

# tjejzonen

Project Report 2012

Chat Sister – Supportive relationships online  
over chat in a non-profit organization



tjejzonen

CHILDHOOD

WORLD CHILDHOOD FOUNDATION

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## INTRODUCTION

This report is part of the project Supportive Relationships online at Tjejzonen and can be found at: [www.tjejzonen.se](http://www.tjejzonen.se).

The project Supportive Relationships online has been financed by the World Childhood Foundation, and has enabled Tjejzonen to study in depth the Big Sister Chat project to structure and further develop it. Thanks to this project, we can now also spread knowledge and experience about supportive relationships via chat in non-profit organizations.

### Acknowledgements

We give a big thank you to the Big Sisters and Little Sisters for their generous contribution of material and reflections regarding the project. We would also like to thank the proofreaders Lotta Zetterqvist and Magnus Munkesjö. A big thank you to all the colleagues at Tjejzonen and the World Childhood Foundation and to David Clinton for ideas of great value and for acting as a sounding board.

### Purpose

The purpose of the project has been to put into words and develop a sustainable, quality controlled support organization, and to make it possible economically. To the extent that it is possible, the project should benefit the target group, but at the same time it should meet the needs of the volunteers and the surrounding world. The purpose has also been to spread the benefit of our results to other organizations and activities to contribute to the development of support for young people online.

### Procedure and ethical reflections

The material that forms the basis of the report has been collected from the Chat Sister project at Tjejzonen and consists of:

- 8 Little Sisters answered a questionnaire before the relationship with the Chat Sister began
- 8 Little Sisters answered an evaluation when the relationship with the Chat Sister was finished
- 3 Little Sisters were interviewed via chat by the project leader when the relationship with the Chat Sister was finished
- 11 Big Sisters with a good spread of age and experience as Big Sisters were interviewed by the project leader, using the semi-structured method.

- 3 Big Sisters, together with the project leader, evaluated the project when the relationship with the Chat Sister was finished.
- Interviews and critical reflections took place with 2 of the coordinators for the Chat Sister project
- An interview and critical reflections also took place with a coordinator for the Big Sister live-project
- Chat logs from 40 Big Sisters that in all have been in contact with 52 Little Sisters. 14 of these Little Sisters still have ongoing contact with a Big Sister; these will end in the autumn of 2012. The relationships range from a minimum of 2 chats to 71 chats/relationship at the most - in all 274 chat logs. The chat logs have been analyzed in every Chat Sister relationship (start, middle and ending). 14 of the Big Sisters have been coordinated by the project leader.
- Group instructions took place on 8 occasions
- Networking and exchange of experience with other similar organizations like Mentor Sverige and United Sisters.
- Research and literature on this subject and other related subjects

The material has then been studied, reflected upon and problematized. After that, it has been elaborated into a project report in narrative form. This is not a scientific report but a project report written by the project leader, who is employed by Tjejzonen and very familiar with the activities at Tjejzonen.

The quotes in this report have been anonymized and collected from the chat logs of the project. After each chat the Big Sisters send in a report with the chat log. The coordinator then reads the chat log and gives feedback and, if needed, further guidance to the Big Sister. Information about this is given to the target group on the homepage: "Extracts from chats can, in anonymized form, be used for educational purposes, guidance and research."

All of the people interviewed have been asked and have agreed that their quotes may be used so long as they remain anonymous.

## What is chat?

This section can also be found in a slightly different version in the earlier project report "Like writing to a diary that answers - chat development at Tjejjonen" Munkesjö, 2011. (Original title: "Som att skriva i en dagbok som svarar – Chattutveckling på Tjejjonen").

The word chat means to speak or babble. By the Swedish Academy, chat is referred to as: "Dialog in writing in real time between Internet users". Accordingly, it is a question of social interaction online. It is like a kind of quick e-mailing where the dialog is shown and constantly updated in real time. It is possible to chat both in private and in groups. It is also possible to have many private chat sessions running at the same time, where only the intended recipient may see their own conversation. When chatting in groups, everyone can see everything that is written in a joint chat log.

Chatting is done over different types of chat programs: either via freestanding ones; the most common ones being Windows Live Messenger and Skype; or via social networks such as Facebook, as well as via webpages such as Tjejjonen.se

Chatting is an interactive way of communicating. The written language used when chatting is close to spoken language, rules for spelling and grammar is often sacrificed when making the communication more conversation-like. The tempo of the chat communication reflect the flow of the spoken word - phrases are more common than sentences.

Chat communication:

*The words* - vocabulary, which words are used, how these are written, how they are spelled.

*Punctuation* – punctuation marks are often used to mark prosody (the melody and dynamic of the spoken word) e.g. Help!!!!!! , I.don't.want.to., maybe...

*Symbols* - symbols for feelings; so called Smileys ☺

*Asterisks* - asterisks are used to mark non-verbal actions, e.g. \*crying\*, \*laughing\*, and to correct spelling mistakes.

*Tempo and rhythm* – how quickly something is written, the amount of text that is being sent at the same time, the flow of what is being written, breaks of the flow by pauses or interruptions.

*Links and documents* – links and documents that can be attached into the chat conversation, the reaction and response to these.

## How to understand the interpersonal aspect of chat communication

- :) Perfect!!! the first line !!! Cool :) ohhh how sweet of her  
<3  
-Yees :D <3

To understand how chatting can work as a way of communication in a supportive relationship, it is worth taking a closer look at how young people use the internet. The usage and experience of the internet generally differ between generations.

