

Targeted social and psychological support for Ukrainian refugee women with young children

Specific challenges and proposed solutions

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Abstract

A significant number of Ukrainian refugee women in Germany are caring for young children amidst multiple challenges, including adapting to new environments and managing a completely altered daily routine. Many have transitioned suddenly into single parenthood without any breaks or relief, compounded by a critical shortage of childcare facilities. This study aimed to explore how these mothers manage children's tantrums, address the need for effective communication and behavioral strategies, and offer practical solutions. An online questionnaire gathered insights on tantrum frequency and coping mechanisms. It was followed by a seminar, which employed problem-solving techniques from positive psychology to enhance resilience, self-compassion, and solution-oriented thinking. It received positive feedback, highlighting the demand for tailored support programs. However, issues of trust persisted due to concerns about the initiative's private nature and the author's cultural background. Future efforts could benefit from closer collaboration with state and civil society support systems to enhance accessibility.

Introduction

According to a large-scale study of Ukrainian refugees[1][2], most of them are women (80 per cent) with an average age of 40. Almost half travelled to Germany with children, and 77 percent without a partner. This situation meant that many women suddenly became single parents and had to cope with the new everyday life with children in addition to the other burdens. Due to the lack of childcare places in Germany (at the beginning of 2023, only 16 per cent of two-year-olds and 58 per cent of three- to six-year-olds attended a daycare centre)[2], many women were left alone with their children for months and had to care for them around the clock. In order to successfully cope with such a daily routine, a high level of adaptability, conflict management skills and effective self-care are required. Since basic knowledge in conflict resolution, communication and personal responsibility was not part of school education in Ukraine[3] until at least 2019 (when school system reforms proposed changes to educational plans[4]), many Ukrainian adults today often lack fundamental skills in these areas. Specific aspects of conflicts with children as well as basic nutritional guidelines, especially the effects of sugar consumption and lack of water on mood swings and conflict potential, are also not taught as standard. This lack of knowledge often led to mothers increasing their children's media and sugar consumption as a stopgap measure, having a negative impact on sleep[5], emotional processing and behaviour[6]. A regular daily routine, which serves as an important source of a sense of security[7], was also often lacking. The assumption of a lack of knowledge in these areas formed the basis for the thematic content of a targeted help offer taking into account the following organizational hurdles:

- Limited Availability: Due to the lack of childcare options and the sole responsibility for their children, women often only had time to access support services late in the evening, online, and for short periods. However, targeted educational programs frequently took place during the day.
- Language barrier: Russian is understood for the most part, but often rejected as the language of the occupiers. Professional psychological counselling in the mother tongue was often not available.
- Lack of trust in state help: There are no comparable structures in Ukraine, so they are not expected here either and often not taken up - for reasons of time, language or habit. Instead, the women organised themselves in Telegram chats, which formed one of the main communication channels[8].
- Media preferences: Flyers and brochures were less well received than videos or live events.

