, air raid alarm, so that everything is peaceful.”*

Bohdan*: *“Sometimes drones fly past us. Sometimes we hide in the corridor. And sometimes the light blinks. It means that there are explosions somewhere. In our corridor, we prepare our places to sleep. We take pillows. And we hide there. Sometimes there is heavy shelling. Like with ballistics. Then there are drones. Then there are guided bombs. Last summer was terrible. There were guided bombs. First, the [drones] started to attack at 6 pm. And then there were guided bombs at night. And simultaneously the drones flew over our house. And they bombed somewhere, but I don't know where exactly.”*

Bohdan*: *“We study at the shelter. It is a separate building from my school. Well, [when we studied online], sometimes the internet connection disappeared. This often happened to teachers. But otherwise, everything was fine. Sometimes [teachers] had power cuts. And the Internet had to be restarted.”*

Veronika*: *“My children are very calm about being in the shelter [during offline school in the underground]. Maybe because we often go to shelters, and therefore it isn't strange for them. [They got used to] be underground. They are safe, it is the main thing for them. Because we have deep shelter, and they don't hear the shelling. They haven't heard an explosion or anything like that being there. Of course, the fact that they study in a “dungeon” is, of course, very bad, I think, for children. Because when I studied at school, I could go outside, breathe fresh air, but they are in the shelter most of the time, in a small space, where you sit here, you get up here. There is no such relaxation for them, for their emotions.”*

Veronika*: *“And they communicate more with each other [when they attend school offline]. They learn how to help each other, to give advice. How to pass something. My daughter says: “My classmate finished his notebook, so I shared mine!”. They learn how to share something; they know how to communicate with each other. And children who study online don't know that. They know that there is a camera, there is a laptop with a camera. The stranger told something to them, they sat down, nodded their heads, and they sat down. And the lesson is over.”*

Veronika*: *“It is an emotionally unstable state. Adults feel it, but children feel it more deeply. The nervous system is exhausted. We are thankful to those who makes it exhausting [sarcasm]. When children hear an explosion, they worry, they get nervous. But there is such an aspect when we can calm them down. We can say: “It was far away...”. Something like that or we can also distract the child's attention. Of course, like all children, they are nervous. We*



always have a blanket, a mattress, and everything else in the corridor. Well, if we hear an explosion, we take children to the corridor, they lie down and continue to sleep. Either we lie down next to them, and we try to make them sleep. If it's constant bang, bang, bang, bang, we just try to let them sleep more. I don't wake them up to go to school, neither online nor offline. They sleep. They sleep as much as they need and then they feel normal all day."

Veronika*: *"My son can tell by the sound whether it's a drone or a missile. He understands this, when something else is happening [when they hear a new sound], they come and ask what it is, what is flying. When at home, shelling often happens; we are not always in the shelter. Children are scared, anxious, and worried. Well, but not hysterical – they have never felt it this way, thank God. When they hear explosions at night, they wake up, ask what and where. They ask if everything is fine. We calm them down, and they somehow fall asleep again. As my son says, mom, we are already used to air raid sirens. If they hear something is flying, something is buzzing, then yes, they ask: "Mom, where and what is flying?"*

Veronika*: *"I don't know what it [drone or missile] looks like in real life, but I know what it sounds like when a drone is flying, when a missile is flying, when a fighter plane is flying. We also recognize a multiple launch rocket system, that it is not some kind of dummy that exploded."*

Veronika*: *"And now, the anxiety is present, because we know that the frontline is approaching. Well, we are adults and understand this. Naturally, we do not tell this to children, because why should they know unnecessary information? We read it in the news, we hear it. It is sometimes very scary at night, especially when you understand that a drone is flying or a multiple launch rocket system is firing. You hear all these explosions, and you, as a person, are nervous. You are nervous, you are restless, you do not get enough sleep, you constantly check, scroll through some information, where weapons are, what they are, how they are. And now, Zaporizhzhia has become a very restless city. Very. Moreover, a lot of people began to leave. And you notice that streets get empty; fewer people stay here. And you get a panic attack somewhere inside you, and it already shows a little."*

Veronika*: *"The Child Friendly Space is a must for children. It gives the opportunity to children [to rest]. Not all parents are so calm. Some parents are more closed, you have a closed child. The child isn't communicative. And when they come here, they socialize more. Children are happy, they want to come here. Even if there is an air raid siren, they still go to classes. They know that it is safe here. That here they are like in a shelter, you know. They talk more; they communicate. It seems to me that their mood improves. They always leave the space in a good mood. The space improves the children's emotional state. They come here, and they are safe, they socialize. And they find friends here, they communicate. Parents let them go here, and we know that we can entrust children to the facilitators. And that your child will be safe. And at this time, your child will learn something new. The child will learn something new here that you, as a parent can't teach them."*

Veronika*: *"For parents, this is the time when you leave your child here, you know that it is safe [here]. You can relax a little there with yourself. To stay alone. Because for parents, I think, when you're stressed all the time – you have to constantly keep track of everything: your child, yourself, your family – and then it starts all over again. It burns you out. And [when your child is at the Space] you can relax a little, exhale. You trust these facilitators and you know that they are safe. You can go for a cup of coffee with your friend, without children. And so, I think that these spaces should exist. They give an emotional break for children, for parents. And they make the children happy. [...]"*