In Sweden today kids start using the internet as early as at the age of three. For a start they play games but as they get older, the internet is used more for social interaction such as blogs, social media, chat programs, video calls, and interactive games. The world online and the world offline start to merge, and the people that they spend time with offline they also spend time with online.

Young people today can be called the "messenger generation" or "native-born" internet users (Nationellt IT-användarcentrum, 2009). It is also common to do many things at the same time:

- *you know, I'm trying to do my hair chat in three places and answer texts at the same time ha ha*
- *Wow major multi tasking!*

Those who aren't "native-born" internet users, (people 25+ of age) are "immigrated" internet users and can be called the "e-mail generation" (Nationellt IT-användarcentrum, 2009). To strain it: they use the internet when they have an errand, for example looking for information, reading papers, e-mailing, paying bills etc. Naturally, the reality is more complicated than that. At Tjejzonen we often see that the "e-mail generation" experience difficulties in understanding that a close and supportive relationship can take place in a chat and be founded on chat communication. Sometimes this can be a surprise for both Big Sisters and Little Sisters at Tjejzonen:

LS: Sometimes I don't know what I would have done without you. You mean so much to me. hope you know that 😊❤️

SS: OHHH!!!! The same to you. The same to you. You mean so much to me too. It's so great to have you as Little sister, that it's you and no one else.

LS: thanks 😊  
and the same to you. didn't really believe in this big sister-thing, and then I got you.  
😊

Sometimes the chat sisters at Tjejzonen experience that it is not really “for real”, because of the built-in distance that exists when communication is done with words and symbols, instead of body and voice:

BS: i'm so glad that you dare telling me how you feel.

LS: i don't dare telling..

BS: what do you mean? you are telling me now?

LS:no, i'm writing it.

For the target group at Tjejzonen and according to recent research in the field (Löfberg, Aspán 2011), it seems like chat communication can be an important way of minimizing shame and increasing control of the communication with the surrounding world. Many of the Little Sisters have said that it is “like writing to a diary that answers”, and that they experience the chat sisterhood as a kind of self-medication. The chat sister conversation becomes a place where the Little Sisters receive confirmation, and where they are listened to from their own experiences and inner reality, as opposed to what the outer, local world signalize as real.

## A potential room

*LS: with you it's easier because you know my name and my secrets you know the inner me  
but at the end of the day you don't know my outside but my parents on the other hand only know my outside and not the inner me and when they get to see the inner me it almost feels like i'm naked like i don't have any secrets that can protect me*

The British doctor and psychoanalyst Donald Woods Winnicott (1896-1971) is famous for his theories about “transitional object” and “transitional space” (Winnicott, 2003). If we borrow this theory construction we can imagine the chat sister relationship as a kind of “transitional space”. This transitional space appears between the Sisters in the chat communication. The chat conversation becomes a place where their inner mental images of each other and themselves meet and can be confirmed or recreated. The empowerment, the control, and to be hidden both physically and in hearing from the Big Sister seems to open up for this transitional space and potential room. Sometimes it is experienced as the only place where the inner self can be manifested:

*LS: and then it is... well.. hard to find someone to talk to.. don't really dare ...  
BS: ok...so you wish you could talk to them (the family, reds anm.) or someone else?!  
LS: not with them, but with someone absolutely! but it's so hard to trust.. I rather isolated myself.. for me you are so important! the feelings pile up in my head .. put an end to everything.. But I put on a smile and look happy for everyone...*

It is not unusual that the Sisters fantasize about what it would be like to meet offline. The idea of the other one lives its own life in the unconscious and changes all the time in the communication because there is no offline-picture to hold on to:

*LS:haha you have no idea what I sound like when I talk ;) hibi  
a bit scary..  
BS:scary? in what way?  
LS: no.. but you know!?! if we ever meet you might be chocked :O ;) and like " ooo damn, this is not gonna work.... "  
BS: maybe YOU would be chocked!  
LS: ;D habaha yes maybe XD*

However, sometimes that potential room that the sisters seem to long for is not created. The distancing might increase and in the end the feeling that it is useless to continue takes over:

*Hello.*

*A problem has come up.. the conversations with my chat sister aren't going very well, it's not her fault in any way, she really tries and she is great! The problem is that it's really hard for me to talk about what I think and feel, for some reason - even when it's on a chat. During our conversation yesterday I panicked when I couldn't write what I was feeling - and that made it impossible for me to write anything at all to her. This feels so strange and stupid, because she is really trying and I can't do it...*

*Regards XXX*

This e-mail was sent to the coordinator from a Little sister when the relationship with the chat sister had lasted almost a year. It is possible that the fact that the chat relationships was coming to an end and the fear of separation could have accentuated the distancing even more.

Many would argue that there doesn't seem to be a big difference between chat conversations and live conversations, or between online and offline relationships. After going through thousands of chat logs (both on-call chats and sister chats) dating back from 2007, when Tjejzonen started the chats, it's impossible not to agree – same, same but different! The motivation and longing for interaction and development in interpersonal relationships seem to be the same irrespective of the way we communicate.

This strong motivation for interaction that the chat sisters possess seem to bridge over communicative limitations (such as not being able to see or hear each other while chatting). By way of chat communication, the Chat Sisters create real and close relationships. Only the conditions are different, and they challenge our creativity and conception of how interpersonal communication and interaction should be. Research by Löfberg and Aspán (2011) and McKenna (McKenna, Bargh (2000) and McKenna, Green, Gleason (2002)), support this theory.