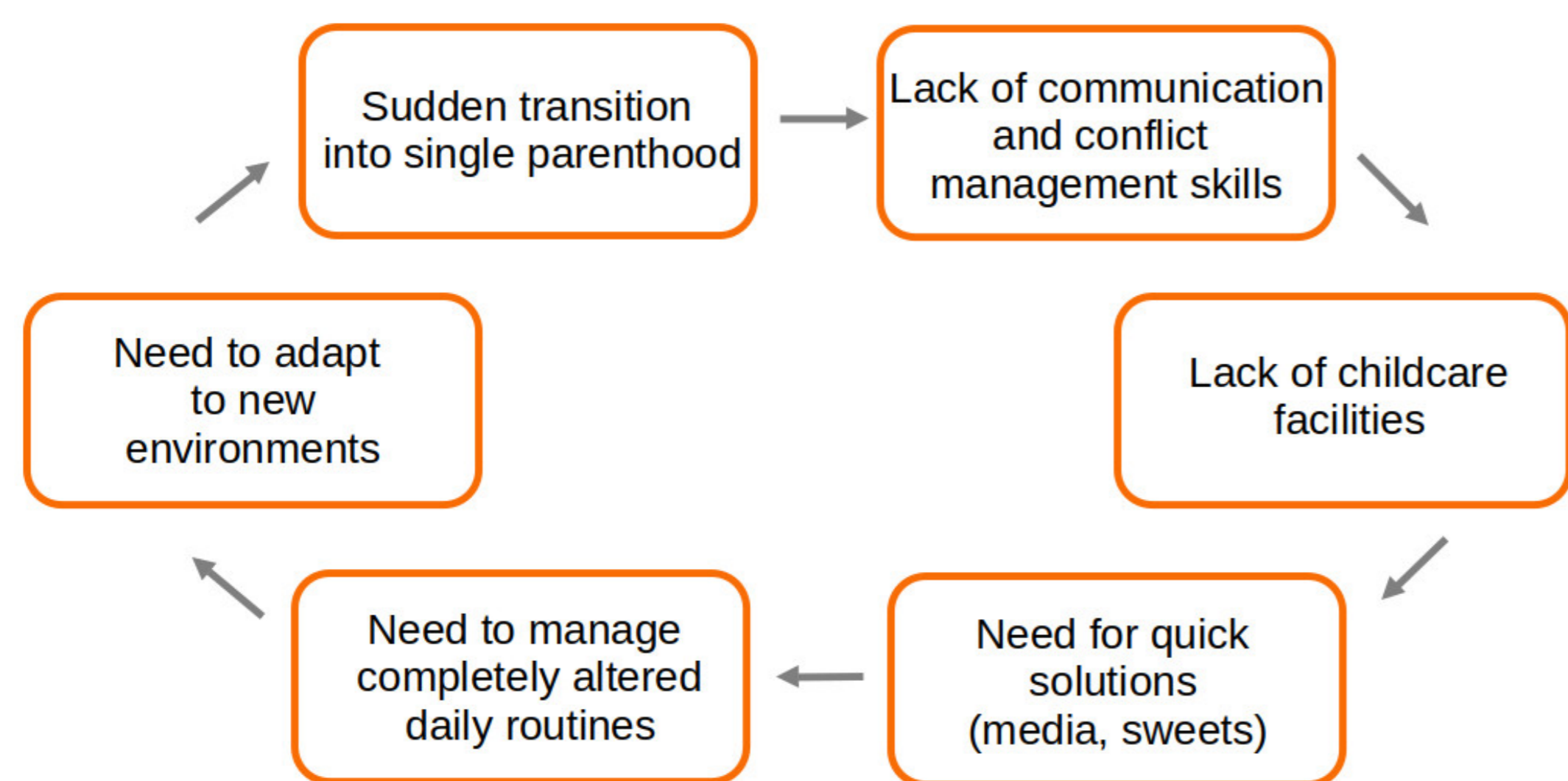


Figure 1: Main challenges faced by Ukrainian refugee women in dealing with children's tantrums

Main Objectives

1. Determine how often Ukrainian refugee mothers deal with their children's tantrums, what their strategies are in these cases and whether there is a need for new solutions.
2. Conduct a seminar describing behavioural and communication strategies for both acute phases of tantrums and their prevention.
3. Collect and analyse feedback after the seminar.

Materials and Methods

An online questionnaire with seven questions in two languages (Ukrainian and Russian) was created to illustrate how mothers currently handle children's tantrums[9]. This included questions on refugee status and mother tongue, the age and number of children, the frequency of tantrums, current solutions and their effectiveness and the individual need for new, effective coping strategies. When designing the seminar, problem-solving techniques from positive psychology were chosen, which particularly promote the participants' resilience, self-compassion and solution-orientated thinking.

Seminar structure

The seminar consisted of two thematic blocks:

• Acute Phase:

This section primarily introduced techniques of empathetic listening according to Carl Rogers[10] and dialogue guidance according to Tina Payne Bryson[11], depending on the child's age and developmental stage. A distinction was made between controlled and uncontrolled outbursts of anger,

and the associated brain processes were explained. From this, behavioural and communication recommendations for parents were derived to optimally support the child during acute tantrums.