Veronika*: *"I dream about one thing. About the end of the war. [Started crying] About the end of the war, so that our children live in peace. So that they could go out and socialize with others, as we used to do. So that we could travel around our country safely. [I dream about] peace [for my children]. So that they can develop and learn. So that they can build their future. So that they reach their goals. So that they are not afraid. I believe that in the future, I hope that it will end. And children will begin to live a different life without air raid sirens and missiles. And they will be happy with their lives. Not the way we are happy now – like, "you survived, so you're happy" – but truly happy, living and seeing their future."*



Yana*: *"We had cases when, for example, there was shelling during the day or at night. We have a schedule for different age groups. And then parents call and say, "We know that there are no classes for the age of our child, but can we please bring the child to you, because our apartment was damaged, we will deal with the issue of blocking windows, removing all the damage that was in the house. Can I please bring the child to you so that she is in a safe place?" Of course, yes. We understand that now is our time to give the child psycho-emotional support so that the child does not think about what is happening at home. And the child is here, understands that they are safe here, their friends are here, the child is interested in activities here, and there are facilitators whom she knows. It is more comfortable for the child to be here than, for example, to be at home at such times."*

Yana*: *"The front line is now located about 25 km from the city. Therefore, this is a big problem since the city is within range of all types of weapons. If before it was only about the guided bombs, now both high-speed missiles and different types of drones reach here. Now a lot of types of weapons easily and very quickly reach the city. There is a big problem since the fact that the front line is quite close, quite often there are shelling in the city before an air raid alarm has been announced. The air alarm, unfortunately, is turned on after people have heard the explosion. That is why people do not always have time to go to shelters. That is why people can be outside [during the shelling]."*

Yana*: *"Unfortunately, the line between [safety and danger] is blurred, the air raid alarms stay on for so long that people start to adapt. You cannot pause your whole life. You need to go to the supermarket; you need to take your child to classes, or the child needs to join the lessons at home. You cannot keep the child, for example, at the shelter for all 19 hours while the air raid siren is on. Well, because it will be difficult and emotionally exhausting for the child."*

Yana*: *"Some families have arranged sleeping places in their corridors. They moved their sofas to have a sleeping place there. The child just knows that this is the sleeping place. Some of them just furnished a corner, hung a garland, put a sofa, and the child does not perceive it as something traumatizing, that they have to find a place to sleep in the corridor, and so on."*

Yana*: *"I know that there are children who have developed gastrointestinal disorders, there are children who get sick very often. And all this, of course, is related to psychosomatics, with the fact that the child is constantly in this nervous state and their body tries to protect them as best it can. There is a contrary situation when the nervous system does not have time to recover. The child becomes a little nervous, they want to move all the time. And of course, the nervous system weakens, and the child begins to act up. They do not want to play games offered by facilitators. It is not the child's fault, because the child does not understand what they want. Because, in fact, the nervous system is already exhausted at this moment. It hasn't got enough time to rest."*

Yana*: *"Our space works from 9 am to 5 pm. We notice that for parents it has become a place of stability, especially at the time when schools were not working in person; the kindergartens were not working in an offline format. For them, it was a space where they could bring their child and be sure that the child is having good time here. And this is both about the development of the child as well as about the release of some tension that is formed over a week. Our space is actually in a shelter. The rooms in which children spend time during activities are completely safe. There are no windows, everything is underground, so the children do not hear any terrible sounds, they do not hear explosions if there is a shelling in the city. They come and they are fully involved in the process, that is interesting for them."*

How is Save the Children helping (or did we help) that child or family:

Save the Children, together with Charity Fund "Posmishka UA" and with the support of Swiss Solidarity, supports a Child Friendly Space that Anastasiia* and Bohdan* regularly attend. In this safe and supportive environment, children can take part in structured educational, creative, and recreational activities such as board and active games, drawing and crafts, English classes, and group activities that encourage communication and teamwork. The Child Friendly Space also provides psychosocial support, helping children process fear and anxiety related to shelling and displacement.

Interviewee's story in their own words (Quotes):



Anastasiia*, 8:

Air raid sirens impact

I can just not hear the air raid alarm sometimes, well, I can just skip it and in general, when I hear the air raid alarm, well, I just calm myself down by drawing. [...] Well, I like to draw by cells, copy some pictures from the Internet, and draw. [...] I can go to my brother or parents [when I don't feel ok]. [...] Well, either we play cards, or we play with my brother. [...]

I spend all my school time in a bomb shelter; all our lessons take place there. [...]

If we are at home, not at school, and hear explosions, we go to the corridor, and when there is an air raid alarm without shelling, we do not react. We do nothing. We do our usual tasks. [...] We have a mattress [at our corridor], if there is shelling at night or in the morning, we go there and take a mattress. [...] Well, it's okay for me to sleep in the corridor, I'm already used to the mattress, because I sleep there all the time. [...] Well, now there's no shelling – it usually only happens in the morning – but if something [drones, missiles, guided bombs] is flying, we go to the corridor. [...]

Attending the Child Friendly Space

I wake up at 7 a.m. because I need to go to school, take a shower, then I have my classes, and when I finish studying and then I go to the Child Friendly Space. [...]

