

# Project Report 2016

## *Support Groups Online in a Non-Profit Organization*



**CHILDHOOD**  
WORLD CHILDHOOD FOUNDATION

**TJEJZONEN**

Translated by Saga Cruz

## Summary

*I'm here because I suffer from anxiety after going through difficult things.  
Glad to be here!*

Support groups online is a two-year development project at Tjeizonen, funded by the World Childhood Foundation. The aim of the project was to develop Tjeizonen's online support with anonymous support groups moderated by volunteers, so-called Big Sisters, and adapt them to the target group's needs.

The project has shown that what was consistent for all support groups was the desire to listen, support, validate, and inspire each other in a safe environment. The overall picture we have is that many feel they suffer greatly from mental illness, have fairly dysfunctional families and a lacking support system. In addition to mental illness, there are four subject areas that are more dominant; relationships, school, violence, and existence.

Age-wise, Tjeizonen's target group is between 10-25 years old and we have estimated that the support groups project consisted mostly of 15-17 year olds.

The biggest challenges in the project have been organizational, paving the way for a good support system within the groups, and to deal with the complexity and uncertainty in terms of how the support groups will develop.

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## Introduction

With this report we hope to share our experiences and lessons learned with funders and organizations that are considering starting, have recently started support groups online, or who want to broaden their horizons, in terms of online support groups in non-profit programs.

The report discusses the opportunities and challenges of online support groups. This report is not meant to be used as a manual, it simply aims to inspire. If you want to read more about the work of non-profit programs, including in terms of individual support, you are welcome to peruse the learning materials on Tjejzonen's website [www.tjejzonen.se](http://www.tjejzonen.se) under "Learn More" where you will discover our previous project reports and research materials.

## Purpose and Questions

The aim of the project was to develop Tjejzonen's online support with support groups moderated by volunteers and adapt them to the target group's needs.

We based our approach on these questions:

What are the needs of the participants in our support groups?

What do the participants get out of attending a support group online?

Which format works best?

What is the Big Sister's role?

How can Tjejzonen best support Big Sisters in their work?

## Chatting in Group

The Swedish word for chat is "chatt" [çat'] which is a form of the English word which means to converse or prattle. According to the Swedish Academy's dictionary "chatt" means "written dialogue in real time between users on the Internet." So this is about social interaction online where dialogue is updated in real time, or close to, as soon as someone writes something. You can chat, both individually and in groups. When chatting in groups everyone's posts can be seen in a common chat log. Tjejzonen chose to start with a chat tool called "Campfire" provided by an American company.

Chats are available through various chat programs, partly via standalone chat programs such as Skype, social networks such as Facebook, or various websites such as Tjejzonen.

Chatting is an interactive means of communication. For many it is a written language that is very close to speech and therefore writing rules and grammar is often put aside in order to resemble a spoken conversation as much as possible. The pace of

chatting reflects the flow of spoken conversation; people send phrases rather than sentences to each other. The methods of communicating are:

- Words - vocabulary, which words one chooses, how one writes, spelling
- Punctuation - punctuation is often used for prosody (speech melody and dynamics) e.g. "Help!!!!!!", "I.don't.want.to.", "Maybe..."
- Symbols - emotional symbols; so-called smileys or emoticons.
- Asterisks - the asterisks are used as a marker for nonverbal actions e.g. \*crying\*, \*laughing\* and to point out a spelling correction.
- Tempo and rhythm - how fast you write, how much text you send at a time, which flow one writes in and sends in, breaks in the flow in the form of pauses or interruptions
- Links and documents - whether, and if so, which, links or documents are shared in the chat conversation and how the others react and respond to it.

## Support Groups Online in Civil Society

Working with support for the youth in groups of various sizes is common practice, however, only a few programs offer support groups online. These groups are mostly forums or manual-based treatment in the form of chat groups. When we started the project in 2014, we found a plethora of different types of support groups and self-help groups offline, with manuals and guidelines. However, we could not find any methods of self-help via chat in non-profit organizations. We have networked and have been in contact with some organizations and foundations, including:

- STAD.se - Provides CBT groups in drug prevention since 2015. The method comes from a Dutch model and is included in a research study on [www.STAD.se](http://www.STAD.se). The target group is children of addicts (between 9-20 years old).
- BRIS.se - Offers anonymous forums for children <http://bris.se/?pageID=6>
- Kuling.nu - Offers anonymous forums and group chat for young people who have a parent with mental illness ([www.kuling.nu](http://www.kuling.nu)). The organization has been around since 2003 and is a complement to offline support groups and is a part of the psychiatric care system in Örebro, Sweden.
- Stockholm Tjejjour - Have previously run a project with group chat and even live support groups for girls with experience of sexual abuse.

