
Welcoming a Child Refugee from Ukraine

~ Karen Imhof

This spring a fortunate opportunity arrived to welcome a little Ukrainian boy in our classroom just a few weeks after the war in the Ukraine had begun. While there are many children from different countries and cultures in our classroom, this was the first time that we were caring for a child who had escaped from war. This new little kindergartner was a particular gift to the class community. He gave teachers a much-needed opportunity to learn about the effects of war and trauma on the physical and psychological development of a young child and a chance to learn what can be done to help remediate trauma in a classroom setting.

This article shares not only what teachers have learned by caring for a young refugee but also describes the anthroposophical view of trauma as it forms the basis for the development of educational methods that have been employed by Waldorf educators to successfully care for traumatized and emotionally distressed children in crisis areas around the world. Through understanding trauma and its remediation according to this methodology, important insights can be gained for our work in a Waldorf kindergarten, and for the emotional healing and growth of traumatized and distressed children and families.

An anthroposophical view of trauma and emotional stress

Experiences that cause trauma and stress in refugee children include living in and fleeing violent situations, losing friends and family members, and undertaking dangerous journeys to safety. In addition, not knowing if one's status in a new country is permanent, living in poor housing with limited resources, and also living with family members who are suffering from trauma themselves can contribute to refugee children's daily stress and further aggravate the trauma they may have already experienced (UNHCR 2022).

The anthroposophical perspective on trauma looks at the effects that trauma has on bodily integration. When trauma or emotional stress occurs, the different levels of organization of the human being are no longer able to function or interact with each other in a healthy way, therefore causing

developmental blockages (Ruf 2013). Children who undergo trauma break off connection with their physical bodies and surroundings. As a result, their basic senses (touch, life, movement and balance) stop developing or remain immature.

Trauma and stress also cause the etheric or life body to detach. When the life body is not functioning properly, it cannot nurture, heal, and maintain the physical body. The organs still forming cannot grow and function normally. Consequently, the body's biological rhythms (sleep, digestion, breathing, heartbeat) are disturbed, which again undermines a child's whole sense of wellbeing.

Trauma and stress also influence the functioning of the astral body, the seat of our feelings and our soul life. When the astral body is affected by stress and trauma, the soul faculties of cognition (or thinking), emotion (feeling) and actions and behavior (willing) are disturbed and unable to function adequately. As a result, stressed and traumatized children often show insecure attachment behavior, emotional instability, and other disturbances of their emotional and social organization.

Finally, childhood trauma almost always disrupts the development of the child's individuality or the incarnation of the "I." A child's capacity for empathy, for establishing relationships and for developing self-trust and trust in others is impaired. The regulating effect that the "I" has on emotions and impulses is blocked. As a consequence, children are flooded by all kinds of impressions and fears, leaving them feeling exposed and overwhelmed (Ruf 2013, 21).

Clearly the effects of trauma and emotional stress on the human organization of a young child are severe and devastating. However, there are many factors that affect the depth of the trauma and determine a child's ability to cope with it. Not everybody who experiences trauma will develop long-term physical and psychological problems or post-traumatic stress symptoms. There is, indeed, a good chance that traumatic experiences can be resolved and even be transformed into an opportunity for inner growth. Experience shows that many methods of Waldorf education can bring healing and prevent post-traumatic stress when applied early enough. Waldorf

educators and eurythmists have been helpers in war and disaster areas around the world, effectively using educational methods based on anthroposophical human studies when caring for traumatized children and families. Termed “Emergency Pedagogy” or “Emergency Education,” these educational-artistic methods have proven to be very successful in activating and strengthening the child’s powers of self-healing to prevent, or at least assuage, pathological development (Ruf 2013, 69).

Many insights can be gained for our classroom work if teachers familiarize themselves with the practical tools for remediating trauma that Waldorf education offers. Many of the children coming to our classrooms exhibit forms of emotional stress and trauma and struggle with obstacles and difficult life situations, even without having experienced the traumatizing effects of a war. Emergency Education and curative Waldorf education are not completely new methods, but they constitute a deepened and more radical application of Waldorf pedagogy which can be used in any Waldorf classroom to the benefit of all children.

Pedagogical tools for trauma prevention and resolution

Trauma disrupts the incarnation process of a child by disturbing the integration and functioning of the different levels of the fourfold human being. Therefore, the holistic stabilization of traumatized children also has to work with all four levels of the human organization. Many of the therapeutic methods used for trauma remediation are already well known and available to us in our classroom work. What we need to do is to adapt them to the specific needs of the child and be open to working with them in new and unconventional ways.

Physical stabilization

Traumatized children have to feel physically safe because they need to reconnect with their physical bodies. This means that children need to be brought into a space where their physical needs are met and where they can connect safely with the surroundings. Schools in general and Waldorf schools in particular

are ideal spaces for young refugees. Research has shown that regular school attendance by itself can help to resolve trauma in young refugees: “School and most importantly the relationships formed at school can be an incredibly stabilizing, positive and nurturing experience in a refugee child’s life, which can help them move on from more challenging times. Paired with supportive help at home or in out-of-school life ... many refugee children and students will overcome the challenges they are experiencing without additional help” (UNHCR 2022). It is of utmost importance that our schools are open to refugee children, and that we integrate them into a stable classroom rhythm and routine as early as possible.

