

## ARTICLE

### Psychosocial emergency aid and crisis intervention in extraordinary environments with children and adolescents

#### *Emergency Kit Therapy assistance Dog*

Natural disasters, such as the recent earthquake in Croatia leave all affected, especially the children, in an extraordinary situation of shock, which can lead to intense feelings of insecurity and existential anxiety. The whole life literally falls apart and, from that moment on, life will never be the same again. The control over life has been abruptly lost.

Safety, which is so important in life, has been forever eclipsed by a massive external event.

All the strategies acquired in life no longer work and those affected fall into the bottomless pit. Such events can cause physical and psychological damage in our body system in the medium and long term. Not to mention, the material loss, which leads to a feeling of helplessness. The most diverse feelings alternate intensely within a very short time. The body can freeze in shock, fall silent and still, or be unrestrained, with each person reacting individually to these extraordinarily stressful situations.

Survivors of natural disasters may dissociate, and their perceptions are permanently altered. Those people often face crazy experiences on the mental level and therefore struggle to handle the situation. This can lead to the personal conviction of being crazy, because of the rapturous situation. If no handling and strategy with this event can be formed at this time, it is possible to develop post-traumatic stress disorders. These in turn can also be measured in the brain and affect subsequent generations (transgenerational trauma).

Trauma affects children, in particular. Their safe environment has been disrupted, rest and retreat are unstable and their resources are not included. The injured child's soul is not able to protect itself and, because of the extraordinary event, cannot receive individual and constructive support in its local environment. It has been shown that parents who are survivors of an extraordinary situation transfer their moods and feelings to their children; yet the children can be reached and stabilized in a world of chaos immediately with targeted emergency psychosocial assistance measures. It is our responsibility as psychosocial emergency workers to meet these children sensitively and mindfully, but also positively and with joyful courage. Children in exceptional situations are dependant on positive role models who show them that not the whole world – their world – consists of chaos.

In an environment of death and destruction, hope can be created. Hope for the future, which can be “good”. And if we, as human beings fail, there is still the opportunity to integrate a therapy assistance dog. A sustainable relationship between the child and the dog can be created, which leads to a deep connection even without using any words. Experiences show that in psychosocial emergency aid with children it is not necessary to understand the spoken language.



Buddy, the therapy assistance dog.  
Owner: Hagar Jaeggi

## *Empathy and giving comfort and courage at eye level is a state of mind!*

Stress reduction by a trained dog can result in a detectable release of oxytocin, which on a physiological level results in a sense of relaxation in stressful situations. In this atmosphere, post-traumatic stress disorder can be reduced. An existing basic affinity for dogs also leads to the inhibition of the production of cortisol. Cortisol is a stress hormone and promotes a wide variety of muscle pain and other long-term painful symptoms.

Country-specific indicators must be considered when selecting dogs. For example, in Croatia, therapy assistance dogs must be chosen very carefully based on appearance.

Due to the high population of street dogs, assistance dogs must be chosen, which do not trigger fear in this context.

Hagar Jäggi (pictured below) is working as a teacher in special classes for integrating young migrants in Switzerland. Furthermore, she is part of the psychosocial emergency care team, the Swiss International Therapy Dog Association. She has been involved in projects in the area of psychotraumatology, as well as in funeral direction for years. She has made it her own mission to support people in the management of psychotraumatic challenges by the integration of dogs in this process.



Buddy and Phoeby, Spanish water dog's.  
Owner: Hagar Jaeggi

For further information please contact: Hagar Jaeggi, [hagar@bluewin.ch](mailto:hagar@bluewin.ch), Zuerich, Switzerland.

Contribution by:  
Hagar Jaeggi

## ARTICLE

### Emergency Case Mobile Doll House “Guardian Angel”

Puppet shows are a useful tool in pedagogical trauma therapy to re-enact situations with the help of children's play, with or without words. Every child likes to play with figures from a dollhouse. There are also, contrary to popular belief, boys who like to play with them. I was able to make impressive experiences, especially with boys.

Here, the focus was not primarily on playing, but on cleaning up and putting things in order according to their ideas. In one particular case, which concerned an 11-year-old boy, I was very fascinated that he occupied himself for over 2 hours with the dollhouse and its inhabitants. Completely immersed and intensely, he repeatedly rearranged, placed figures in a new location and staged them in a new order. He rearranged the house until he was satisfied and everyone was in bed. This just brings me to a new case in the intercultural context. Only we Europeans think people sleep in bed in a bedroom. I already had a girl from Laos, who told me that they had beds since they started living in Switzerland, but they had never slept in them. The whole family would lay down to sleep on thin mattresses on the floor in the living room, like they used to in Laos at that time. Pretty tight between the sofa and the dining table, however, like this they would all sleep together in this room and during the day the thin mattresses were put away. When they have visitors, the family would never talk about their sleeping situation, since the parents and children do not sleep separately, in their own bedrooms, as is customary in Swiss culture. Therefore, these children are at home in different realities and bringing both together every day is a real achievement. Apparently, this gives them a piece of home in a foreign country, which also holds a great power.