The humor, warmth and empathy that occur in the chat communication between the Sisters feel rich and real (ed: capital letters symbolize screaming):

*IT FEELS LIKE CHRISTMAS HAS BEEN NOTHING  
BUT A BIG SETBACK*

*sorry*

*accidentally pressed caps lock hehe*

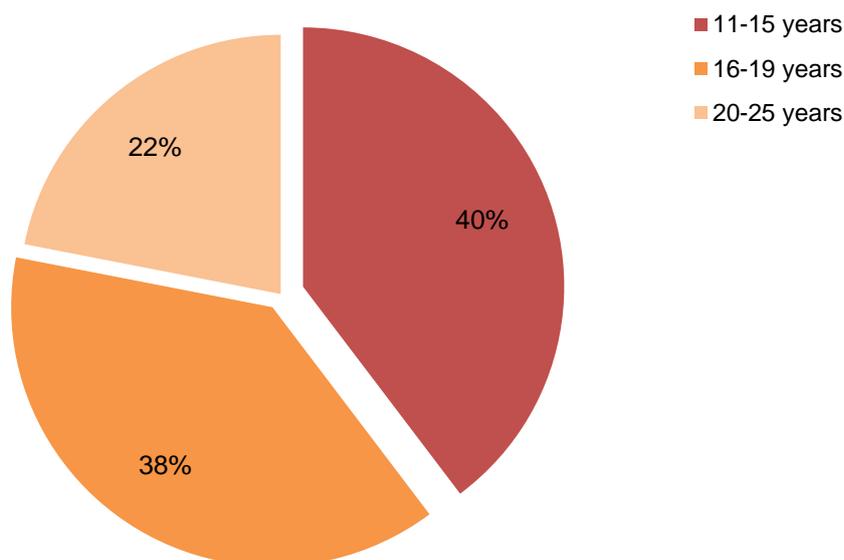
## THE CHAT SISTERS

### The Little Sisters

*Hi! I was thinking about this chat sister thing ... how do you get one? Up to what age? I think it might be good for me.. I don't really feel like I have anyone to talk to about stuff that's hard... and to talk to someone in real life would just be too hard / impossible.. it would be nice to share my problems with someone...*

All the girls that seek a Chat Sister take the first step themselves by sending an e-mail to Tjejzonen. They often have the need of “someone to talk to”. All of the target group (12-25 years) seek Chat Sisters, but we also hear from girls as young as 10 years old and as “old” as 28 years old. The Little Sisters are split up according to fig 1, below:

Fig 1



A relatively large number of the Little Sisters that sign up back out before the relationship with the sister has begun. In the age group 11-15 years 45% of the girls drop out. We believe that decisive factors for this are:

- There is a great need for Chat Sisters, greater than what Tjejzonen can meet with the economic resources of today. Consequently, there is almost always a queue and the waiting time varies from 1 week up to 6 months depending on the amount of active Big Sisters at the time. The younger Little Sisters don't seem to have the patience to wait more than 2-3 weeks for a Big Sister, unlike the older Little Sisters that are prepared to wait a little longer.

- The need for a Big Sister seems to change more quickly for the younger Little Sisters.
- The younger Little Sisters seem more prone to forgetting appointments and answering e-mails.
- Generally speaking, the younger Little Sisters don't have the same complex of problems as the older ones. The Little Sisters with more complex problems and greater suffering tend to stay longer and have a more lasting and continuous relationship. This is not so for the Little Sisters with mental disorders or a family situation that makes it hard for them to be punctual and stick to agreements.

A Chat Sister relationship ranges from two chats (the shortest relationship) to 73 chats (the longest). On the average, around 60% of the Chat Sister relationships last between 6 months and a year, the rest for a shorter period of time. If the number of conversations are spread out equally, we see 15-17 conversations/ relationship as an average.

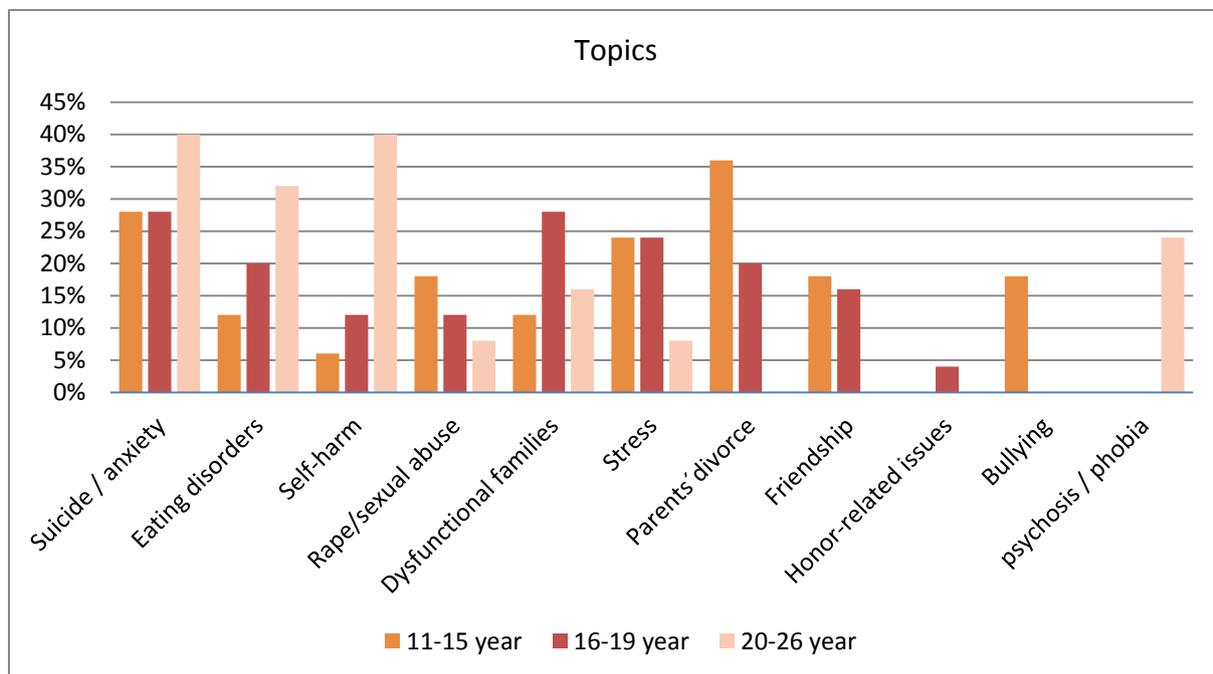
Out of the contact via chat, the Sisters also have contact via e-mail to book or change the time for a chat. Some Little Sisters also use the e-mail to "get their thoughts out of their system" and to regulate anxiety in between the chats, or to share texts and pictures with the Big Sister. There are no statistics of the number of e-mails but supposedly it's about the same as for the Big Sisters Webcam; about 16 e-mails per relationship. When the volunteers receive their training, it is recommended that e-mail communication is sparse. This is because e-mails tend to be many if no limit is drawn.

