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Predictors of the Everyday Parenting Practices of Ukrainian Mothers of Young Children With Special Needs Displaced by the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract

Background: War has detrimental effects on the everyday family life of mothers and their children. Many mothers, however, adapt to war-related adversity and continue to maintain healthy parent-child relationships. Objective: The study described in this paper examined the predictors of the everyday parenting practices of 62 primary caregivers (81% mothers) of young children with special needs displaced from their homes and communities following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Method: Three proximal (maternal well-being, optimism, & consistency in everyday routines) and five distal (family needs, challenges locating needed resources, social support from host-county social network members, social connectedness with Ukrainian family and friends, and satisfaction with early childhood intervention practitioners) factors were the focus of investigation. Results: Findings showed that maternal well-being, maternal optimism, consistency in everyday routines, and social connectedness with Ukrainian family and friends, both individually and in combination, proved to be the best predictors of positive everyday parenting practices and parent-child interactions. Conclusion: The everyday parenting practices of displaced Ukrainian mothers were influenced by both proximal and distal explanatory factors.

Keywords: war, displacement, parenting practices, maternal psychological health, family needs, social support, early childhood intervention, parent-child interactions, everyday child learning

Introduction

Family, parenting, and child routines are rich sources of everyday child learning opportunities (see e.g., Bourke et al., 2024; Dunst et al., 2000; Rogoff et al., 2016; Spagnola & Fiese, 2007). Everyday routines include shared parent and child activities (Richter et al., 2018; Schatz, 2022), contexts for positive parent-child interactions (Keel, 2012; Mermelshtine, 2017), parent-guided child participation in everyday activities (Rogoff et al., 2003), parental responsiveness to and encouragement of child competence (Richter, 2004; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), and opportunities for children to acquire functional and culturally meaningful behaviors (Göncü, 1999).

Parents' abilities to engage their children in everyday learning opportunities are influenced by both personal (proximal) and contextual (distal) factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Holden, 2021; Sanders & Turner, 2018; Sue, 2009; Wachs, 2000). This includes proximal and distal factors that are either facilitators (Jeong et al., 2022) or barriers (Gonzalez-Gomez et al., 2025) to parents' use of development-enhancing caregiving behavior as part of children's participation in everyday learning activities (Bourke et al., 2024; Rogoff et al., 2016).

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The personal factors related to parents' provision of development-enhancing everyday child learning opportunities include, but are not limited to, parents' psychological health and well-being (Dunst, 2023a), parents' positive caregiving expectancy beliefs (Hoang et al., 2024), and the consistency of everyday family, parenting, and child routines (Trivette et al., 2004; Zeise, 2004). The contextual factors related to parents' provision of development-enhancing everyday child learning opportunities include, but are not limited to, social support from informal and formal social network members (Dunst, 2022; Serrano, 2003), the adequacy of resources for meeting family needs (Dunst, 2021b), and the availability of neighborhood and community resources that encourage parent-child interactions (Garbarino & Kostelny, 1993; Strange et al., 2014).

The personal and contextual factors that impede parents' provision of everyday child learning opportunities include poor psychological health (Dunst, 2023a), household chaos interfering with consistency in everyday family, parenting, and child routines (Chung et al., 2025; Finger, 2015), challenges in locating resources to meet family needs (Bendickson, 2020), and adverse or traumatic life events that interfere with carrying out parenting responsibilities (e.g., Christie et al., 2019; Eltanamly et al., 2019). The latter includes war, which is a particular life event that has proven to have detrimental effects on everyday family life (Levkovich & Hadad, 2026). As noted by Martsenkovsky et al. (2026), "War dramatically alters daily life. It ruins routines, strips away any (personal) sense of control, and renders the future deeply uncertain" (p. 26).