I attend Child Friendly Space with pleasure, I like clay classes, thermomosaic activities, and everything else creative. [...] I like to be at the Space; I have already found many friends here. [...] I used to go dancing, but I stopped. And then, well, I started drawing more, I make a lot of paintings and paint nails. [...] Drawing calms me down. [...]

I make a clay candle holder. And now we will paint it, and then we will cover it with varnish. [...] Last Friday we made the holder itself. It was a little difficult to make the form itself, but in general it was easy. [...] I will put the candle holder on the night table, and it will be so beautiful. Well, maybe I'll put some of my favourite figurines inside the holder, and that's it.

Dreams for the future

[I dream] about peace in Ukraine, well, in all the countries. So that there is no such shelling, air raid alarm, so that everything is peaceful. [...]

Bohdan*, 9:

Everyday life and education during the war

I wake up, have breakfast, have cup of tea, take shower, and then go to school. After school I go home, do my homework, and play games. [...] With my sister...sometimes we play, sometimes we fight. Sometimes we argue. But otherwise, everything is fine. [...]

I am studying normally. We study at the shelter. It is a separate building from my school. The 5th grade is very noisy there. [...] Well, [when we studied online], sometimes the internet connection disappeared. This often happened to teachers. But otherwise, everything was fine. Sometimes [teachers] had power cuts. And the Internet had to be restarted. [...]

Air raid sirens impact

I check Telegram channels [popular social media network in Ukraine] or check some special apps. If the notification is orange, it means that it is just an air raid alarm. If it is green, everything is calm. And if it is red, it means that something is approaching the city – within 15 kilometres, or 35, or 40. And if it is white, it means that the Internet is down. Or the shelling begins. [...]



Well, sometimes drones fly past us. Sometimes we hide in the corridor. And sometimes the light blinks. It means that there are explosions somewhere. [...] I saw a video filmed by a woman with a drone flying past her. And it fell somewhere. And she stood under the wall. And it was written there that two walls can save you from the blast wave. [...]

In our corridor, we prepare our places to sleep. We take pillows. And we hide there. Sometimes there is heavy shelling. Like with ballistics. Then there are drones. Then there are guided bombs. Last summer was terrible. There were guided bombs. First, the [drones] started to attack at 6 pm. And then there were guided bombs at night, when mom wanted to go to the shower. And an attack with guided bombs started. And simultaneously the drones flew over our house. And they bombed somewhere, but I don't know where exactly. [...]

Attending the Child Friendly Space

[At the Child Friendly Space] I like active games. I like to run. Run, jump. Well, to do something active there. To train my reaction. [...] [Games I play at the Child Friendly Space are] limbo, freezing. And also fishing net. Well, and, of course, catch-up games.

Veronika*:

War's impact on the family

We have been living in Zaporizhzhia since the beginning of the war. Our family consists of me, my husband, and two children. We rent an apartment here. We live here on a permanent basis, we hope it's going to last. [...] We moved here four years ago. We took some belongings with us. So, we took ourselves and our belongings with us. [...] [We packed] only clothes. We didn't take any electronics or anything like that. Only clothes. We came with what we were wearing. And toys. Yes, I took some toys for children. [...]

Now, our apartment [in our hometown] is destroyed. Completely. That is why I say that we live here now. We don't have the apartment there anymore. [...]

As most of us, we were getting used to a new life. To a new city in general. Well, war changed our lives. I'm like a mother hen with kids now. Children must be nearby. We should be only together. [I command where] to stand, to lie, to sit. Well... It's more restless. In general, I am not calm.

Financial situation

Our financial situation is challenging. Because my husband is the only breadwinner. I am a housewife now. Sometimes I have a part-time job, but mostly I stay at home. Therefore, it is very expensive to live in a rented apartment in a big city. And the realization that this is not your apartment, that it is someone else's apartment is morally difficult. [...]

Now the school has already opened, and the children are already going to school. But previously [when the school was only online], I was constantly with the children, so I didn't work. Because you can't leave the child alone and go to work. Therefore, only our father works. [...]

Education during the war

My children have been studying in the underground school for the whole school year [2025-2026]. Last school year they studied there for three months. They're very calm about being in the shelter. Maybe because we often go to shelters, and therefore it isn't strange for them. [They got used to] be underground.

On the contrary, offline learning is much brighter and more emotional. They go to school with pleasure, because there are friends there, there is communication. They are safe, it is the main thing for them. Because we have deep shelter, and they don't hear the shelling. They haven't heard an explosion or anything like that



being there. And when they finish their underground classes, they ask if any shelling appeared. I say, no, there was nothing. Therefore, they are calm there.

But when we are at home, then we hear everything. There is the sound of something flying, there is noise, there is creaking, and there is an explosion. And when they hear it, they react to it. And while at the underground school, they are not aware of it, and they are calmer. They are communicative. They have found friends. They have their hobbies. [...]

Of course, the fact that they study in a “dungeon”, is, of course, very bad, I think, for children. Because when I studied at school, I could go outside, breathe fresh air, but they are in the shelter most of the time, in a small space, where you sit here, and you get up here. There is no such relaxation for them, for their emotions. Well, in general, they come from school very satisfied. They go to school; they like it there.

Online learning is not the kind of learning that I would like to give my child. I want the child to go to school, to socialize there. [...] I have always been against online learning. Because this is not the experience that I would like my children to have.