For more info, see:

[http://stockholm.tjejjouren.se/sites/default/files/story/43/2012/09/stod\\_till\\_inces\\_tutsatta\\_tjejer\\_metodbok\\_kopia\\_pdf\\_17351.pdf](http://stockholm.tjejjouren.se/sites/default/files/story/43/2012/09/stod_till_inces_tutsatta_tjejer_metodbok_kopia_pdf_17351.pdf)

- 1000möjligheter - Offers anonymous support groups online for boys up to 25 years old starting in spring, 2016.

As we now, two years later, are concluding this project, we are pleased to see that a number of different forms of support groups begin to sprout online in non-profit organizations. An example is the association MIND and their newly started Inheritance Foundation Project (Arvsfondprojekt) "*Moderated support forum online for people with mental illness*" (<https://mind.se/3432-2/>).

## Participants in Tjeizonen's Support Groups

In Tjeizonen's support programs the target group is for the most part anonymous, so also are the participants in support groups online. Therefore, we cannot guarantee that the information we have received from the participants is consistent with public perception. The image of the target group will therefore be somewhat nonspecific and "pixelated". What we can understand from the information we received in the conversations is that we reach out to the entire target group of 10-25 years and the largest age group is teens 15-17 years old. Most identify themselves as girls and the occasional participant state that they are transgender. All are Swedish speaking/writing and most live in Sweden, ranging from southern Sweden to the northernmost Norrland. Some have experience in online chat groups, but many attended the support group as first time users when the project started. Participants found Tjeizonen primarily by "Googling". Some had been referred by their student health services and the like, or had used individual aid at Tjeizonen previously. The overall picture we have is that many, but not all, feel they suffer from mental illness to varying degrees, and have somewhat dysfunctional families and a lacking support system.

### Age

*Being able to write with girls of different ages is very rewarding and you can help each other and see that you are not alone.*

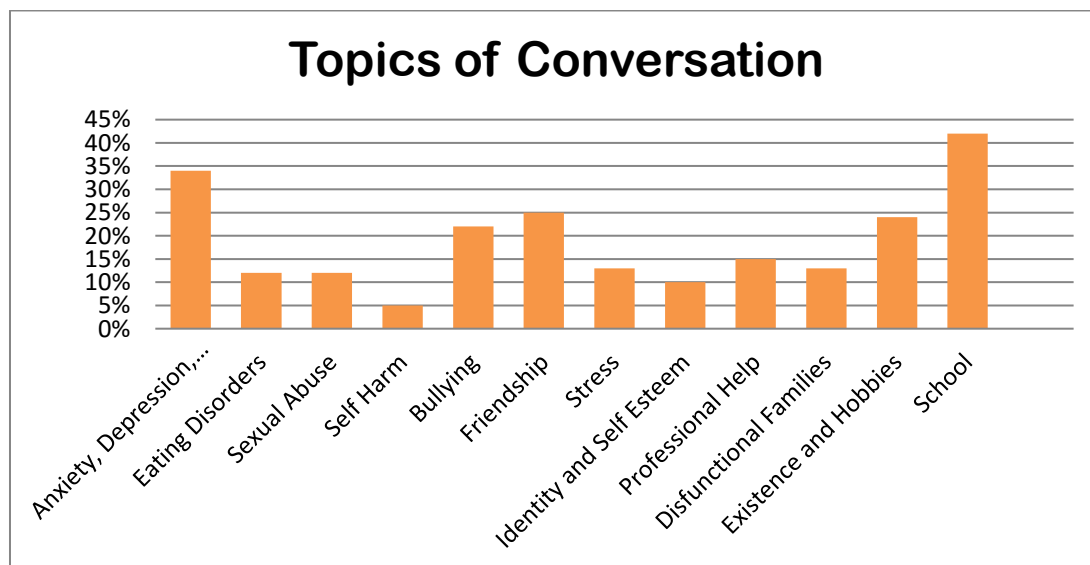
We planned to divide groups by age but decided to first see how the groups worked spontaneously without age division. Usually groups were comprised of mixed ages, ranging from 11 to 20 year-olds. The majority, 80%, did not state their age but was estimated to be the largest group of 15-17 years, after what we've been able to tell from conversations when topics such as school, family, healthcare, and work were discussed. Although several of the Big Sisters noted a big difference in terms of language level and how they address each other, the topic of age only arose twice in the groups. None of the participants who responded to the evaluation survey have