War and Parenting

War is related to disruptions in parent-child interactions and everyday parenting practices (Chasson et al., 2025; Eltanamly et al., 2019; Gewirtz et al., 2025). Poor psychological health (Chasson et al., 2025; Wessel et al., 2026), post-traumatic stress disorder (Christie et al., 2019; Zamir et al., 2020), unmet needs unrelated to caregiving responsibilities (Bukharkina, 2026), economic hardship (Sim et al., 2018; Wessel et al., 2026), and the lack of social support from family, friends, and other social network members (Martsenkovsky et al., 2026) interfere with or prevent parents from carrying out parenting responsibilities.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 resulted in the displacement of millions of Ukrainian citizens from their homes and communities (Sorensen, 2026). Most of the displaced persons are women, and most of the women are mothers and their children (Bare, 2025). The latter includes mothers of children with special needs (identified disabilities, developmental delays, chronic health conditions, etc.) who have faced many challenges, either displaced within Ukraine (Bondar et al., 2026) or as refugees in other countries (Paoletti et al., 2023; Stoliaryk & Semigina, 2024). As noted by Bukharkina (2026), parents of children with special needs affected by the Russian invasion of Ukraine "face a 'double burden': they shoulder all the handicaps of displacement as refugees and the ongoing responsibilities of caring for a person with disability" (p. 5).

Available evidence from studies of parents of children with special needs displaced from their homes and communities following the Russian invasion of Ukraine indicates that the challenges parents face have proven to be barriers to obtaining needed resources, supports, and services (Bukharkina, 2026; Slozanska et al., 2025; Stoliaryk & Semigina, 2024). Tsiupenko (2024), in a review of factors affecting parents of children with special needs in times of war, identified poor parental psychological health, lack of family social support from social network members, challenges accessing needed family, parent, and child resources, and the need for specialized child-related services as sources of disruptions in family life and parent-child relationships.

The challenges faced by mothers of children with special needs displaced by the Russian invasion of Ukraine have often resulted in disruptions in family routines and parents' abilities to engage their children in everyday learning opportunities (Paoletti et al., 2023; Selivanava, 2026; Stoliaryk & Semigina, 2024). There is, however, evidence that many mothers of children without special needs adapt to the adverse effects of displacements from their homes and communities and establish continuity of family routines in displaced locations (see e.g., Gulenok & Tkalich, 2025; Harrocks, 2024;

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Johnston et al., 2025; Kurylo et al., 2023; Rock & Vansmayan, 2025). There is limited empirical evidence that Ukrainian mothers of children with special needs are also able to adapt to displacement from their homes and communities and both establish continuity in family routines and engage their children in development-enhancing everyday learning opportunities (see e.g., Bondar et al., 2026; Slozanska et al., 2025, for descriptive evidence that family routines are negatively affected by displacement).

Everyday Routines, Children with Special Needs, and Parenting Practices

Patterns of participation of young children with special needs in everyday family, parenting, and child routines parallel those for children without special needs (Dunst, 2020; Dunst et al., 2009; Ehrmann et al., 1995; Rogers & Umaibalan, 2011). There are, however, variations in the children's frequency and types of participation which are related to both proximal and distal parent- and family-related factors (e.g., Arakelyan et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2019). The variations, in turn, are associated with differences in child participation in everyday activities and parenting practices used with the children in the activities (Dunst, 2023a, 2025).

The proximal factors related to variations in children with special needs participation in everyday activities and parents' use of development-enhancing parenting practices include mothers' psychological well-being (Larson & Miller-Bishoff, 2014), positive expectancy beliefs (Nur'aeni et al., 2024), and mothers' abilities to establish consistency in everyday routines and activities (Zabidi et al., 2023). The distal factors related to variations in child participation in everyday activities and parents' use of development-enhancing parenting practices include social support from family, friends, and other social network members (Dunst, 2022), adequacy of family resources (Dunst, 2021b), and the helpfulness of early childhood intervention practitioners and other professionals (Espe-Sherwindt & Serrano, 2020; Kukuruza et al., 2022).