The level of online knowledge is different from when they sit behind the desks at school. Let it be even in the shelter. But they sit behind their desks, they know that they are sitting here, that you have a teacher standing in front of your eyes. The teacher teaches you; they explain to you. And these are generally two different things – online and offline learning. I believe that as many underground schools as possible should be opened so that children can go only offline. Because my son is in the fourth grade, but he and his classmates didn't even know each other well [during online learning]. You have 24 squares with small videos on your laptop screen. And you guess if it is your classmate, or maybe not. And now, they know everyone, they can meet somewhere, they know each other, and they communicate. They have something to discuss.

As for the level of knowledge, they became more in contact with the teacher. But online it is like a stranger connects to the lesson, turns on the camera and says something to you. And even asks some questions. Children don't perceive that it is their teacher. And in the underground school they sit at the lessons, they know that they need to do homework, they need to prepare for some tests. Because there is no way to cheat.

And they communicate more with each other. They learn how to help each other, to give advice. How to pass something. My daughter says: “My classmate finished his notebook, so I shared mine!”. They learn how to share something; they know how to communicate with each other. And children who study online don't know that. They know that there is a camera, there is a laptop with a camera. The stranger told something to them, they sat down, nodded their heads, and they sat down. And the lesson is over. [...]

Children`s reaction to explosions and air raid sirens

At one time, we were talking to a psychologist. And she told us that first of all, parents show signs of danger to their children. It means that when we are trembling, our child is trembling too. So, you have to be calmer. In general, I turned off all these news notifications. And I try not to read them. So that you and your child are calm. At first, we experienced everything: crying, and shouting. Now we are calmer. Because I react more calmly. When we hear explosions – we go to the corridor; we are there for several minutes. I am always saying that the main thing is that the roof does not fly off and the windows do not fall. [...]

It is an emotionally unstable state. Adults feel it, but children feel it more deeply. The nervous system is exhausted. We are thankful to everyone who makes it exhausting [sarcasm]. When children hear an explosion, they worry, they get nervous. But there is such an aspect when we can calm them down. We can say: “It was far away...”. Something like that, or we can also distract the child's attention. Of course, like all children, they are nervous. The main thing is that they are not so afraid so that to lose consciousness. We are always nervous. In general, we are always nervous. [...]



In general, we always have a blanket, a mattress and everything else in the corridor. Well, if we hear an explosion, we take children to the corridor, they lie down and continue to sleep. Either we lie down next to them, and we try to make them sleep. If it's constant bang, bang, bang, bang, we just try to let them sleep more. I don't wake them up to go to school, neither online nor offline. They sleep. They sleep as much as they need, and then they feel normal all day. [...]

As my son says, mom, we are already used to air raid sirens. At first it was very worrying to hear this siren and the constant sound of this siren. And now, well, we are somehow more adapted. We hear [the sound], we know [what to do], we read [news], we see everything. They do not feel it so nervously anymore, and I am also calmer. At first it was very worrying to run into the shelter, to find somewhere to hide. And I was trembling, and the children were trembling, but now we got used to it. [...]

If a shelling is at night, then they get up and we know that we are immediately, first of all, we run somewhere behind two walls, into the corridor, according to safety recommendations. In general, we are ok with the air raid siren. Children surf networks [with notifications on weapons reaching the city], we know what, where, when and we know how to react, what to do. And if there are explosions, of course, we are in the shelter. [...]

When at home, well, shelling often happens, we are not always in the shelter. Children are scared, anxious, and worried. Well, but not hysterical – they have never felt it this way, thank God. When they hear explosions at night, they wake up, ask what and where. They ask if everything is fine. We calm them down, and they somehow fall asleep again. [...]

If they hear something is flying, something is buzzing, then yes, they ask: "Mom, where and what is flying?". But they are not scared because of the sounds if neighbors drop something, then no, they do not react to it. But I know that many children started shattering. But thank God, our children don't. [...]

My son can tell by the sound whether it's a drone or a missile. He understands this, when something else is happening [when they hear a new sound], they come and ask what it is, what is flying. [...]

My son follows a telegram channel [popular social network in Ukraine], and he reads there. And he says – it is our airplane, it is fine. My younger daughter distinguishes a drone by sound, she knows what a drone is, that it flies. But not a missile - she has never said, "Mom, it's a missile". For example, let's say. Only drones! We also distinguish sounds as parents, because we already have this experience. [...]

Yes, I don't know what it [drone or missile] looks like in real life, but I know what it sounds like when a drone is flying, when a missile is flying, when a fighter plane is flying. We also recognize a multiple launch rocket system, that it is not some kind of dummy that exploded. [...]

We can discuss it with my husband [when we learn about upcoming attacks], so that children do not hear this conversation. And when we go to bed, we always say that everything will be fine, everything is quiet with us, nothing flies to us, and everything will be fine. But we as parents and I as mother, we have anxiety, I sometimes wake up and monitor, monitor, monitor [notifications], well, to understand for myself what, when, and where should I run, how to take and carry children to the corridor. [...]

[To feel better in times of shelling] we read books together with children, we get distracted, we can tell something, talk about something. My son likes to talk about history, to find some information somewhere and start asking, and we say, let's tell you this now, let's talk about this. Or play some kind of game, some board games, or play a game of battleship. Or the words game. Well, we do everything so that they do not think [about shelling], we talk to them. First of all, we tell them something, play with something, ask them if they would like to discuss something. Even sometimes, now all our children play Roblox, Minecraft, all these games. We sit and listen to them about these games. They tell, tell, tell, tell, so they do not think about anything else at that time. We will listen to everything they would like to tell us and say yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. [...]