The stabilizing effect of regular school attendance was visible with this child right away. The little boy loved to come to school every morning, despite the fact that the structure and rhythm of the classroom was new to him and there was a lot he had to learn. When his mother came to visit the classroom one day, he proudly showed her around, his face beaming with joy. He had made the classroom his home away from home. Knowing that the classroom always looks the same every morning must have been a great relief after experiencing the loss of his home and moving to a different country. In the initial days after his arrival, he also saw the older children in the school building or the administrators in their offices. Learning that the school is a safe space for everyone and everybody has a place there to work, learn, and play was important for his feeling of safety and to rebuild his trust in the world.

Somatic stabilization

After regaining a feeling of security in a safe space, traumatized children have to reconnect with their bodies again. To restore sensory integration after shock or trauma requires nurturing the foundational senses. The senses of balance, proprioception, life, and touch are disturbed in almost all traumatized children. Emergency Education places a particular emphasis on nurturing the sense of touch because the protective sheeting of the skin as the organ for touch makes us feel safe in our bodies. Providing traumatized children with sensory experiences can reconnect them with their bodies and restore their

body awareness. However, while massage and applying gentle pressure on a child's skin can release blockages and release frozen energies, these applications can also cause adverse reactions. Touching the body of a traumatized child can possibly trigger a memory of physical violence (Siebert 2020, 25f.).

Additionally, it is also necessary to nurture the life processes. Warmth, healthy nutrition, and a strong daily rhythm can help traumatized children reconnect with their bodies. Some families in our classroom donated extra clothes, and a set of warm clothes and shoes were in the cubby of our little friend so that extra warm layers were always readily available.

Traumatized children lose their orientation and rhythmical bodily organization, disturbing their sense of well-being. Therefore, anthroposophic trauma therapy places a strong emphasis on offering clear time structures to traumatized children. A structured school day with strong rhythms and rituals conveys safety and restores the bodily rhythms. It takes a while to reestablish a regular rhythm of resting and eating when working with a traumatized child since many of them show sleeping and eating disorders. Developing a smaller rhythm within the general rhythm and offering smaller snacks at regular times outside of the regular kindergarten snack rhythm helped to bring our new kindergartner into the classroom rhythm.

Rest does not come easily to a traumatized child and overstimulation happens quickly. Regular breaks throughout the day—a quiet moment on the lap of a teacher or a moment of handwork or drawing away from the play—were needed to reduce his fear of resting. During our short rest time in the morning, a special sleeping house or a secluded space under a table covered with silks offered the protection needed to make him feel safe. During the afternoon nap time, rhythmical movement helped to settle him. The dedicated co-teacher learned that when she carried him on her back and walked around the classroom for a while, he was able to settle for a nap more easily. Similarly, sitting in the rocking chair for a bit when he felt overstimulated also helped to calm him.

Regression is part of trauma and it is necessary to adjust expectations accordingly. How can a young child who has just lost all of his playthings happily clean up the classroom toys after play, or share those classroom toys with another friend? Teachers learned quickly that extra help was needed during play and transition times. Cleanup went a lot better when the

child had a preview of what was going to happen every day. The close presence of a teacher was reassuring and needed during a transition. Furthermore, the trauma-induced lack of sensory integration and the disturbed “I” incarnation make it difficult for emotionally stressed children to cope with too many external stimuli. Not only the transitions but every free play situation had to be carefully observed by teachers. Creating a safe space within the classroom, where he was allowed to play exclusively with some of the classroom toys, helped to restore his feeling of safety. When overstimulation occurred, stepping outside the classroom for a moment or visiting the nursery classroom to watch the calmer and dreamier play of the younger children helped to soothe his overtaxed senses and restore peace again.

Formative rhythmic movement exercises are very helpful to restore the disrupted biorhythm of traumatized children. Musical rhythm exercises that require a crossing of the midline strengthen the connection between the two hemispheres of the brain, which often become disconnected during trauma. Furthermore, eurythmy helps to restore the connection between body and soul and release the blockages of trauma. Yet moving together in close proximity with other children can be challenging because it requires trust in the others—an area that is also disturbed by trauma. The times that this child was able to join for eurythmy and circle were few, but the difference that it made for the rest of his school day was visible. However, there was good success offering finger games and clapping games outside of circle time and working with movement during time outside. Emergency Education emphasizes the importance of all physical movement as a way to free energies that have become frozen through a traumatic experience. Being outside and moving freely in nature, offering rope jumping and skipping exercises in addition to movement games, are particularly helpful. Being outside in nature and moving around freely was where this boy was the happiest. When he was upset or angry, walking up and down the stairs in the school building was most helpful to bring him back into his body.

Restoring social relations

Because trauma causes children to lose trust in the world and people around them, their attachment behavior becomes loose or insecure. They often take refuge in oppositional behavior or activate

their fight-or-flight response. Emergency Education emphasizes the importance of adult role models who provide the children with healing images and experiences that are needed to restore their trust in the world and themselves.