Once, during a dollhouse play, I was allowed to watch a boy from Africa, who was over 12 years old, as he built his house out of a shoebox, which had also been in the therapy room. Impressive was his statement, that this house of his was now stable unlike the one in Africa. He has built a new secure place in Switzerland out of an unstable shoebox, visualizing that he feels safe here. In the next step, he created puppets, which would be allowed to live in his home in the future and what character traits these people should have. At the end he customized an angel to watch over the house, which he fastened on the roof. I find this special, because with this position the angel was tied to the house.

With these three examples I want to give the understanding that a valuation or a conception on how something should be, never comes into play in the pedagogical trauma therapy. Basically, everything exists and everything is possible. That is precisely the challenging task, that there is nothing that does not exist. In this context it is also clear that the therapist should not ask suggestive questions and should be very careful and even playful.

In the method of the "Guardian Angel", as described above for the boy from Africa, a play figure is deliberately offered as an angel. I have had countless conversations with children about guardian angels, it can be a natural need for the child to feel protected by an angel. Beyond religions, I have been asked countless times by children: "Do you believe in angels?" And I always answer in the same way: "Do you believe in them?", which is always followed by a "Yes".

Then I say, "If you believe in them, I believe in them. Is there something you want to tell me?" And this is the moment when interesting philosophic conversations about angels can be held and the children share their ideas and beliefs about angels with me as an adult. It is interesting that children never judge or devalue when it comes to this topic. I have never had a conversation with a child who did not have the hope that a superior force would protect him. "The Guardian Angel method" is based on this pillar.



First phase crisis intervention sleeping room

Another support is that when the child enters the therapy room, the dollhouse and figures are consciously presented in a box in such a way that all the materials are mixed up and the dollhouse is empty. The point of this controlled process is to create order and not to invite to a game with an already fancy furnished house. This would be misleading and suggestive, and outside the children's true way of life. It is quite possible that a child will first spend several sessions only arranging material and figures. This is very important and desirable even in order to define a sustainable new order in its life. It is also possible that as soon as everything is in order, the child empties everything into a box again, perhaps for multiple sessions, until an order manifests itself on the horizon like a streak of light, which can then be placed in the house.



"The focus was not on playing, but on cleaning up and putting things in order according to their ideas"

Through this the dollhouse becomes the inner stage of the child's trauma, the so-called stage of staging the traumatic situations. This way it should be possible to give the playing child the chance to believe in the good, in a functioning good power, which opposes the destruction or the chaos. This opportunity has the power to clean up, representative of the child perhaps this "Guardian Angel" and sometime later on, the child itself.

However, the playing child must never be encouraged to choose the "Guardian Angel" to play with. It should be spontaneous and never guided, because that would be manipulative and not in the best interest of the child. When the angel comes into play, it is also important to let the child play this character and not the therapist. Of course, it is nice when there is order and the final picture of the game ends up being that each figure and piece of furniture is back in the place it was before the event of the traumatic situation. There is no need to mention, that this cannot be achieved in only one session and further it is necessary that this chaos-play is really being given space and time by the therapist.

It is counterproductive to provide the traumatized child with beautiful new figures and furniture for the purpose of play therapy, as this does NOT represent the traumatizing situation. Once the angel is used in the process, further steps can be taken to encourage the child to create a safe place or figure to protect themselves.

In addition to the angel, characters from the fire department, police, paramedics or other supporting figures of the rescue service can also be included. Personally, I have had very nice experiences with dolls, which represent the police and paramedics.

When choosing the dollhouse, I would like to recommend, against my haptic claims, the dollhouse suitcase from Play Mobil. It is made of plastic and is ideal ON THE SPOT for mobile dollhouse use. After each use, it can be washed and disinfected; moreover, it is light in weight and handy. For this reason, these dollhouse cases could be used in stressful emergencies by a team in places all over the world such as refugee camps, local schools as well as in a natural disaster area.

The figures must be adapted on a sociocultural level to the countries in each case. The therapist should form his own opinion about the appearance of the angel; as it must be authentic for the therapist as well as the sociocultural indicators must also be taken into consideration here again.

None of the therapist's religious motives, intentions and feelings have any value in the method of the "Guardian Angel"! The "Guardian Angel" is a universal strong companion and no advertising medium for religious instrumentalization!

### Emergency kit: “Dolls with detachable limbs”

Here dolls, injured and intact, were used in nature-based trauma therapy. In the emergency backpack it also had an original first aid kit. The material is only laid out as already described. The child does not need to be encouraged to use it. In this way he can heal intrinsically and heal himself, the doll is a proxy here. Bandage all the mental or physical wounds it has suffered, do good to itself, be loving to itself and do self-care along the way. Here the child has chosen an intact, happy doll at the very beginning. To create an undisturbed, safe atmosphere, some dolls were locked in a prison made of small branches. This gives a safe working zone. You will be amazed at how absorbed children are on the path to healing. The trauma educator treated all the really hurt figures during this time and then arranged them as a group. After the initial treatment, all the dolls were marked with flowers, which is important. As there are no visible signs on the outside of the body, especially in the case of emotional boundary crossing, a healthy healing marking takes place. Figures with flowers are healthy on the inside. The figure in the prison was given emergency care at the end and then put back into the prison (also a representative for a mental state). In the final picture, however, the puppet was reintegrated into the group. A first small step towards reintegration has been taken.