Current situation in the frontline city

In general, the situation in Zaporizhzhia right now seems to me that the city has become a bit emptier. At the beginning of the war, there were also very few people. Then people started moving around again, and there were more families on the playgrounds.

And now, you have anxiety inside, because we know that the frontline is approaching. Well, we are adults and understand this. Naturally, we do not tell this to children, because why should they know unnecessary information? We read it in the news, we hear it.

It is sometimes very scary at night, especially when you understand that a drone is flying or a multiple launch rocket system is firing. You hear all these explosions and you, as a person, are nervous. You are nervous, you are restless, you do not get enough sleep, you constantly check and scroll through some information, where weapons are, what they are, how they are. And now, although we are all hiding it from our children, Zaporizhzhia has become a very restless city. Very. Moreover, a lot of people began to leave. And you notice that streets get empty; fewer people stay here. And you get a panic attack somewhere inside you, and it already shows a little.

Because we understand that the frontline is approaching us, which we would not like very much. Fewer people are in the city, while shelling is more frequent. And in the last two weeks, this air raid siren has been endless. I have such a feeling as if it does not end. It seems that the alert is over, then it starts again. Over and over. And you're constantly under stress. Because you understand that at the moment it can be quiet. You check the news, they do not write anything all day, but suddenly you hear an explosion. And that's it; you lose your inner calmness.

At the beginning, not at the beginning, probably last year or the year before last, we were afraid, we were worried, but it was not as strong as it is now. At the moment, I believe that the fact that the frontline is getting closer and closer is very oppressive to people. People read a lot of updates, people discuss a lot, and you're starting to overthink. And the thought, "where to leave?" returns. How to get there? You have to get ready, you need to pack these bags of belongings again and everything else. And you don't want to repeat this experience anymore. [...]

My husband works at a critical infrastructure company. So, it feels scary and unsettling. Every time I call, I ask "how are you, are you in the shelter"? Because a shelling has already happened there. And I don't want to be picking up what's left of my husband from the factory. Therefore, it is very anxiety-inducing when he is at work and we know that something [drone, missile] is flying there. And I'm probably not as afraid of myself at home as I am of him, while he is at work. [...]

Now, now, you don't even know where to evacuate. We sit and think where, how, what, where. Well, first of all, he works here, and we don't really want to change job again. Therefore, if we leave, we go somewhere where there is work for him. Where there will be a school [with shelter] for children, socialization, and where it will be quiet. First of all, where it will be quiet. Because now, it seems to me, everywhere in Ukraine is dangerous. [...]

Child Friendly Space

My children have been attending this Child Friendly Space for three years. Since it was opened at this location, we started to attend it. And at that time, it was the only space where children could come and talk to some children. Because then they studied online at their school, and they met their peers only via the camera of a phone or a laptop. Therefore, they attended the Space with pleasure, and they still attend it with pleasure. They ran here with great enjoyment, because this space has given children a lot of things. They socialized; they are always in live communication.

Facilitators of the Space in this team are perfect! They are all so nice. Previously they had male facilitators. My son used to play football here since he has his own priorities. In general, the space is a must for children. It gives the opportunity to children [to rest]. Not all parents are so calm. Some parents are more closed, you have



a closed child. The child isn't communicative. And when they come here, they socialize more. Children are happy, they want to come here.

In three years, we have already been to all classes. We have been everywhere. Despite snow or rain, we go to classes here. If we can cancel some other activities, we will definitely come here every day. Only if we are sick, we may skip classes here. It is the only reason. And so, I think it gives a push for children, as they say, to develop. They play board games, they paint something, they draw something. There are active games, English classes.

The facilitators who work here – they are like mothers. They are like mother hens with kids now. They give every child their support and love. They know how to find approach to each child. They know how to communicate, what to say to each child. Children generally feel comfortable here. And no aggression. You know how it happens at school, when a child doesn't like a teacher. And a child has an aggressive attitude to this teacher. Or you don't react to the teacher's questions anymore. Here, in general, I have not seen a single child who would not want to come here. They all go here with pleasure. There are many children here. And little ones, and older ones. Therefore, I believe that such spaces should be in every district of the city. And in every city. [...]

Children know that they are very calm here. They go to classes. Even if there is an air raid siren, they still go. They know that it is safe here. That here they are like in a shelter, you know. They talk more; they communicate. It seems to me that their mood improves. They always leave the space in a good mood. There is no such thing as a child saying: "I will not come here again!". And I have never seen such situations here. Everyone runs out and shouts, "Mom, look at a toy I made." My child learned to sew here. Yes, because I, for example, can sew. But I can't teach it. Well, for me it is difficult to explain how and where. And here my child learned to sew. She embroiders; she sews toys with girls. It is diversified development. She says, I would be in every class! I need to go to every lesson and everywhere.

My son, of course, is more athletic. And as he says, "These crafts are not for me, I can't". But he attends the space. We do not force him. Well, we don't force him to attend, and we don't say he has to go. No, we don't do that. If you want, you go. And he says: Yes, I want, yes, I will go. Board games, active games, some kind of research. He is fond of this! [...]