## Conversation topics

The conversation topics differ a bit between the age groups. The younger Little Sisters talk about parents' divorce, stress in school, and bullying to a greater extent than the older ones. The older Sisters tend to talk more about anxiety, suicidal behavior, self-harm, eating disorders, and mental illness. All in all the most common conversation topics for the Little Sisters are anxiety/suicidal behavior and eating disorders.

Fig 2 shows how many percent of the conversations that contain a specific topic. However, many of the conversations contain several topics:

Fig 2



Considering the complex of problems that exist in all the Little Sisters, and the fact that the training and experience of the Big Sisters vary and often don't have a nursing ground, the relationships often function very well, and seem to give meaning to both parties. It is possible to describe these relationships as therapeutic. Let us look at similarities and differences from talk therapy:

### Similarities

- Continuity and clarity regarding time
- Clear conditions for both parties
- Professional approach (critical reflection, focus on the Little sister and no contact in private)
- Professional supervisor who has the overall responsibility
- The relationship often seems to have a therapeutic effect; it stimulates well-functioning relationships and increases the ability to seek and receive professional help, it lowers the risk for suicide and reduces anxiety and gives the Little sister greater psychological flexibility.

## Differences

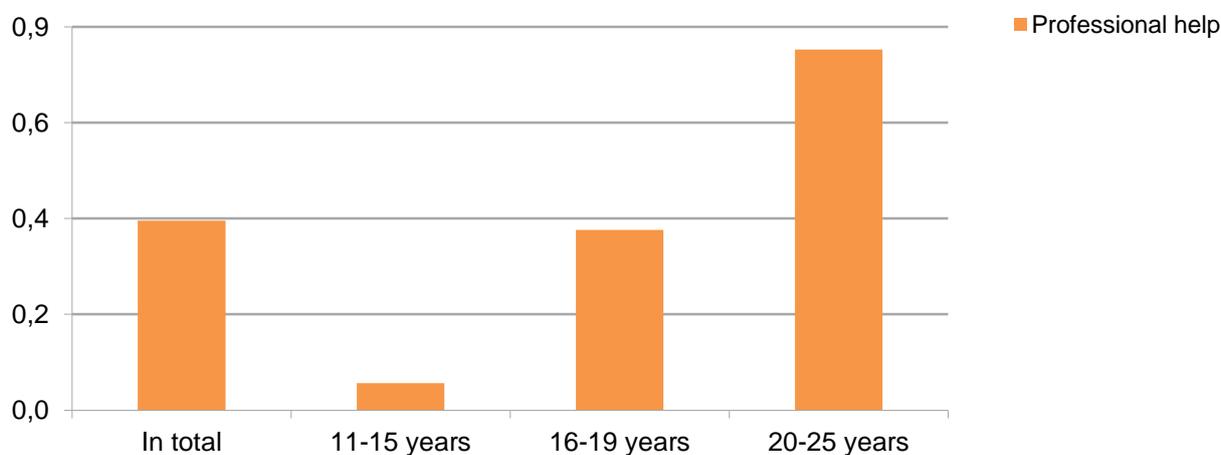
- The Big Sisters are compassionate human beings that engage themselves in the project without payment. They usually don't have therapeutic training or experience.
- The metaphor "Big Sister" raises expectations of a personal and familiar relationship.
- There are no expectations of a therapeutic process or therapeutic objectives.
- The volunteer uses her personality and interaction in the relationship - not professional interventions and methods.
- The fact that the Big Sisters work for free and not as hired talk therapists or counsellors seems to increase the trust and the positive expectations for the Little Sisters.
- The Chat Sister relationship seems to play a complementary role for both parties. It is not of decisive importance but often experienced as enriching and as increasing the quality of life.

By way of offering the target group (even those with complex problems) a Chat Sister relationships are created. These relationships are based on an idea of empathy and Big Sisterhood. This strives for equality and mutuality where the "only" goal is intersubjectivity in the form of conversations, interaction, and relationship. We think that this contributes to the increase in healing space and anxiety relief that the target group experiences.