Purpose of the Study

The extent to which different proximal and distal parent- and family-related factors were related to the everyday parenting practices of mothers of young children with special needs displaced from homes and communities following the Russian invasion of Ukraine was the focus of the study described in this paper. The predictor variables that were the focus of investigation were informed by results reported in previous studies of young children with special needs (e.g, Arakelyan et al., 2019; Trivette et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2019), studies of mothers of young children displaced from their homes and communities as a result of war or other adverse life circumstances (e.g., Eltanamly et al., 2019; Gewirtz et al., 2025; Harrocks, 2024), or mothers of children with special needs and displaced from their homes and communities (e.g., Bukharkina, 2026; Slozanska et al., 2025; Tsiupenko, 2024).

The proximal factors included maternal well-being, maternal optimism, and mothers' abilities to maintain consistency in everyday routines in displaced locations. The distal factors included challenges obtaining resources to meet child and family needs, social support from social network members in a host country, social connectedness with Ukrainian family and friends, and support from early childhood intervention program practitioners. The goal of the study was to identify which predictor variables, both individually and in combination, were related to variations in mothers' everyday parenting practices after being displaced from their homes and communities as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Methods

Participants

The participants were 62 primary caregivers (81% mothers) and their preschool children with special needs (58% male) who were displaced from their homes and communities following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Ten participants (16.1%) were displaced internally in Ukraine, and 52 participants (83.9%) were displaced in eight different European countries. The families were displaced from their homes and communities for an average of 6.03 months (SD = 1.98) at the time of data collection.

The children ranged from less than 12 months to 78 months of age. The children and their mothers were receiving early childhood

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intervention (ECI) for an average of 36.77 months (SD = 23.46) at the time of data collection. Half of the participants were receiving ECI in Ukraine or remotely in a displaced European country from Ukrainian ECI practitioners. Half of the participants were receiving ECI from practitioners in a host country.

Survey

The participants completed a survey that included a combination of previously validated and investigator-developed measures. The survey was developed in collaboration with ECI program directors and practitioners to include measures consistent with the aims and goals of recommended ECI practices in Europe (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2005; European Association on Early Childhood Intervention, 2019).

The survey included nine sections that were relevant for the current study: (1) everyday parenting practices, (2) parental well-being, (3) parental optimism, (4) consistency in everyday family routines, (5) family needs, (6) difficulties and challenges finding needed resources, (7) social support from host country social network members, (8) satisfaction with assistance and guidance from ECI practitioners, and (9) social connectedness with Ukrainian family and friends.

Measures

Everyday Parenting Practices

A 5-item investigator-developed scale was used to measure mothers' frequency of use of different everyday parenting practices (e.g., provide my child activities to promote learning, establish routines to ensure my child's safety, engage my child in everyday activities). Each item was rated on a 5-point scale ranging from never able (1) to always able (4) to engage in the activities with my child. The participants' responses were used to construct three parenting practices measures: (1) parent-child activities (sum of the five item responses), (2) child learning opportunities (sum of the three child learning item responses), and (3) parenting comfort and safety (sum of the two parenting protection item responses).

Parental Psychological Health

Parental psychological health was measured using the WHO-5 Well-Being Index (Dunst, 2026; Sischka et al., 2020) and an investigator-developed optimism measure. The WHO-5 includes five positive-stated well-being indicators (e.g., feel calm and relaxed, feel cheerful and in good spirits). Each item is scored on a 6-point scale ranging from never (0) to all-of-the-time (5). The sum of the five item responses multiplied by 4 yields a total psychological well-being score (World Health Organization, 2024). Parental optimism was measured by asking the participants to indicate the extent to which "I feel things will be better" on a 5-point scale ranging from never (0) to all-of-the-time (4).