The space improves the children's emotional state. They come here and they are safe, they socialize. And they find friends here, they communicate. This is live communication; it has always been a priority for everyone. They learn here, they find something new for themselves. I think that in general these spaces are generally the best Godsend for parents. Because we let them go here and we know that we can entrust children to the facilitators. And that your child will be safe. And at this time, your child will learn something new. The child will learn something new here that you, as a parent, can't teach them. [...]

Not all parents can provide a child with everything they need. Therefore, these spaces are a Godsend for parents. They have everything here. And for the little ones, those children who were born during the war and don't know what kindergarten is like. There are activities for them. And children come and they communicate. They somehow make friends there. And there are preschool classes.

For parents, in general, it seems to me, this is the time when you leave your child here, you know that it is safe. You can relax a little there with yourself. To stay alone. Because for parents, I think, when you're stressed all the time – you have to constantly keep track of everything: your child, yourself, your family – and then it starts all over again. It burns you out. And [when your child is at the Space] you can relax a little, exhale. You trust these facilitators, and you know that they are safe. You can go for a cup of coffee with your friend, without children. And so, I think that these spaces should exist. They give an emotional break for children, for parents. And they make the children happy. [...]



Dreams for the future

Dream? I dream about one thing. About the end of the war. [Started crying] [...] About the end of the war, so that our children live in peace. So that they could go out and socialize with others, as we used to do. So that we could travel around our country safely. Because we have a very large country. I believe that we generally live in such a beautiful country. But now we can't travel to see everything. We are afraid to go somewhere, to travel somewhere. Since there are cases when a drone hit a train, then something else. So it seems to me that very few people are traveling now. And I believe that our country needs to be travelled all over.

Because it's very beautiful. And I want my children, all the children, to see this beauty. So that they develop and dream.

[I dream about] peace [for my children]. So that they can develop and learn. So that they can build their future. So that they reach their goals. So that they are not afraid. Not afraid to say anything. So that something is wrong. So that they could communicate. And always express their opinion. So that it is never forbidden in conversation. [...]

I believe that in the future, I hope that it will end. And children will begin to live a different life without air raid sirens and missiles.. And they will be happy with their lives. Not the way we are happy now – like, “you survived, so you're happy” – but truly happy, living and seeing their future. The future for themselves and for their further families. Therefore, I believe that we need to make our dreams come true.

Additional interviews:

Yana*, facilitator at the Child Friendly Space, Child Protection Expert from Charity Fund «Posmishka UA» - Save the Children partner in Ukraine

Air raid sirens and shelling in the city

The front line is now located about 25 km from the city. Therefore, this is a big problem since the city is within range of all types of weapons. If before it was only about the guided bombs, now both high-speed missiles and different types of drones reach here. Now a lot of types of weapons easily and very quickly reach the city.

There is a big problem since the fact that the frontline is rather close means that quite often there are shelling in the city before an air raid alarm has been announced. The air alarm, unfortunately, is turned on after people have heard the explosion. That is why people do not always have time to go to shelters. That is why people can be outside [during the shelling]. And this is an additional problem.

In regard to children, the city has already adapted a little. About 10 underground schools have already been built that teach children in person. Children are constantly staying in shelters. [...] This year both kindergartens and schools have resumed their work in person [underground]. Unfortunately, there is not enough space for everyone. That is why children study in several shifts. Unfortunately, it happens that a child may go to school for a week and then switch to online classes. This is because they have to wait their turn [to attend school in person], so that everyone gets a chance to go. This is simply because there isn't enough physical space for all the children to be in safe places. Underground schools continue to be built, so that more children can return to offline education.

Meanwhile, online learning continues all the time. In addition, parents have a choice for their child to attend classes offline or online. Each family chooses what is best for their child. Parents also consider where, for example, their house is located, whether it will be safer for the child to study at school or stay and study at home. Each family chooses a more or less safe place for themselves. [...]

And all the activities that we now conduct at various locations are held only in shelters for the safety of children. Now, unfortunately, we cannot put children at risk. When we run activities anywhere, an explosion might occur before the air raid alarm is announced. This means that whenever there is a gathering of children, it can only take place in shelters.



There was a period when air raid alarms were a bit shorter. Each alarm could last about half an hour, but there could be 5–6 alarms in a single day. Now, in the last month the situation has become more complicated. A recent air raid alarm lasted for 19 hours. The air alarm lasted the whole day. It means children had to be constantly in the shelter.

That is why, for example, in schools or in our space, children can't leave on their own, only with parents. And parents decide whether they can go out or stay in the shelter. Over the past week, the air raid alarm has been almost constantly on. Because there might be explosions. After that some drones fly to monitor the shelled place. And all this time, the air raid alarm continues for people's safety, because not always even the air defence system knows what exactly is reaching the city and how dangerous it can be. Therefore, the air alarm is on for the sake of safety. [...]

Now there is no single mechanism, so each family chooses the best for them. Because, unfortunately, the line between [safety and danger] is blurred, the air raid alarms stay on for so long that people start to adapt. You cannot pause your whole life. You need to go to the supermarket; you need to take your child to classes, or the child needs to join the lessons at home. You cannot keep the child, for example, at the shelter for all 19 hours. Well, because it will be difficult and emotionally exhausting for the child. Just like you cannot risk your own child and take her somewhere from underground. Let's say, there is quite a difficult choice for parents to make, and no one knows how to do it right, and no one wants to take risks. But we all understand that a child and an adult cannot be in the shelter all day long. Therefore, everyone chooses the best for themselves. [...]