## The Little Sisters and health care

Slightly more than 40 % of the Little Sisters state in the chats that they are in contact with professionals in health care and/or social services. Fig 3 shows percentage that received professional help, grouped by age: 11-15, 16-19, and 20-25:

Fig 3



We can see that almost all of the older Little Sisters receive professional help in their local environment. The contact with the Chat Sister seems to satisfy a different kind of need than other professional contacts. Factors here might be:

- Continuity – To create and maintain a supportive relationship over time. Stability and continuity are important factors for being able to enter into altering processes. Many of the Little Sisters have brief contacts (from one single occasion to a couple of months) with therapists and contacts during the year that the relationship with the Chat Sister takes place.
- Meetings to manage resources – Conversations and meetings with adults where no demands are made on the Little Sister, who is allowed space without fear of judgement. The experience of being treated as a human being and not as a problem that needs solving, is important for the Little Sisters. Many of the Little Sisters of Tjezonen seem to lack these kinds of meetings in the contact with health care and social services.
- Conception of people vs. professionals - The trust and will to share inner feelings in sensitive conversations seem to increase in non-profit environments where there is nothing but the feeling of well-being for the Big Sister (i.e. nobody is employed or gets paid).
- A kind of "co-therapist" or a "social skills training function" – below is an excerpt from a chat report by a Big Sister:

*Something that was extra fun was that Little Sister had seen her therapist. She had been given the task to write down things she did and how happy or sad she felt while she was doing them. She said it felt ridiculous but then we started laughing about it and decided to both write down or memorize things till next time and tell each other how happy or sad we had been feeling on a scale from 1 - 5 smilies :) Little Sister was really glad that I wanted to do it too because then she felt a lot more motivated to do it. It was a great bit of our conversation.*

- Internet – remaining anonymous behind a computer allows the Little Sister to feel safe in the familiar surroundings of her home, and increases her courage and her will to talk openly about tough and shameful topics. Here is an example from a chat:

*BS: what do you mean by psychologist-feeling?*

*LS: That they start asking and don't understand. I get insecure and don't feel safe.. I feel forced to speak.*

*BS: I see. so what is it that you are afraid of then, you think?*

*LS: the whole situation I get scared when I don't feel safe..*

*BS: yes, I really understand that feeling and how it can come up but sometimes when you feel scared and can't define what it is that you are afraid of it can be good to think about it a little more*

*what's the worst that can happen, you think, right then and there when you talk and get scared?*

*LS: Everything.. All the questions, that feeling inside that just grows... the panic*

*BS: do you feel like that now when we talk? I ask a lot of questions too..*

*LS: no. Because I'm home and feel safe in my bed.*

*BS: maybe it would work to chat with a psychologist?*

*LS: Sure the questions.. yes maybe*



According to research about relationships online by McKenna and colleagues (2002), the possibility of establishing close relationships increases and is easier online, and that in itself increases the possibility of establishing close relationships offline. In that way, we can look at online relationships as beneficial on their own, but also as precursor to forming relationships offline.

## **The Big Sisters**

All the volunteers that become Chat Sisters are recruited, trained, and coordinated according to a model that Tjeizonen has developed. The volunteers are between 20 & 37 years old, and most of them have an academic degree or are studying at university. Most of them are full time employees or full time students. They want to make a contribution despite the fact that they are in the middle of their careers, and may not have time to spare.

E-mail from a volunteer wanting to be a Chat Sister:

*I want to listen and to be someone who a Little Sister can talk to. To be a Chat Sister would fit into my hectic lifestyle.*

The interviews and evaluations made by the volunteers show a few important factors that contribute to the volunteers choosing to be a Chat Sister:

- The flexibility: the Big Sisters can chat with the Little Sister anywhere, as long as they have a computer/smartphone and an internet connection.
- The defined mission: conversation one hour a week (time is agreed upon with the Little Sister via e-mail) for up to a year with breaks for summer and Christmas.
- The shared responsibility: Tjeizonen provides coordination and guidance, and helps out when the volunteer cannot take care of the Little Sister alone and assistance is needed, such as contact social services or psychiatric professionals.
- To be part of an activity that feels meaningful and in an organization that is perceived as safe and professional.

## **The approach of the Big Sisters**

### **A personal reflection on how to be a fellow human being**

Maria (the project leader) and Lotta (director at Tjeizonen) were in a networking meeting with an organization that was planning to start their own Chat project and were looking for inspiration and wanted to hear about our experiences from working with support online. Suddenly Maria heard herself say:

*The work that the volunteers do is incredible! And most often it is done without professional training or experience; it's simply the act of being a fellow human being.*

Maria reflected upon what she had said and upon the expectations put on amateurs versus experts from society. It became evident that she also had the feeling that a person that works without getting paid and without professional training isn't expected to be able to meet the needs of young people in crisis or with great psychiatric needs. But when the Big Sisters over and over again meet the needs of the Little Sisters and create enriching meetings it tells us more about how limited the expectations of Maria and society are, than what can actually happen in the interpersonal meetings.

*Big Sister: you can always talk to me. I might not always understand, but I listen.*

## Training for the volunteers

The training for the volunteers at Tjejzonen is divided in two parts: first the basic training and then, the practical training. The training is short and the focus is on attitude and self reflection. The training creates a foundation upon which further guidance and education is built. The purpose of the conversation reports that are put together and sent after every chat conversation between the Sisters is to stimulate reflection in the volunteers, not to point out what is right or wrong. Tjejzonen has developed a special way of interacting called Sisterhood with a professional attitude, see attachment 2.