Consistency in Everyday Routines

A 14-item investigator-adapted scale was used to measure the extent to which participants were able to engage in everyday routines in the same way after displacement from their homes and communities. The scale items include parenting routines (e.g., feeding my child, child bathtime, dressing my child), family routines (food shopping, preparing meals, household chores), and social activities (e.g., going to church, visiting friends). Each item was rated on a 4-point scale ranging from never (0) to all-of-the-time (3). The sum of the 14-item responses was used to measure the consistency of parenting and family routines in a displaced location.

Family Resources

An investigator-adapted version of the Family Resources Scale (FRS; Dunst, 2021a; Dunst & Leet, 1985; Dunst et al., 2006) and challenges finding needed resources in a displaced location were used to measure family resources. The FRS includes 30 items measuring the need for basic resources (e.g., food, shelter, utilities), financial resources (e.g., money to pay bills, good-paying job, expendable income), time availability (for self, children, spouse or partner, family or friends), healthcare (medical, dental, child medical care), and specialized child resources (e.g., adapted devices or equipment, transportation, child medical supplies). Each item is rated on a 5-point scale from do not need at all (0) to need all the time (4). The sum of the 30-

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item scores was used as the family needs measure.

Participants were provided with a list of 11 challenges they might encounter in obtaining needed resources in a displaced location (e.g., lack of transportation, no funds to pay for the resource/service, child or family not eligible for a service). Participants were able to "check all challenges that apply" to their family situations. The total number of items checked was used to measure challenges in finding needed resources in a displaced location.

Parent and Family Supports

An adapted version of the Family Support Scale (FSS; Dunst, 2023b; Dunst et al., 1984; Dunst et al., 2006) was used to measure the helpfulness of social network members (e.g., new neighbors, parents I met) and organizations (e.g., churches, non-government organizations) in a displaced location. The scale includes eight items, each rated on a 5-point scale ranging from not-at-all helpful (0) to extremely helpful (4). The sum of the eight item ratings was used to measure host country social support.

An adapted version of the Early Intervention Program Helpfulness Scale (Trivette, 2006) was used to measure participants' satisfaction with the assistance and guidance provided by ECI practitioners. The scale includes five items measuring satisfaction with assistance with child learning activities, ECI program services, and help finding needed resources and services from other programs and organizations. Each item is rated on a 5-point scale ranging from strongly disagree (0) to strongly agree (4) that the practitioners were helpful to the family. The sum of the five item responses was used to measure satisfaction with early childhood intervention.

An investigator-developed scale was used to measure social connectedness (Friedling et al., 2018) with Ukrainian family and friends while in a displaced location. The scale included eight items measuring different kinds of social connectedness (e.g., I can count on my [Ukrainian] family members whenever I need them, my [Ukrainian] family and friends help me stay strong when I face problems, staying connected with [Ukrainian] family members helps me remain positive). Each social connectedness statement is rated on a 5-point scale ranging from false (0) to true (4). The sum of the 5-item ratings was used to measure social connectedness with Ukrainian family and friends.

Method of Analysis

Hierarchical multiple regression analysis by sets (Cohen et al., 2003) was used to identify the predictors of the three everyday parenting practices measures. The order of entry was guided by an analytic model where proximal variables were expected to exert the greatest influence on everyday parenting practices, and distal variables were expected to exert less influence on everyday parenting practices (Holden, 2021; Sanders & Turner, 2018). The order of entry in each analysis was: (1) parental psychological health (well-being and optimism), (2) consistency in everyday family routines, (3) family resources (family needs and challenges in finding needed resources), (4) parent and family support is a displaced location (host country social support and satisfaction with ECI), and (5) social connectedness with Ukrainian family and friends. This permitted the identification of the unique amount of variance that was accounted for in each of the three parenting practices measures by each set of predictor variables after controlling for the influence of the variables already entered into the regression analyses (Cohen et al., 2003).