Unfortunately, very often there is shelling at night. Well, last time shelling was from about 11 p.m. to 4 a.m. when a child is in a state of deep sleep. It is also very difficult, as parents must take the child [to a safer place] as quickly as possible, at least to the corridor.

Personal experience about a shelling at night

Well, tonight, unfortunately, the attack happened right in the houses next to mine. From that experience, I realized that you don't always have enough time to make a decision. The gap between the sound of something falling down – I didn't yet know what it was – the flash outside the window, and the sound of the explosion was about five seconds.

You don't even have time. My child slept next to me. Well, I didn't even have time to grab her to carry her to the corridor. In fact, I took her to the corridor after an explosion, at least to protect her from following explosions, because we don't know how many more there will be.

Sleeping in corridors and its impact on children

Some families have arranged sleeping places in their corridors. They moved their sofas to have a sleeping place there. The child just knows that this is the sleeping place.

Well, again, it depends a lot on the family, on what emotional background they have. Some of them just furnished a corner, hung a garland, put a sofa, and the child does not perceive it as something traumatizing, that they have to find a place to sleep in the corridor, and so on. But there are cases when there is not enough space to arrange a place, for example, in the corridor, and the children have to sleep in their beds. But there is a risk that parents will abruptly pull the child out of bed and rush them to the corridor or the shelter to keep them safe.

Of course, it affects the state of the child, especially for the next day. I want to note that, given that, for example, teachers and educators also live in this city, they are very patient about this. And if they see that the child is in such an unstable psycho-emotional state, they can contact a psychologist, even without asking the child [about the attack], because we all understand why a child feels this way.

We had cases when, for example, there was shelling during the day or at night. We have a schedule for different age groups. And then parents call and say, "We know that there are no classes for the age of our child,



but can we please bring the child to you, because our apartment was damaged, we will deal with the issue of blocking windows, removing all the damage that was in the house. Can I please bring the child to you so that she is in a safe place?" Of course, yes. We understand that now is our time to give the child psycho-emotional support so that the child does not think about what is happening at home. And the child is here, understands that they are safe here, their friends are here, the child is interested in activities here, and there are facilitators whom she knows. It is more comfortable for the child to be here than, for example, to be at home at such times. [...]

Children, as well as adults... in general everyone experiences this interrupted sleep in different ways. And in any case, it does not go unnoticed. And every person, every body reacts in its own way. Someone becomes so sleepy, they want more rest. We observe children want to sit on a pillow so that no one touches them.

That is, to be in such a calm state. There is a contrary situation when the nervous system does not have time to recover. The child becomes a little nervous, they want to move all the time. And of course, the nervous system weakens, and the child begins to act up. They do not want to play games offered by facilitators. It is not the child's fault, because the child does not understand what they want. Because, in fact, the nervous system is already exhausted at this moment. It hasn't got enough time to rest. [...]

Again, it depends a lot on how adults around react to explosions. Of course, if the child is in our Child Friendly Space, that is underground, children, in general, when they are in Child Friendly Space, do not hear what is happening on the street. There are no windows here. They do not even know if there are any explosions. If the child is outside or at home, very often their reaction depends on how adults around them react. Some of them just calmly explain that "Yes, now we will move with you to a safe place, we will be okay there, please take some toys with us that you would like to play with". They divert the child's attention. And the child feels as calm as possible, without any trauma, so to speak.

Unfortunately, there are adults who got very exhausted during these 4 years of war, and they cannot always control their emotions. Of course, the child feels it and starts to get nervous.

I know that there are children who have developed gastrointestinal disorders, there are children who get sick very often. And all this, of course, is related to psychosomatics, with the fact that the child is constantly in this nervous state and their body tries to protect them as best it can. That's why we advise parents to react as neutrally and calmly as possible, because even when it seems that a child doesn't sense our emotional state, they do. [When] a child sees their mother worrying, shouting, or reacting in any way, the child responds as well.

In general, when a child is brought to us for the first time, we ask parents to wait in the hall, not to leave even if they go out somewhere on the street, so that they are as close as possible. Because it is very important for a child to be sure that a trusted adult is next to them, although they know all the facilitators, and so on. There are moments when a child asks if they can look out the corridor to see if their mother is there, and it is normal. And we ask parents – even when their child has been attending our Child Friendly Space for a long time, but we know that there was a restless night, there were some explosions – then we ask adults to be near the Space at any time, so that we can call and the child could hear the mother and find out that everything is ok. Or if the child suddenly asks for their parents, the parents should be able to come to the child within 5–10 minutes. So the child calms down when seeing the parents. Unfortunately, it is our everyday life.

This happens, of course, also during the adaptation period, even when the child visits a space in a peaceful time, and so on. But still, now we understand that this contact should be as fast as possible so that the child calms down, so does the nervous system, as the adult is nearby. So that the child is safe. When, for example, we finish our classes and the parents meet their children, but we know that something is flying over the city, some drones for example, or we hear explosions, we suggest that parents and children stay in our space until it is safe to go out, first, for the safety and psycho-emotional state of the child. [...]