Support before a doctor's appointment:

*BS: Oh, I wish I could go with you!! Mentally I can.  
Like your own make-believe friend!  
LS: Haha, yes I'll have to imagine you*

## THE RELATIONSHIPS

For ethical reasons we have chosen not to talk about specific cases. Instead we'll show examples and excerpts from different Chat Sister relationships.

### Launch

The launch usually starts with an e-mail from girls who have found Tjejzonen online. Some have used the on-call chats and other have found the website by searching the web or been tipped off by someone close to them, a school councilor or a friend. Examples from first contacts with Tjejzonen:

#### Ex.1

*Ehmn, I don't exactly know what to write, but the thing is. I would like a Chat Sister. I hope it's possible for me to talk to somebody. I can't live like this anymore. I don't have anyone and can't stand going to a psychologist. I can't do this anymore.*

#### Ex.2

*I would like a Chat Sister, I don't really like talking, writing comes easier for me...*

#### Ex.3

*Hi! I would love a Chat Sister. I'm 12 years old and don't have anyone to talk to and would like a sister for that reason*

The coordinator answers the Little Sisters as quickly as possible with a personal e-mail containing information about the conditions and, if needed, further questions for the Little Sisters. The Little Sisters are allowed to remain anonymous. The only information that they need to provide is their age because they are being matched with a Big Sister about ten years older than themselves. If the coordinator receives information about problems that the Little Sister has, this stays between the Little Sister and the coordinator. Since only a few of the volunteers have received professional training, it has been proven that more focus is put on the problem of the Little Sister than the actual relationship if the Big Sister receives information about the problem beforehand. Since the purpose of the Chat Sister is to create resourceful meetings, feelings of inadequacy on the part of the Big Sister can arise if she is aware, for example, that the Little Sister has is in a bad family situation, but the Little Sister would rather talk about school. One Little Sister gave the advice:

*don't talk about just the problem. If for example a girl has a mum that beats her up, maybe they don't have to talk about this, but about other things to get more relaxed, like how are things in school*

Another reason for not talking about the problems of the Little Sister with the Big Sister beforehand is to let the Little Sister decide herself when and how she wants to talk to the Big Sister about her problem. The first conversation is usually fairly nerve-wracking for both of them, but surprisingly often the problems of the Little Sister are revealed right away.

## Conclusion and summer break

If the Chat sisters continue their conversations, a mutual and trustful relationship is created. Just like in any other relationship it goes up and down. The conversations can feel more or less meaningful, and if it is hard the coordinator gives extra guidance and offers further training for the Big Sisters. To end the relationship or to take a long break, such as a break for summer, are usually perceived as the hardest tasks for the Big Sisters:

Chat conversation before summer break:

*LS: I don't know what I would have done without you these months.*

*BS: :)*

*How do you feel now that we won't be talking for a while?*

*LS: It's scary somehow*

*BS: why?*

*LS: Because I won't be able to spew all my shit to you... He,he. Everything I feel I have to keep to myself now...*

Most often the coordinator and the Little Sisters only have contact over e-mail when the matching is done, when there is a break, or when the relationship is ending. But sometimes the Little Sisters need more contact with the coordinator. This can be when they need practical help finding support and care in their local environment, or when they need help taking control of their emotions:

*Hi!*

*I feel so totally useless, am not good enough for anything. I feel like the worst ever and just wuaaaa.*

*I feel this way because the relationship with my Big Sister is about to end. I cry every night and have done so for a while now.*

*Hugs, XXX*

(E-mail to the coordinator from a Little Sister, one month before the Chat relationship was supposed to end)

A few of the Chat Sisters continue to have a relationship privately after the year as Chat Sisters has ended. But since many of the Little Sisters have great needs and psychological issues Tjejzonen usually advises against continuing a relationship privately. There is a big difference in developing a private relationship and in having a relationship with a professional attitude, like the one at Tjejzonen. The task for Tjejzonen is therefore to try and make the best out of the resources we possess. This means guiding and supporting the volunteers so that the experience of the conclusion is good for both Little Sisters and Big Sisters. Many of the Little Sisters unfortunately have bad experiences of separation and ending relationships. In this phase the coordinator plays an important role.

*LS: hey you! I am so glad to have met you and gotten to know you as much as I have only by chatting*

*you have said so many nice things that have helped me cope*

*BS: I'm so glad you feel that way!*

*.....*

*LS: I'll keep you with me as a guardian angel on my shoulder :)*

*LS: When I signed up for a Chat Sister , I thought it would be like talking to a wall. I don't really know why I signed up either. sometimes I chat at Tjezonen's other chats. just because I'm bored. thought this would be the same, had no expectations at all. I am so happy I got to talk to you.*

## Sometimes it is hard

Some of the hardest things that volunteers and coordinators at Tjezonen come up against, when talking to the young girls, are of course threats of suicide, abuse, and exposure. But the conversations that never seem to take off are also hard to deal with. There are many things to think about when the interaction with the Little sister isn't working. These conversations make both the Little Sisters and Big Sisters feel inadequate, a feeling that can be hard to deal with. At this point it is easy for the relationship to fizzle out, leaving both Little Sister and Big Sister with a feeling of having failed. It can also be hard to ask for guidance when the volunteer experiences that the Little Sister doesn't have a "real" problem. It is therefore important for the coordinator to be able to spot when the interaction in the relationship isn't creative enough to feel meaningful for the Sisters:

*BS: Sometimes I feel that I ask too much and that I'm pushing the conversation forward alone, that I become too much of a mother so there you will have to help me out.*

*LS: aaa*

Giving those who cry out the loudest the most attention, and forgetting those Little Sisters who don't speak up is easily done. This increases their feeling of being lonely and feeling like an outsider. But sometimes it is not possible to continue the relationship, despite best efforts. In that case it can sometimes be a better idea to switch Big Sisters, or for the Big Sister to take consolation in the thought that the Little Sister experiences the relationship as meaningful even though the Big Sister doesn't necessarily feel that way.