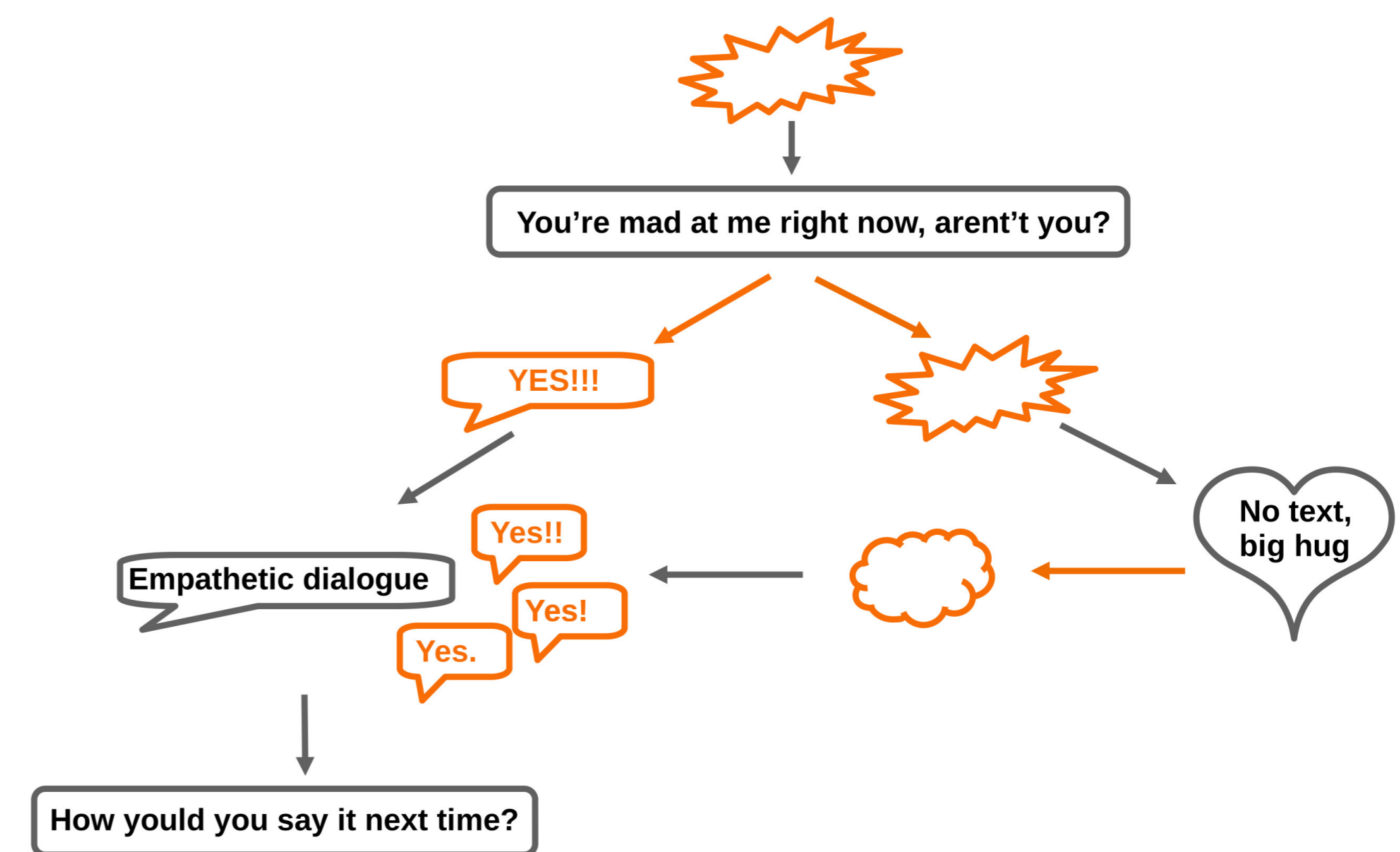


Figure 2: Conversation scheme in the acute phase

• Prevention:

In this section, the topic of unmet needs (both the parents' and the child's) as a major source of discomfort was addressed. The first two basic levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs[12] (physiological and safety needs) were examined in detail. The connection between unhealthy diet and discomfort was discussed, as well as the effects of sugar consumption on mood swings[6] and media consumption on sleep quality[5]. Specific suggestions for dietary changes were provided, and the importance of sleep rituals was emphasized. The topic of rituals was further explored in the context of safety needs[13], highlighting the stabilizing effect of a structured daily routine and the importance of self-care. Finally, the technique of self-feedback with solution-oriented questions was presented, such as: "What worked well today? What will I do differently tomorrow?"

