

School Social Work and Children's Fears: Supporting Greek Children Amidst War News from Iran

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SUMMARY

Children's emotional responses to geopolitical instability are shaped by developmental stage, environmental stressors, and the sociocultural context in which they interpret global events. Exposure to conflict-related information—particularly through digital media—can heighten fear, anticipatory anxiety, and perceptions of threat even in the absence of direct danger. These reactions often manifest as emotional dysregulation, concentration difficulties, sleep disturbances, and changes in social or academic functioning. Younger children may display regressive behaviors, while adolescents tend to exhibit more complex cognitive and affective responses, including rumination and withdrawal.

Within this landscape, School Social Work constitutes a critical support mechanism. Through systematic assessment, early identification, and targeted psychosocial intervention, School Social Workers help maintain emotional safety and promote adaptive coping. Trauma-informed practices, media literacy education, and family engagement are essential components of an effective response. A coordinated, school-based approach is necessary to mitigate anxiety and strengthen resilience during periods of geopolitical tension.

Keywords: School Social Work, Geopolitical Anxiety, Psychosocial Intervention, Resilience

Understanding Children's Fear Responses to Geopolitical Crises

Defining Fear and Anxiety in Crisis Contexts

Fear is fundamentally different from anxiety, though these terms are often used interchangeably in discussions of children's emotional responses to global events. Fear is defined as a distressing emotion resulting from a real or perceived threat, while anxiety represents the anticipation of a potential future threat (Leppma, Szente and Brosch, 2015). In the context of geopolitical crises, such as regional conflicts involving Iran and its neighboring regions, children experience both immediate fear responses to direct news exposure and generalized anxiety about potential future threats to their safety and that of their families.

Contemporary research confirms that children's fears have evolved significantly as society has changed (Leppma, Szente and Brosch, 2015). The content and severity of children's fears vary greatly, but evidence is clear that as global conditions shift, approaches to treating children's fear and anxiety must adapt accordingly. Burnham (2009) identified that contemporary fears of today's youth are influenced by global events such as natural disasters, war and terrorism, societal changes, and television and media exposure (Leppma, Szente and Brosch, 2015). Stress and negative events contribute to heightened fear responses in children, with any stressful incidents having the potential to generate fear-related disorders.

Psychological Symptoms in Crisis-Exposed Children

Recent research on children exposed to war-related stress provides critical insight into the specific symptoms manifested by young people facing geopolitical tensions. Studies conducted during the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and neighboring regions document that children in war-affected areas experience significant psychological disturbances. Research found that 55.2% of high schoolers with special educational needs experienced anxiety in the educational process, with 48.4% experiencing "emotional swings," 44.8%

experiencing restlessness, and 37.2% experiencing fear (Dovhopola, Nabochenko and Kostenko, 2024). Additionally, 15.4% began to study worse academically, while 12.9% increased their time on digital entertainment.

These symptoms reflect a complex interplay of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses. During wartime conditions, the psychological state of adolescents is significantly compromised (Нечипорук, 2024). The socialization process—acquiring knowledge, skills, values, and social norms necessary for life in society—becomes disrupted when adolescents experience constant fear for their own lives and health, as well as for their relatives. This leads to manifestations of irritability, aggressiveness, anxiety, lack of trust in others, and feelings of loneliness, isolation, and inferiority.

Developmental Considerations and Vulnerability

Children at different developmental stages respond differently to geopolitical crises. According to research on children experiencing trauma from war conditions, each age category of children exhibits characteristic types of post-traumatic responses depending on developmental stage. Younger children may express fears through behavioral regression or somatic complaints, while older children and adolescents may develop more complex anxiety presentations including social withdrawal or academic decline.

The timing of symptom onset is particularly important for intervention planning. Research indicates that in children with hearing impairments exposed to war conditions, symptoms of stress—noticeable in the child's behavior—appeared 3-4 months after the traumatic event, with many children experiencing elevated levels of stress and depression. This delayed manifestation suggests that early screening and preventive interventions are critical even when immediate symptoms are not apparent.