On opposite side of the scale we find the Little Sisters without boundaries: the Little Sisters that completely and head over heels "fall in love" with their Big Sister. These Little Sisters often make the volunteers feel chosen and sometimes even like the only person in the world that can understand and "save" the Little Sister. If the volunteer doesn't receive help with setting boundaries in these relationships, the feeling of being invaded or flooded can be overwhelming. The relationship then affects the volunteer in her everyday life and creates anxiety and worry. It is very bad for everyone if it goes this far, but unfortunately it seems to be a pattern that these young girls recreate in their relationships, not only at Tjejzonen. Although only a few of the Little Sisters have this problem, these issues take up much time and effort in the project.

Threats of suicide and deliberate self-harm (usually the girls cut themselves or have destructive sexual behavior) is another thing that can be hard to handle for the Big Sisters.

Below is an e-mail from a 20 year old Little Sister after the Big Sister had begun talking about the conclusion of the relationship (that would take place 6 months later):

*I'm in the hospital again. If that concerns you anymore. I just want one thing now, to die. I'm still mad at you and I feel that you are failing me. Just like everyone else. So I don't know if it's even possible to chat from now on.*

Sometimes the volunteers need some extra in handling the anxiety that can arise within them when they talk to the Little Sisters. The coordinators are therefore always "on-call" on nights and weekends. The volunteers may call or text when there is a crisis and sometimes even receive guidance right there and then. This can make chat conversations with the Little Sisters with destructive behavior easier to deal with. This "on-call" guidance is almost never used by the volunteers but knowing that it exists is usually enough for the Big Sisters, and enables them to handle these difficult situations well.

## DISCUSSION

Tjeizonen is an easily accessible organization and therefore doesn't have a selection process for deciding who gets a Big Sister or not. This causes a wide span of topics, and some of the Little Sisters may be in great need of professional help while others are coping fine on their own. The conversations can range from worrying about school to real psychiatric problems such as personality disorders and self-destructive behavior. Sometimes other difficulties such as neuro-psychiatric impairments and develop mental problems can be an issue.

To offer supportive relationships online in non-profit organizations where the Little Sisters are dealing with psychological illness and have problems with social interaction requires professional attitude and teamwork. The Big Sisters should not be, nor feel, that they alone have the responsibility for the Little Sister. An adequately trained coordinator that on his/her part gets professional guidance is essential to be able to offer and develop continuity and quality.

The feeling of teamwork is also important when interacting with the professional world, such as health care professionals and social services. We shall ease and prevent suffering. Not work against each other which increase the feeling of isolated islands and inner splitting for the target group. Just like the volunteers at Tjeizonen ask and reflect upon professional support and care with the Little Sisters, the professional world should ask their patients if they receive support online. We are convinced that if we can work together when it comes to these girls, even if it just means being aware of each other's existence, it would reduce the feeling of "inner splitting" for the Little Sisters. "Tightening up" with professional attitude and that way make the world feel more sensible and safe is hard if we don't work together.

## SUMMARY

The Chat Sister project at Tjeizonen is a demanding and appreciated project. According to the Little sisters themselves, the sense of empowerment helps them to regulate themselves emotionally. For the Big Sisters it is a safe and stimulating way to contribute their time and compassion for the target group, as well as to grow as a fellow creature. Tjeizonen reaches even more exposed girls with psychological illnesses online than offline. To be able to handle the meetings in a constructive way, and for the quality control of the project, it is important that the volunteers have a professional attitude. This also requires that Tjeizonen has enough recourses to be able to hire and maintain coordinators with professional qualifications.

Tjeizonen believes that supportive relationships online, in the non-profit world, play an important part for public health, as a preventive measure, but also as resource-creating work. For this to have an effect on society, collaboration and networking between the professional sector and the NGO sector is needed.

## BACKGROUND

### Tjejzonen in brief

Tjejzonen is a politically and religiously independent non-profit organization. The target group is girls between 12 and 25 years of age. All girls are welcome, irrespective of culture, ethnicity, sexual orientation. Tjejzonen works for an equal society and takes exception to racism, violence, bullying, oppression and abuse. No drugs or alcohol are allowed within the organization.

The overall purpose is to relieve and prevent psychological illness. The work of Tjejzonen is built on a belief that the interpersonal meeting and conversation itself can have a healing power. Those who work for Tjejzonen should be sensitive to the needs of the girls and strive to be there for them when it is needed. The organization shall be runned and developed in collaboration with the girls, the volunteers, and other organizations, public authorities, and experts.

Tjejzonen was founded in 1998 and has since then developed a well functioning organization that, to a large extent, is non-profit. The volunteers are trained according to model developed by Tjejzonen in collaboration with volunteers and Solveig Laine, psychologist and teacher at Tollare folk high-school. To be able to help the girls in need, the organization has established contact with health care institutions and organizations that work with young people, such as: Elevhälsan, Kunskapscentrum för ätstörningar, children psychiatry, Fryshuset, Stadsmissionen, A/B-Kontakt, Tjejjouren.se , Killfrågor.se and more.