considered the age differences a problem, but rather an asset. Particularly the younger ones. There seems to be little need for age divisions but it is an interesting area to explore further.

## Topics of Conversation

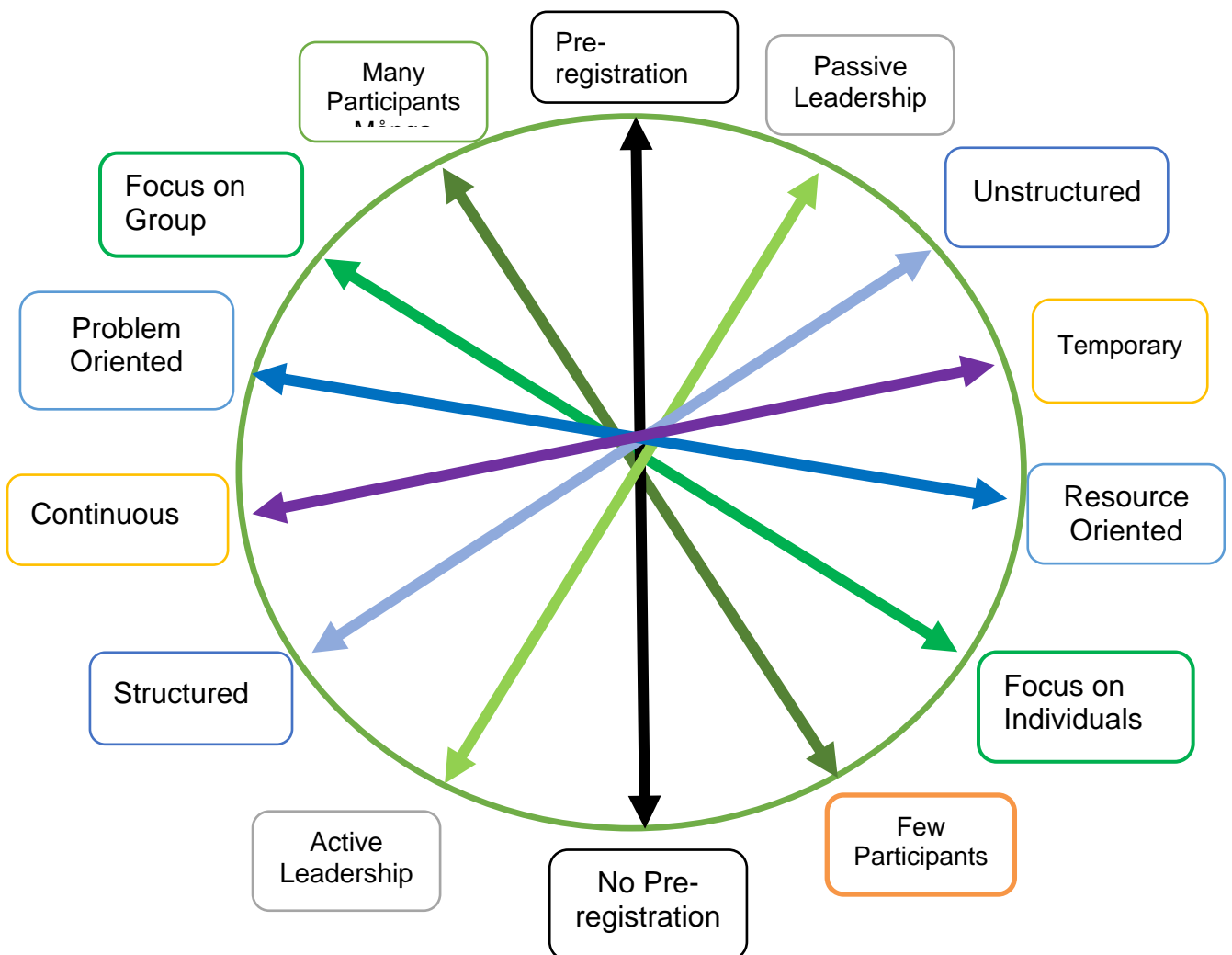
What all our groups have in common is the desire to listen to, support, validate, and inspire each other in a safe environment. The topics that the participants had the greatest need to talk about were issues related to school, relationships, and mental health.