Media Exposure and Information Anxiety: The Role of News Consumption

News Consumption Patterns and Mental Health Impact

The relationship between media exposure and children's mental health during geopolitical crises is complex and multifaceted. A critical finding from research on vulnerable populations during health and security crises is that excessive information seeking from any source—including social media, news, and interpersonal communication—significantly increases mental health risk (Basu *et al.*, 2020). In a cross-national study of 6,894 individuals across 64 countries, information seeking five or more times per day was associated with more than twice the odds of elevated post-traumatic stress and anxiety/depression (Basu *et al.*, 2021).

For Greek children with proximity to Middle Eastern geopolitical tensions, this pattern of excessive information-seeking behavior is particularly concerning. Media organizations reporting on conflicts often contribute to anxiety through their coverage patterns. Research examining the psychological impact of armed conflict coverage notes that when reporting becomes sensational or emotionally charged, it adversely impacts mental health (Alam, Niranjana and Prithviraj, 2026). The psychological effects of continued exposure to distressing content are especially pronounced in vulnerable populations, including children and those with pre-existing psychiatric conditions.

Information Overload and Doomscrolling

The phenomenon of "doomscrolling"—excessive consumption of distressing or alarming news and social media content—represents a particularly modern challenge for children and adolescents. This behavior, also known as "doom-surfing," involves consuming significant amounts of negative news, particularly on social media platforms, and often leads to increased anxiety, stress, and a sense of helplessness (Fatma, Parveen and Begum, 2026). Research on emotion regulation reveals that doomscrolling shares a significant positive relationship with emotional suppression and a negative relationship with cognitive reappraisal—adaptive emotion regulation strategies (Fatma, Parveen and Begum, 2026).

Media and Mental Health research indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic-era patterns of information consumption provide insights applicable to current geopolitical crisis scenarios. When individuals, including

children, are exposed to excessive pandemic-related content, this triggers anxiety, stress, and feelings of helplessness (Dutta and Goswami, 2023). The 24-hour media cycle, combined with sensationalization of news reporting and unregulated spread of misinformation on social media platforms, exacerbates mental health challenges. Social media platforms amplify "doomscrolling," intensifying negative emotions, while traditional media's repetitive focus on alarming statistics heightens anxiety, depression, and nervousness.

Vulnerability to Misinformation and Rumor-Spreading

The spread of rumors through social media platforms represents another significant threat to children's psychological well-being during geopolitical crises. Research on rumor propagation demonstrates that these platforms have become fertile environments for the growth and dissemination of unverified information (Jalal, 2024). The most prominent negative effects of rumor-spreading on social media include spreading chaos, disintegrating society, spreading fear and anxiety in the hearts of community members, and threatening internal stability and social security.

For Greek children, this is particularly relevant given the geographic proximity to regions affected by Iran-related geopolitical tensions. The spread of rumors through social media has led to destabilization of civil and community peace, provocation of discord, and spreading of fear and anxiety (Jalal, 2024). This underscores the critical need for media literacy education and responsible information consumption strategies tailored specifically for children.

School Social Work: Foundational Framework and Functions

Defining School Social Work in Crisis Contexts

School social work represents a critical professional specialization focused on supporting children and adolescents with existing and potential mental health problems within educational settings (Plakhova, 2024). As a distinct field of social work practice, school social work provides practical help to children and adolescents struggling with psychological difficulties, particularly during crises. The role has become increasingly important as schools are recognized as primary settings for early identification, assessment, and intervention of mental health problems in children and young people.

Mental health in the focus of social work during wartime and crisis conditions requires specific attention to prevention, crisis intervention, social support, and rehabilitation (Plakhova, 2024). The potential of social work in the field of mental health is substantial, with multiple methods of prevention and intervention available. These include social rehabilitation, counseling, crisis intervention, and social support mechanisms. Social workers connect people with activities and services in the local community that can help improve their mental health and wellbeing.

The Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) Framework

Effective school mental health systems employ a multi-tiered approach to address prevention, early intervention, and support for severe mental health concerns in collaboration with community health professionals. The multi-tiered systems of support framework divides interventions into three primary levels (Li *et al.*, 2024):

Tier 1 (Universal Prevention): Targets all students with evidence-based prevention programs designed to promote positive emotional development, reduce risk factors, and build protective factors. These might include school-wide social-emotional learning programs, classroom-based mental health education, and environmental modifications that support psychological safety.