Today Tjejzonen offers supportive conversations and relationships, both in the physical and virtual reality. In 2011 Tjejzonen had about 10 000 contacts. About 200 volunteers are active within the organization. They are recruited, trained, guided, and coordinated by employed staff and according to the manifesto developed by Tjejzonen. The organization is guided by a common approach: *fellow creature with a professional attitude*.

The organization consists of the Big Sister project: Big Sisters live, Big Sister via chat, and Big Sisters via Skype (voice- and video-calls). A Big Sister is a volunteer that is about ten years older than the Little Sister. They meet regularly to spend time and talk. This goes on for about a year. In focus are the needs of the Little Sister from a healing perspective. The project also consists of on-call chats online: the regular chat, the e-mail chat and the chat for eating disorders.

In the virtual parts of the project the girls can be anonymous. In the chats, the girls get to choose both for how long they want to talk, and how much they want to share about themselves and their situation. Both the regular chat and the chat for eating disorders are open during the evenings, five days a week. The e-mail function is there for those who would rather send an e-mail.

Out of the supportive chats and meetings, Tjejzonen runs a blog since the summer of 2010 (Tjejkraft.se) where both volunteers and the target group contribute with texts, pictures, music, and links.

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## Attachment 1

### CHAT SISTER'S MANIFESTO

We know that girls need adult companions, and that is something that Tjeizonen wants to offer them. Many young girls need someone to talk to, to confide in, and to have a relationship with outside of the family. As a Big Sister, the volunteer is a few years older and has a little more life experience that the young girl can benefit from.

- You have gone through the volunteer training at Tjeizonen
- Professional attitude – This means focusing on the girl and being aware of one's own feelings and needs. It also means being able to handle one's own feelings in such a way that these do not impact the contact with the Little Sister and the considerations regarding her.
- Attitude - to focus on what gives the Little Sister strength, hope, and will allow both painful and joyful feelings to exist. One Little Sister gave the advice: "don't talk about just the problem. If for example a girl has a mum that beats her up, maybe they don't have to talk about this, but about other things to get more relaxed, like how are things in school"
- Fellow people - we are sympathetic people that listen and support, but we are not a replacement for professional experts, friends, or family.
- Representative - you represent Tjeizonen in your relationship with your Little Sister – you are not friends but Big Sister and Little Sister at Tjeizonen.
- Report - reports and follow-ups are done regularly (after every meeting) to the coordinator via e-mail or phone. It is the responsibility of Tjeizonen to make sure that the girl and the volunteer get the support they need. It is important that you inform the coordinator if you become ill for a longer time or have a personal crisis. We will then together find a solution for your sisterhood that makes sure that neither you nor the Little Sister suffer unnecessarily. You do not need to and should not do things that feel too hard, heavy, or demanding.
- Group guidance - twice per semester at Tjeizonen in the evening is mandatory.
- The duration of the relationship - You meet up to 60 minutes a week for as long as is needed, and for as long as it works out for both of you, for up to a year. In rare cases the relationship can be extended, but only after consultation with the coordinator.
- Conclusion - if you need to end the relationship prematurely it is important that you and the coordinator, try to create a positive conclusion so that the Little Sister does not feel abandoned.



- Online accounts - you get an e-mail account from Tjeizonen for use in your Big Sisterhood. E-mail is used to book/reschedule dates for chats.
- At Tjeizonen a kind of professional confidentiality is used – you can talk about your Little sister with your coordinator but not with anyone outside of Tjeizonen. The Little Sister is allowed to be anonymous and Tjeizonen does not contact the Little Sisters family, school, or friends regardless if she is anonymous or not. Exceptions are made in rare cases but then always with the Little Sister involved and never over her head.
- Quotes may be used for training and research, but in that case always anonymously so that nobody can recognize the person behind the quote.
- You may not contact your Little Sister privately or use your private e-mail, telephone number, or social media such as Facebook to contact your Little Sister as long as you are a volunteer at Tjeizonen.

## Attachment 2

### SISTERHOOD WITH PROFESSIONAL ATTITUDE

#### Big Sisterhood

As a Big Sister at Tjeizonen we begin from a positive view of people, with respect for the individual. By way of listening, giving time and space for reflection, taking things seriously, confirming and supporting; we want to give our target group the space they need. Change can only happen when someone sees and understands their choices, and sees their own power and their situation.

We take as a given that everyone engaged in the activity of Tjeizonen plays the part of sympathetic human beings, not experts, regardless of former education and training. To be a Big Sister at Tjeizonen means to - while maintaining a professional attitude - use and develop your own personality and approach, in the conversations and meetings with the girls.

#### Professional attitude

The foundation of a professional attitude at Tjeizonen is a critical reflection of yourself and the work that you perform. By way of a professional attitude we want to give the volunteers tools to handle and regulate conversations and meetings with the girls in a constructive and lasting way.

At Tjeizonen this means:

- Critical reflection of yourself and the work that you perform
- Clear goals for the project and each assignment
- Clear rules and frames that are updated regularly when needed
- Focus on the girl in need and her story
- Empathy and respect for the girl and her specific needs
- Clear roles and limits are defined
- Awareness of power - strive for equal relationships
- Focus on each individual and her power. Strive to give the girl a feeling of empowerment and increased space
- To receive and accept guidance from the coordinator regularly