Results

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations (SDs), range in scores, and coefficient alphas (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994) for the three parenting practices measures and the eight predictor measures. There was considerable variability in the participants' scores for all measures. The internal consistency estimates (coefficient alpha) indicated that the scales and subscales were measuring homogeneous constructs (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

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Table 1. Measures Used to Identify the Predictors of the Everyday Parenting Practices of Mothers of Young Children with Special Needs Displaced by the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

Measures	Items	Mean	SD	Range	Alpha
Everyday Parenting Practices					
Parent-Child Activities	5	15.28	2.66	10-20	.75
Child Learning Opportunities	3	8.31	1.91	6-12	.68
Parental Comfort and Warmth	2	6.97	1.15	4-8	.69
Psychological Health					
WHO-5 Well-Being Index	5	35.90	23.51	0-80	.87
Parental Optimism	1	2.39	1.11	0-4	NA
Parenting and Family Routines					
Maintenance of Family and Parenting Routines	14	32.88	8.64	7-47	.80
Family Resources					
Family Needs	30	46.42	28.10	0-112	.96
Challenges Finding Needed Resources	9	3.31	2.23	0-9	NA
Parent and Child Supports					
Host County Social Support	8	8.71	6.77	0-22	.79
Satisfaction with Early Childhood Intervention	5	13.03	4.59	0-20	.75
Social Connectedness with Ukrainian F/F	8	16.55	7.14	0-27	.89

NOTES. WHO = World Health Organization. F/F =Family and friends, NA = Not applicable.

The results from the three regression analyses are shown in Table 2. Parental psychological health (well-being and optimism), consistency in everyday family routines, and social connectedness with Ukrainian family and friends accounted for significant amounts of variance in each of the three parenting practices measures. Parental psychological health accounted for 10.0% to 11.4% of the variance in the three parenting practices measures. Consistency in everyday family routines accounted for 11.2% (parenting comfort and safety) to 16.6% (parent-child activities) of the variance in the parenting practices measures. Social connectedness with Ukrainian family and friends accounted for 5.4% (child learning opportunities) to 7.7% (parent-child activities) of the variance in the parenting practices measures.

The cumulative influences of the variables significantly related to the three parenting practices measures were determined by repeating the regression analyses by entering the predictor variables in two sets: (1) the variables not significantly related to everyday parenting practices (family needs, challenges finding needed resources, host country social support, and satisfaction with ECI) and (2) the variables significantly related to parenting practices (parental psychological health, consistency in everyday family routines, and social connectedness with Ukrainian family and friends). The results showed that the latter set of variables accounted for 34.6% of the variance in parent-child activities, $F(4, 53) = 7.51$, $p < .000$, 25.3% of the variance in child learning opportunities, $F(4, 53) = 4.86$, $p = .002$, and 31.5% of the variance in parenting comfort and safety, $F(4, 53) = 6.21$, $p < .000$, after controlling for the effects of the first set of predictor variables.

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Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Results for the Predictors of the Three Everyday Parenting Practices Measures

	Everyday Parenting Practices Measures					
	Parent-Child Activities		Child Learning Opportunities		Parental Comfort and Warmth	
Predictor Measures	R^2 Change	p-value	R^2 Change	p-value	R^2 Change	p-value
Psychological Health (2)[a]	.114	.028	.100	.045	.106	.036
Routine Maintenance (1)	.166	.001	.135	.002	.112	.005
Family Resources (2)	.007	.757	.002	.920	.051	.584
Social Support (2)	.025	.383	.020	.482	.029	.355
Social Connectedness (1)	.077	.013	.054	.047	.066	.026

[a]Number of predictor variables in each set.

NOTES. Psychological health includes maternal well-being and optimism; family resources include family needs and challenges finding resources to meet family needs; and social support includes support from social network members in a host country and the helpfulness of early childhood intervention practitioners.

Discussion

Findings from descriptive studies of Ukrainian mothers of children with special needs displaced from their homes and communities include evidence to suggest that displacement is related to disruptions in everyday parenting practices (e.g., Slozanska et al., 2025; Stoliaryk & Semigina, 2024). To the best of our knowledge, our study is the first to demonstrate an empirical relationship between everyday family routines in displaced locations and the everyday parenting practices used with young children with special needs.