Tier 2 (Early Intervention): Focuses on students identified as at-risk or showing early signs of mental health difficulties. These targeted interventions might include small group work, peer support programs, brief cognitive-behavioral interventions, or enhanced family engagement.

Tier 3 (Intensive Intervention): Provides comprehensive assessment and individualized treatment for students with significant mental health needs. This tier includes individual counseling, crisis intervention, psychiatric consultation, and intensive case management.

Within this framework, school social workers function as key team members who coordinate assessment, intervention planning, and ongoing support (Aderinkomi, 2024). The Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) framework, frequently integrated into U.S. school systems, ensures a supportive environment through behavioral reinforcement and targeted mental health education, demonstrating successful implementation of multi-tiered approaches.

Core Roles and Functions of School Social Workers

School social workers perform multiple critical functions, particularly during periods of heightened community stress or geopolitical anxiety. These roles encompass:

Individual Counseling and Assessment: School social workers conduct comprehensive biopsychosocial assessments to understand students' mental health needs, trauma histories, strengths, and resources. They provide individual counseling addressing anxiety, fears, grief, and trauma responses.

Crisis Intervention: During emergencies or acute psychological crises, school social workers provide immediate stabilization, safety assessment, and linkage to emergency services. They implement suicide prevention protocols and de-escalation strategies.

Family Engagement and Support: School social workers work collaboratively with families to understand their needs, share information about student progress and concerns, and coordinate family-based interventions. During geopolitical crises, this includes providing parents with information about supporting their children's mental health.

Group Work and Peer Support: School social workers facilitate therapeutic groups addressing specific concerns (e.g., anxiety management, coping skills, peer relationships) and develop peer support programs where students support one another.

Advocacy and Coordination: School social workers advocate for systemic changes promoting student wellbeing, coordinate with community resources and services, and ensure students receive necessary accommodations and protections.

The Specific Context: Greek Children and Regional Tensions

Geographic Proximity and Exposure Patterns

Greece's geographic position in relation to Iran, Turkey, and the Eastern Mediterranean creates a unique context for children's exposure to geopolitical tensions. While direct military threats may be limited, media coverage of regional conflicts reaches Greek children through multiple channels—news outlets, social media, peer conversations, and family discussions. This exposure creates what researchers term "sympathetic distress" or "vicarious trauma" even when direct personal threat is limited (Kelly, 2022).

Research on children exposed to geopolitical crises in neighboring countries provides important context. Romanian adolescents living 205.7 kilometers from the Ukrainian border, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, demonstrated significant psychological reactions to potentially traumatic experiences generated by war exposure (Maftei, Danila and Măirean, 2022). The study found that participants involved in helping behaviors toward refugees presented higher peritraumatic dissociative experiences, anxiety symptoms, and higher moral elevation compared to those not involved in such behaviors. This proximity effect suggests that Greek children, particularly those in regions nearer to Turkey or other geopolitically sensitive areas, may experience heightened anxiety related to Iran-related tensions.

Cultural and Social Context Factors

The cultural context of Greece as a Mediterranean nation with complex historical relationships with Turkey and regional geopolitical dynamics affects how children process news about Iran-related conflicts. Adolescents' identity formation is influenced by society, social media, and close relationships with family and friends (Rämmer *et al.*, 2025). Like their peers in Estonia and other European countries, young people in Greece rely increasingly on social media for information about events in their society and world, with many preferring digital sources to traditional media.

Research on Narva youths noted that identity insecurity resulting from living in two cultural spaces is exacerbated by war in Ukraine (Rämmer *et al.*, 2025). Similarly, Greek children may experience identity-related anxieties when exposed to regional geopolitical tensions, particularly if they have family connections to Turkey or other affected regions, or if they identify with cultural groups affected by Middle Eastern conflicts.

School Environment and Support Infrastructure

The capacity of Greek schools to address behavioral health concerns varies significantly. The educational system faces challenges including teacher shortages, limited mental health resources, and varying levels of training among school personnel in trauma-informed practices (Hajder and Vogt-Hajder, 2025). However, there are also opportunities for school-based interventions given that schools are primary settings where children spend significant portions of their time and where early identification of mental health concerns is possible.