Child Friendly Space Activities

We are in the city of Zaporizhzhia. As we all know, it is quite close, unfortunately, to the frontline. Our Child Friendly Space for children, families, and young people is attended by both children from the city of Zaporizhzhia and children who have been displaced from the occupied territories. They are not from Zaporizhzhia region only, but also from Donetsk and Kherson regions. Different children live here. Our Child Friendly Space has been working for children from 3 to 18 years old. We invite everyone. There are both scheduled classes and unscheduled activities. It depends on the situation at the moment. There are different classes on psychosocial support. [...]

In our space, we hold classes on psychosocial support. Activities are for children from 3 to 18 years old. They are in different formats. It can be classes such as pre-kindergarten, thermo-mosaics, clay workshops, active games of different formats for different ages. We do this first and foremost so that when a child comes here, they understand that this is a safe space, that there are safe adults, that there are friends. We even have cases where children meet here, in our space, during our classes, and then ask their parents to transfer them to the same school [where their CFS friends go], so they already have friends there. It is especially true for children who are displaced from occupied territories. So, they came here, they had no friends in the new city, and for them it is a very cool space to find new friends. They sometimes meet on playgrounds and play the games they played here. [...]

Our space works from 9 am to 5 pm. We notice that for parents it has become a place of stability, especially at the times when schools were not working in person; the kindergartens were not working in an offline format. For them, it is a space where they could bring their child and be sure that the child is having a good time here. And this is both about the development of the child as well as about the release of some tension which is formed over a week. [...]

Parents bring their children to us whenever they have an opportunity. And for us it is like an indicator of our work that they understand that it is safe at our Child Friendly Space and that they can leave their children here, so that they can stay here as long as it is necessary. [...]

Our space is actually in a shelter. When you come to us, you go down to the base floor. This is a hall where parents can stay and wait for their children. The rooms in which children spend time during activities are completely safe. There are no windows, everything is underground, so children do not hear any terrible sounds, they do not hear explosions if there is a shelling in the city. They come and they are fully involved in the process, that is interesting for them. [...]

They communicate with each other; they are with their friends. All classes include a get-to-know-each-other session. There is always an active part to relieve this physical tension, which, unfortunately, is usual for children. There is always a creative part where they can express themselves, and we usually try to provide some free time so children have time to realize what they want, can find friends based on their hobbies, and leave the space with the feeling that they were where they were interested, where they liked the atmosphere, and where they want to return.

Notes from the interviewer:

Zaporizhzhia city and the surrounding region remain in a high-risk security environment due to the ongoing war. The region continues to experience frequent air raid alerts and regular shelling, including strikes that damage residential buildings and critical infrastructure. In January 2026 alone, 233 residential buildings in Zaporizhzhia were damaged by attacks, including dozens of apartment blocks and private homes struck during repeated shelling. In total, since the beginning of the full-scale war, 1,291 multistorey residential buildings and 2,674 private homes were damaged, 38 residential buildings and 54 private homes were either destroyed or critically impacted, according to the data available on February 5, 2026.



Zaporizhzhia city hosts a significant population of internally displaced persons, who were forced to leave their homes due to active hostilities, occupation, and destruction of civilian infrastructure elsewhere in Ukraine. As of January 2026, there are over 156,000 registered IDPs living in Zaporizhzhia city, including 20,000 children.

Air raid alerts are a regular part of daily life; residents often have to seek shelter multiple times a day, and there have been periods where alerts and threats of attack have lasted more than a full day due to sustained shelling and aerial threats.

The security situation across Zaporizhzhia region is directly tied to the frontline, which is relatively close to the city compared with the rest of Ukraine. Zaporizhzhia is located roughly about 20-25 kilometres from active frontline positions, meaning that artillery, drones, and missile threats can regularly reach the urban area.

Civilian infrastructure, including homes, utilities, and public services, has been routinely impacted by attacks, causing power outages and damage to essential services and contributing to ongoing stress among residents.

In addition to aerial and artillery threats, there are active air defense systems deployed around the city and region to intercept incoming missiles and drones, but these systems cannot eliminate all risks, and sirens remain a frequent reality for families and children.

Background / Project information

The Child Friendly Space is implemented by Charity Fund “Posmishka UA” and supported by Save the Children, with funding from Swiss Solidarity. Trained facilitators lead the activities and provide daily support to children, creating a calm, inclusive, and child-centered environment where every child feels welcome and protected.

Through routine, positive interaction, and attentive facilitators, the Child Friendly Space contributes to improving children’s emotional well-being, sense of safety, and resilience. Trained facilitators lead the activities and provide daily support to children, creating a calm, inclusive, and child-centered environment where every child feels welcome and protected.

While children are at the Space, parents are given a moment of relief, knowing their children are safe and cared for. This allows caregivers to rest, attend to daily responsibilities, or simply regain emotional strength, which is critical in the context of prolonged stress.

Interview conducted by: [Anastasiia Olinska](#)

Interview translated by: [Anastasiia Olinska](#)

Date of interview: [30/01/2026](#)

Story edited by: [Include writer/editor name here](#)

Story Approved by: [Write name of Country Director or senior sign off lead \(and Child Safeguarding contact if appropriate; see Image Guidelines for further guidance\)](#)

Country/region of interview: [Write this here](#)

Interview language: Ukrainian, Russian