After the emergency care, the doll, which has been treated by the child, is given a special place of importance. A safe place must be found, a beautiful place. In this case here, the child itself then carried the attended-to doll home and gave it a safe place in its home. The figure remains there until the next outreach session. She has not yet received a flower - that is another step on the path of healing. This is of course very beautiful - when the patient gives himself care and healing. So one day the therapist will become superfluous, that is what we are all working towards. Towards the healing empowerment of the children, who are enabled to do good for themselves. That they may experience that they themselves can have control of their lives, that life is good and that they can be effective in doing. This is the most beautiful gift for a trauma pedagogical working relationship with a child.

In the method described, 4-8 outreach sessions in the child's environment are necessary.

I just had the opportunity to talk to a colleague who has contacts in various refugee camps in Syria and Iraq about my emergency kit with detachable limbs. He talked to me about a refugee camp in Homs (Syria), which is unofficially controlled by the Islamic State. The children there are instrumentalized and instructed on how to cut off the heads of the infidels. The children are shown how the supposed enemy is punished and decapitated by just such dolls. Even how to hold a sword or how to make unbelievers get down on their knees. This technique seems to be effective, as westerners are threatened by children, around 7 or 8 years old, to run away when entering the camp, otherwise they would be beheaded.

This is quite a tragic starting point, which gives rise to the greatest concern. There are many children who had to watch their families get killed this way, or witnessed it on the way of escape. Many children in the war saw how limbs were severed from humans and animals. And



Self-care doll



“Dolls with detachable limbs”

you don't have to look that far, in Europe and the industrialized countries there are also children who were witnesses of accidents, assassinations or natural events in which body parts were cut off.

Even if some readers now think that this is too much for a therapeutic emergency case, I refer to my own experiences in crisis intervention with two boys under the age of 14, who witnessed exactly such images.

For them, what was seen was immediately worked out playfully in role-play. Just like that out of nowhere we were playing out situations, which reflected the horrors of death. My own children and I became extras in scenes that kept us up at night. For example, we were sitting on the floor playing a parlor game, and from one moment to the next, a situation arose in which a person had to give up his life by the sword at the hands of the Islamic State. The situations alternated between healing laughter, incredulous questioning and talking about the horrors, then crying at night and laughing again during the day while role-playing the situations.

I have never in my life laughed and cried so much at the same time.

Never again have I seen children who are so happy and resilient in the belief that there is good in life. The experiences with these two boys have inspired me to find a way to confront the horror and how to help children sustainably with the healing power of laughter, playing and dogs.

It has involuntarily brought me the best practice competences, which I was allowed to further develop little by little.

Just as the terrorist groups use the puppets for their propaganda, WE can use them for good, healing and transformation.

I also once worked in a kindergarten. There were a lot of broken dollhouse figures in the attic. When I took them out, it was the youngest children, who asked me to repair the missing arms and legs. Since this was not possible in terms of material, and I had to deny, we tended to the figures with bandages. The children did this devotedly and for hours. Later, at a school with 8- to 10-year-olds, I used exactly these dolls again. At first, the children were irritated and asked me: "Why do you have such dolls? They are broken!" To which I answered: "Well, have you never seen a person without an arm?"

Of course, they had and that settled the issue of physical impairment, and the kids loved the figurines. They made them wheelchairs, bandaged their head wounds, and more. And that's how this form of therapy took off, and then over the years the severed heads were added.

Again, with these figures, it is important that in the course of the process the dolls become healthy and whole again. One cannot undo what has happened, but nevertheless the soul can heal again. The dollhouse figures symbolize this on behalf of the victims. For this reason, there must be dollhouse figures where the limbs can be attached or detached.

For this sensitive topic, I do not recommend the hospital game, as for example from Playmobil and others similar tools. These figures should be soft and tactile, as to me, it seems that the haptics are extraordinarily important in this context.

Again, the basic attitude of the therapist must be to offer this form but never to directly ask a child to use it. The characters should be offered as a matter of course in the figure box or, depending on the course of the therapy, may also be staged inside the dollhouse.



Play as a victim of an experienced situation, Privat  
Selection 2016

Perhaps a child will save the life of a figure, representing himself, bandage and tend to the figure, give emergency aid and thus get his own healthy wings.

For further information please contact: Hagar Jaeggi, [hagar@bluewin.ch](mailto:hagar@bluewin.ch), Zuerich, Switzerland.

Contribution by:  
Hagar Jaeggi

Hagar Jäggi works as a teacher in special classes for the integration of young migrants in Switzerland. She is also part of the psychosocial emergency care team in the canton Solothurn and the Swiss Therapy Dog Association. For years she has been involved in projects in the field of education, psychotraumatology as well as funeral care. Furthermore, Hagar Jäggi has best practice skills in the emergency admission of minor unaccompanied children from war or escape. In particular, she has no fear of the subject of death. She has made it her mission to support people in overcoming psychotraumatic challenges - also especially by integrating dogs into this process.