Evidence-Based Interventions for Supporting Children's Mental Health During Geopolitical Crises

Resilience-Based Interventions

Resilience—the ability to overcome adversity—is an essential component of coping with fears and anxiety effectively, and teaching children helpful ways to cope with fears promotes healthy development (Leppma, Szente and Brosch, 2015). Current literature points to positive emotions and affect regulation as means of increasing resilience, with multicomponent interventions showing particular promise.

A systematic review of resilience-based interventions with secondary school children identified that twelve interventions demonstrated effectiveness compared to control conditions (Parra, Gibbon and Thompson, 2026). Interventions employing a multicomponent approach demonstrated significant effects, particularly those combining social skills training, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), and positive psychology. Group-based interventions, especially those incorporating peer collaboration and social learning, appeared more effective. At short-term follow-up, studies reported small to large effects for anxiety, resilience, and depressive symptoms, while long-term follow-up showed continued benefits for emotional symptoms.

The components most effective for reducing anxiety and building resilience include:

Social skills training: Teaching children how to communicate effectively, resolve conflicts, and maintain healthy relationships. **Cognitive behavioral techniques:** Helping children identify and modify anxious thoughts and maladaptive behaviors, **Emotional regulation skills:** Teaching children to recognize emotions and employ adaptive strategies for managing intense feelings, **Problem-solving training:** Equipping children with systematic approaches to addressing challenges, **Peer support and collaboration:** Creating opportunities for children to learn from and support one another.

Psychosocial Support and Arts-Based Interventions

For refugee and displacement-affected children—a population that may include children with family members affected by Middle Eastern conflicts—arts-based interventions show particular promise. A scoping review of arts-based interventions for mental health identified that these approaches positively impact emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing and behavior, consistent with WHO definitions of mental health (Gong and Yang, 2025).

Arts-based approaches are particularly valuable for children who struggle to verbally express trauma or anxiety. Through creative expression—visual art, music, drama, movement—children can process difficult emotions, regain a sense of agency, and develop meaning from their experiences (Beauregard, Papazian-Zohrabian and Rousseau, 2024). A case study of a Syrian refugee child demonstrated how integration of puppets into an Art & Storytelling program allowed the child to regain a sense of agency and control in post-crisis contexts. The creative process enabled the child to work through trauma while developing adaptive coping mechanisms.

Cognitive-Behavioral and Psychoeducational Approaches

Cognitive-behavioral therapy adapted for children has strong empirical support for treating anxiety and trauma-related symptoms. Psychoeducational approaches that teach children about the normal stress response, validate their experiences, and provide concrete coping strategies are particularly effective (Lal and Gupta, 2025). Mental health education equips children with essential stress-management skills through evidence-based interventions such as coping skills training, emotional regulation practices, and resilience-building (Aderinkomi, 2024).

Specific programs such as the Los Angeles Unified School District's teletherapy initiative provided virtual mental health support to over a million students, significantly reducing stress and anxiety levels during the pandemic (Aderinkomi, 2024). The Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems (CSMHS) employ a multitiered approach, addressing prevention, early intervention, and support for severe mental health concerns in collaboration with community health professionals.

Trauma-Informed Approaches

Trauma-informed care represents a critical framework for schools supporting children exposed to geopolitical crises and media-related distress. A trauma-informed approach recognizes that many students may have experienced trauma and implements organizational practices that: Recognize the prevalence and impact of trauma, Understand the mechanisms by which trauma affects children's behavior, learning, and relationships, Create safe, trustworthy environments, Support child empowerment and choice, Employ culturally responsive practices.

Research on implementing trauma-informed support for children in Northern Ireland found that when services adopted trauma-informed approaches, 95% of people felt more confident in managing their health and wellbeing, and 94% felt more aware of support available to them (Lewis, 2025). A person-centered, timely support approach that meets children where they are is critical to addressing wellbeing needs and improving mental health.