Results showed that positive maternal psychological health (well-being and optimism), mothers' ability to maintain consistency in parenting, family and child routines in a displaced location, and social connectedness with Ukrainian family and friends, both individually and in combination, were the best predictors of everyday parenting practices. The relationship between maternal psychological health and the three everyday parenting practices measures is identical to those reported in studies of mothers and young children with and without special needs (Dunst, 2023a; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). The relationship between consistency of everyday routines in a displaced location and positive parenting practices is much the same as found in studies of mothers of children with and without special needs (Crespo et al., 2013; Fiese et al., 2002; Selman & Dilworth-Bart, 2024). The relationship between social connectedness with Ukrainian family and friends and parenting practices is consistent with findings in studies of mothers of children with and without special needs (Cochran & Walker, 2005; Dunst, 2022). Taken together, the results indicate that both proximal and distal parent- and family-related factors were related to mothers' use of different types of everyday parenting practices.

In contrast to previous studies that focused primarily on factors related to disruptions in the everyday family life of mothers and their children with special needs, our study attempted to identify which parent- and family-related factors were related to positive adaptations in the face of war-related adversity. One can glean from available descriptive evidence that many mothers of children without special needs who experienced challenges related to displacement from their homes and communities were able to muster the personal resources needed to navigate wartime adversity and continue to use positive, everyday parenting practices (see e.g., Gulenok & Tkalich, 2025; Harrocks, 2024; Selivanava, 2026). The same was the case for the mothers in our study as evidenced by the relationship between positive maternal psychological well-being, consistency in everyday family routines, and the mothers' use of different everyday positive parenting practices.

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Previous studies of Ukrainian mothers and their children displaced by the Russian invasion of Ukraine include evidence about the importance of social connectedness with family and friends as a factor having positive effects on parent and child functioning (e.g., Espe-Sherwindt et al., 2025; Johnston et al., 2025). Social connectedness was found to be related to the everyday parenting practices in our study after the effects of all other predictor variables were accounted for in the analyses reported in this paper (see Table 2). As noted by Johnston et al. (2025) in their study of transnational ties with Ukrainian family and friends, social connectedness proved important in terms of "fostering improved parent-child relationships…while prioritizing the safety and well-being of their children" (p. 59). Results from our study include evidence consistent with the Johnston et al. (2025) findings. Social connectedness was related to both parent-child interactions (parent-child activities) and child safety (parental comfort and warmth) in our study.

Strengths and Limitations

One strength of our study included measures that differentiated between (a) consistency in family routines after displacement from the mothers' homes and communities and (b) the everyday parenting practices used with the mothers and their children. A second strength was the focus on mothers with young children with special needs, which has been a neglected area of investigation involving mothers who were displaced by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. A third strength was the method of analysis for identifying the particular predictor variables that were related to mothers' use of everyday positive parenting practices with their young children with special needs.

One limitation of our study was the use of a survey method, and not observational data, for measuring everyday parenting practices. A second limitation is the fact that the study sample may not be representative of all mothers of young children with special needs who were displaced from their homes and communities following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. A third limitation was the fact that there are other variables not included in our study that also might explain differences in mothers' everyday parenting practices.

Conclusion

War has detrimental effects on everyday family life. This is especially true for persons displaced from their homes and communities as a result of armed conflicts. Displaced individuals, particularly mothers and other primary caregivers, face many challenges that interfere with parent-child relationships and caregivers' abilities to carry out parenting responsibilities. Many mothers, however, are able to overcome war-related adversity and establish family, parenting, and child routines in displaced locations that mirror conditions before displacement from their homes and communities. The results reported in this paper identified which family-related variables functioned as personal and social resources that permitted mothers of young children with special needs to employ everyday parenting practices that engaged their children in positive parent-child interactions.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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