Restoring trust in oneself is the basis for trusting others. Traumatized children are plagued with feelings of helplessness. Replacing this helpless feeling with experience that raises their self-confidence helps them to heal. Artistic activities and handwork make traumatized children realize that they have an effect on the world and that they can take hold of their own life again. Drawing, painting, and modeling can also help children express feelings, thoughts and fears that they might be unable to speak about. Storytelling that provides healing pictures to replace the horrible images of war is a proven tool of trauma pedagogy. It was a blessing that this child spoke and understood basic English. He could listen to and understand the puppet plays and stories told in the classroom. He was also a very skilled artist and enjoyed drawing and painting. While his mother reported that his drawings at home initially showed war scenes, helicopters and fire, his drawings in school depicted mostly houses, trees and birds—a hopeful sign that he had processed some of his negative experiences. He also greatly enjoyed participating in handwork projects. Because flexible fingers restore and enhance the formation of synapses and neuronal networks in both halves of the brain, handwork and string games are well-known therapeutic tools in the work with traumatized children. To create something real with his own hands to bring home was a wonderful experience for a child who had just lost all of his belongings.

We know the importance that imitation plays in our anthroposophical understanding of child development; teachers must be worthy models for imitation. When working with a traumatized child, teachers need to examine themselves and their relationship with others extra carefully. A child who has lost trust in others particularly needs to experience harmony, trust and acceptance in his surroundings. The teachers took working with this special child as an opportunity for personal growth—a chance to examine personal biases and to do the inner work that is needed when caring for a young refugee. A willingness to work completely flexibly and to shift activities and roles according to the needs of the individual child and group are basic prerequisites

for successfully working with a traumatized child. Critical reflection upon a teacher's own biography is equally important. "If helpers don't sufficiently reflect on their biographical experiences and motives, there is a possibility that traumatized girls and boys are used by professional helpers to work through their own trauma. Sometimes the wish to help other people is an attempt to heal oneself" (Ruf 2013, 175). Moments of self-care and taking breaks from stressful situations are essential in order to remain a reliable helper.

What about the others?

Rudolf Steiner demanded repeatedly that teachers take a true interest in individual children (especially those who need extra help) and observe them specifically in all of their aspects. He emphasized that only then will an exact understanding of the child be possible. This deepened relationship, filled with the powers of love, would put the individual child at the center of the teacher's consciousness, even in a large class. "If you thus enter lovingly into the kind of human insight presented here, you will soon find it possible to have the needed attention for every child, even in a class with many people" (Steiner, GA 310, quoted in Selg 2008, 21). The question for the teacher is how to turn the individual work of healing a traumatized child into a learning experience for all the children in the classroom.

Steiner describes how children absorb morality through language, actions, and through their experiences of gratitude. If children perceive meaningful gestures, he says, a feeling of gratitude arises in them, forming the foundation for devotion and love (Steiner 2003, 274, 275; Steiner 2004, 114f.). Can our modeling of unconditioned acceptance and compassion for a refugee child help to build morality in all the kindergarten children?

Working with a traumatized child requires teachers to modify routines and rules and to also devote more attention to an individual child. To do this, teachers had to ask more of themselves and had to ask more of the children too. It was wonderful to see how the other children lived up to the higher expectations set for them. From the beginning teachers explained to the children that their new friend would need help to learn kindergarten ways. While teachers did their best to model compassion and acceptance, it was heartwarming to see how the children tried to work along with this intention. They welcomed the boy into

the group and took on the task of teaching him what they already knew. Surely there were conflicts, but little gestures of the children showed that something had shifted in their consciousness. One day when our friend had a particularly hard time getting dressed to go to the park, a little girl approached him, stretched out her hands, and said, "Come to the park with us. You are happy there." This invitation was all that was needed for him to get ready. Gratefully he took her hand and walked out the door with her. Many friends lent a helping hand to him when a transition was not going well. During a playtime conflict, one little boy showed patience with his rough behavior, saying, "It is okay, he is a good friend and he will learn how to play gentle soon."

By learning about his needs, classmates also learned to take care of their own needs more independently. Accepting the need to give a friend more space during play taught them to reconsider their own needs for space. One child who was particularly noise-sensitive learned to find a quiet place in the classroom all by himself when it became too loud for him. Some children who needed a teacher's attention when doing chores or needed an extra reminder to clean up were suddenly able to do it by themselves. Everyone was able to do circle together even when there was distraction. This friend had come to help us rise to a higher level of self-competence and compassion.

Conclusion

As devastating and destructive as trauma is for the overall health of a child, we also know from mainstream and anthroposophically-informed research that trauma can be prevented or resolved when addressed in a timely and systematic manner. All schools, but particularly Waldorf schools, can be places for healing traumatic experiences in young children. It is up to us to open ourselves to this experience and to enhance and deepen our understanding of Waldorf trauma education. This will not only benefit those children escaping from war and disaster. Trauma has many faces and can occur on many levels of the human organization. Developing an eye for the signs of childhood trauma can help many children in our care. ♦

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