Implementation Strategies: Supporting Greek Children Through School Social Work

Assessment and Screening Protocols

Effective support begins with comprehensive assessment. School social workers should implement systematic screening to identify children experiencing anxiety related to geopolitical crises or media exposure. Assessment should include:

Direct inquiry about media exposure: How much news are students consuming? From what sources? What specific events are causing concern?

Symptom screening: Use validated instruments to assess anxiety, depression, sleep disturbance, academic impact, and behavioral changes.

Risk and protective factors: Evaluate family stability, social support, previous trauma exposure, and coping resources.

Functional assessment: Determine how anxiety is affecting academic performance, peer relationships, and daily functioning.

Teachers and school social workers need more information on maintaining the mental health of high schoolers, with research indicating that 59.9% of teachers need more information on this topic (Dovhopola, Nabochenko and Kostenko, 2024). Providing professional development on trauma-informed assessment practices supports teachers in identifying students needing support.

Family Engagement and Communication

Family involvement is essential for supporting children during geopolitical crises. School social workers should: **Provide psychoeducation:** Educate parents about normal stress responses to world events and signs of problematic anxiety, **Offer guidance on media management:** Help parents understand healthy approaches to children's news consumption, **Facilitate family coping:** Work with families to develop family-based coping strategies and communication about fears, **Create parent support groups:** Provide spaces where parents can share concerns and learn from one another, **Maintain regular communication:** Keep families informed about their child's wellbeing and progress.

Research emphasizes the importance of good parent-child communication as a protective factor, with this variable identified as significant in predicting improved mental health outcomes (Magklara and Kyriakopoulos, 2023). During the early stages of the pandemic, one-third of parents reported their child's psychological health was considerably affected, highlighting both the impact of crises and the critical role of family support.

Media Literacy and Information Management Education

A critical intervention involves teaching children and families healthy approaches to news consumption and media literacy. Evidence demonstrates that information literacy is more useful than digital literacy, media literacy, or news literacy alone in preventing belief in misinformation (Mujayapura, Suryadi and Sardin, 2021). School social workers can facilitate classroom or small group sessions teaching **Critical thinking about sources:** How to evaluate news sources, identify bias, and distinguish between verified reporting and speculation, **Emotional regulation during news consumption:** Recognizing when news causes distress and implementing breaks or boundaries, **Selective exposure strategies:** Learning to choose when and how much news to consume, **Fact-checking skills:** Using reliable sources to verify information and identify misinformation, **Discussion facilitation:** Creating safe spaces to discuss worries about world events.

Research on news avoidance among university students found that information literacy education and academic support services should be developed with a differential approach, addressing both emotional and cognitive aspects of information consumption (Shehata, Rabah and Eldakar, 2026). This nuanced approach acknowledges that anxiety about news is partly cognitive (difficulty interpreting information) and partly emotional (managing distress in response to news).

School-Wide Mental Health Promotion

Beyond individual and family interventions, schools benefit from comprehensive mental health promotion efforts. The contribution of school social work to climate change education and mental health support provides a model for addressing contemporary concerns affecting youth (Wiedebusch, 2024). School social workers can: **Develop school-wide policies:** Create media consumption guidelines, mental health promotion plans, and crisis response protocols, **Implement universal prevention programs:** School-wide social-emotional learning, peer support programs, and mental health awareness activities, **Create brave spaces:** Develop forums where students can discuss world events, ask questions, and receive accurate information, **Promote connectedness:** Strengthen the sense of school community and peer relationships, which serve protective functions, **Coordinate with community partners:** Link school efforts with community mental health services, media literacy organizations, and crisis support resources.

The effectiveness of school-based interventions is enhanced when they employ a multicomponent, school-wide approach rather than isolated interventions.

Workforce Development and Training

Research indicates substantial gaps between need for services and workforce capacity. A "grow your own" policy pilot demonstrated that schools can address behavioral health workforce shortages by partnering with universities to train teachers and staff in school mental health (Bates *et al.*, 2024). Greek school systems might consider: **Professional development for teachers:** Training on recognizing anxiety symptoms, de-escalation techniques, and self-care, **Mental health training for school social workers:** Specialized training on trauma-informed care, geopolitical crisis response, and cultural competence, **Peer support training:** Equipping student leaders to recognize distressed peers and provide initial support, **Interdisciplinary collaboration:** Creating structured opportunities for school social workers, counselors, nurses, and teachers to coordinate care.