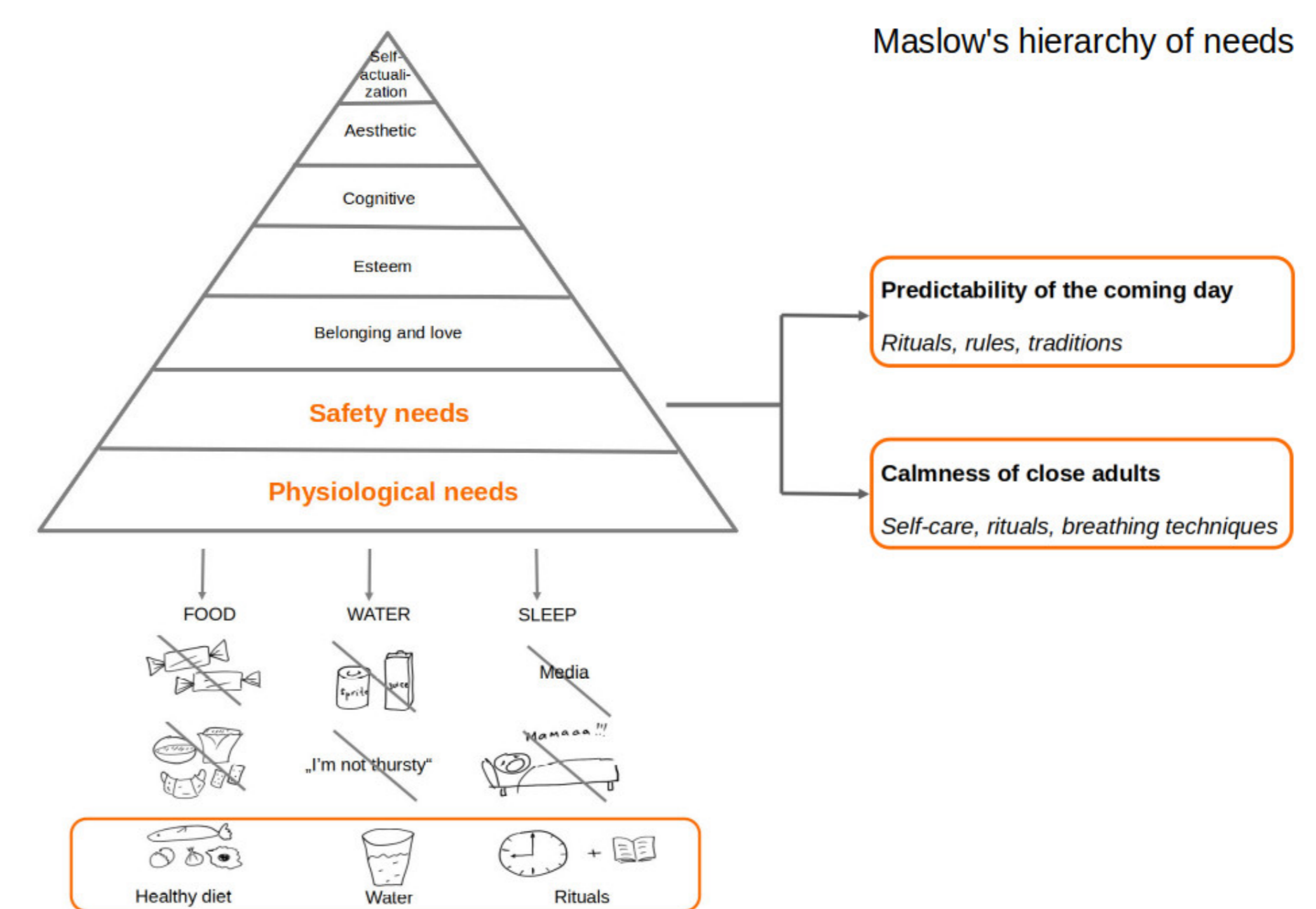


Figure 3: Prevention of tantrums: consideration of unmet needs

Results

To reach the target group, Telegram proved to be the most frequently used medium among Ukrainian refugees in Germany[8]. However, the offer dissemination was hindered by the frequent refusal to allow an advertisement (in 11 out of 24 chats), partly with reference to the author's Russian origin. In the end, only 35 women took part in the survey. Most of them expressed the need for new strategies in dealing with tantrums, more than half reported using media as a calming tool, and about one-third used sweets for this purpose. Almost half of the women had to deal with tantrums at least five times a week. The seminar was conducted online (the recording is still available for free[14]), and later in person, with childcare organized in parallel by a refugee aid group. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with requests for a follow-up seminar on self-care, which was also held in person.

Conclusions

There is a need within the target group for effective communication and behavioral strategies for dealing with children's tantrums and increased conflict potential. The support offered within the framework of this project was perceived as very helpful. The greatest hurdle was a lack of trust due to the nature of the authorship (private initiative, not a state measure), the language (Russian), and the origin of the author. For future measures, it could be confidence-building to integrate the offer more closely into the system of state and civil society support.

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