Key Evidence-Based Recommendations and Tables

Table 1: Anxiety Symptom Progression Timeline and Intervention Points

Timeline	Common Symptoms	Recommended Interventions	School Social Work Involvement
Immediate (Days-Week 1)	Acute stress response, heightened arousal, emotional reactivity	Psychoeducation about normal stress responses; Safety assessment	Rapid screening; crisis support availability
Early (Weeks 1-4)	Persistent anxiety, sleep disruption, academic concentration difficulties	Anxiety psychoeducation; coping skills training; Media limit setting	Individual counseling; family engagement
Ongoing (Weeks 4-12)	Chronic anxiety, peer conflict, academic decline	CBT-based interventions; peer support groups; Family counseling	Case management; school-based therapy
Extended (Months 3+)	Post-traumatic stress symptoms, depression, isolation	Trauma-informed therapy; multimodal intervention; Community linkage	Intensive intervention; treatment coordination

Table 2: School Social Worker Competencies for Geopolitical Crisis Response

Competency Domain	Essential Skills	Greek Context Relevance
Trauma-Informed Care	Understanding trauma impacts; Creating safety; Recognizing triggers	Critical for children with anxiety about regional tensions
Crisis Intervention	Immediate stabilization; Safety assessment; De-escalation	Essential for acute anxiety episodes triggered by news
Cultural Competence	Understanding diverse backgrounds; Language accessibility; Cultural validation	Important given Greek diversity and Turkish/Middle Eastern cultural connections
Media Literacy Education	Understanding media impacts; Teaching critical consumption	Directly applicable to news-related anxiety
Family Engagement	Culturally responsive family work; Communication; Advocacy	Central to comprehensive support for children
Emotional Regulation Teaching	Modeling; Reinforcement; Coaching;	Foundational skill for anxiety management

Assessment and Measurement	Screening tools; Outcome tracking; Progress monitoring	Necessary for determining intervention effectiveness
Self-Care and Resilience	Personal wellness practices; Preventing compassion fatigue; Professional boundaries	Critical for school social worker sustainability

CONCLUSION

A Coordinated Approach to Supporting Greek Children

Supporting Greek children navigating anxiety related to geopolitical events, particularly tensions involving Iran and regional actors, requires a comprehensive, coordinated approach spanning individual, family, school, and community levels. School social workers stand at the center of these efforts, uniquely positioned to assess, intervene, and coordinate services protecting children's mental health and well-being.

The evidence is clear that children's fears are influenced by global events, media exposure, and societal conditions (Leppma, Szente and Brosch, 2015). However, equally clear is that effective interventions—combining universal prevention, early intervention, and intensive support—can significantly reduce anxiety and build resilience. When schools implement multi-tiered systems of support with trained school social workers, provide families with psychoeducation and coping resources, teach children media literacy and emotional regulation, and create trauma-informed environments, children demonstrate improved mental health outcomes even amid ongoing global uncertainties.

For Greek schools, the path forward involves investing in school social work capacity, implementing evidence-based interventions, promoting healthy media literacy, and creating connected school communities where children can voice fears, receive accurate information, and develop confidence in their ability to navigate an uncertain world. By taking these steps, Greek schools can ensure that contemporary geopolitical events, while challenging, do not compromise the mental health and wellbeing of their young people.

Data Sources

The figures presented in this review synthesize data from the following sources: - Figure 1 (Comprehensive Analysis): Data derived from studies on war-affected children (Ukraine, Romanian border regions, hearing-impaired children in war zones), multi-tiered intervention effectiveness research, coping strategy efficacy studies, information-seeking impact research, and resilience factor contributions. - Figure 2 (Intervention Outcomes): Data drawn from school-based mental health access surveys, trauma symptom timeline studies, competency needs assessments, and media literacy intervention outcome research.

All visualizations represent evidence-based synthesis of research findings and should be considered illustrative of general patterns rather than specific prevalence rates for Greek populations, which would require localized epidemiological data.

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