Even more resource oriented topics such as existential issues, music, and hobbies have been discussed. For example, one of the topics were "what we are passionate about."



## Project Variables

Running this project has revealed many aspects of working online and with young people. There has been a great dynamic and many variables that needed to interact and balance. The figure below is an attempt to highlight the complexity and the systemic challenge that we experienced in our work with support groups online.





## Registration and Group Formats

One question in the project focused on the recruitment of participants and what format support groups would have. How can we and should we recruit to achieve as efficient and readily available support groups as possible? One Tjejzonen vision is to "be where and when the girls need us" which in this context means a balancing act consisting of several parts. Throughout the project we tried three different ways of recruitment:

- Without registration
- With pre-registration through e-mail dialogue with the project manager
- With pre-registration via the website which was then followed up by the project manager

## Without Registration

To make the support groups as accessible as possible, we offered one support group 2 hours per night, one night a week for 10 weeks in the spring of 2015, then two parallel groups for 90 minutes, one evening per week for 18 weeks in the fall and winter of 2015, and one group for 90 minutes, four nights a week for seven weeks in the spring of 2016. "Without pre-registration" means that participants joined anonymously via a guest link on the website and was thus taken directly into the current chat room where two of Tjejzonen's Big Sisters welcomed and moderated the group. Participants were free to choose any username and were all anonymous. They did not share contact information or the like with each other.

Most used the group to "purge", get support, and share their situation with others.

*It feels good to talk to and get advice from you girls who do not know who I am, it's so different with you than when I talk to my friends. It feels good to get advice from like, two completely different perspectives!*

*In real life, I have social anxiety and I'm unable to walk into my classroom without getting a panic attack*

Some of the participants joined the group to "try it out". Some became frequently recurring and some then continued on to a closed group with pre-registration or applied for their own Big Sister at Tjejzonen.

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*I've never been here before, so I mostly just wanted to pop in and see what it was like here :)*

Some had been recurring for several years in Tjejzonen's support programs and had a lesser need for help than before, rather, a need to help others. They used the group to share their experiences and support the other participants.

*I wish I had had the courage to get help when I was struggling.*

Some really wanted to chat in private chat, but since it is generally under high demand it is often full, which leads them to seek out other options.

A few individuals simultaneously used several available forms of support, including support groups, to relieve severe anxiety. We have previous experience of that at Tjejzonen and were therefore on high alert throughout the project.

*I have so much damn anxiety, I'm shaking*

Overall, it seems support groups without pre-registration is the method that works best for those who care about anonymity, accessibility, and opportunity to influence the topic of conversation.

### **With Pre-registration via Email Dialogue with the Project Manager**

To meet the demand for closed support groups focused on specific issues, we offered support groups with the themes "Sexual Assault" and "Eating Disorders" for 90 minutes, once a week during 5-10 weeks. Among the groups that concluded in 2015 those who were interested in participating had to register with a personal email to the project manager. The project manager provided information and inquired about age and purpose of participation in the email dialogue and thus achieved an auto-qualified selection of participants for the groups.

Support groups with pre-registration seems to work best when participants want to talk about subjects that are perceived as difficult and sensitive. No one can log in unannounced and participants have the opportunity to get to know each other and the Big Sisters more each time.

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*For me, it is often helpful to talk to others (especially on the internet) with the same experiences and who understands in a whole different way than perhaps a psychologist.*

The degree of anonymity is slightly lower than typical at Tjeizonen in this type of support, because the participants did engage in email dialogue with the project manager and used a personal login. This was too high a threshold for some girls, who, when they were in the more anonymous channels at Tjeizonen, expressed that they were afraid to be traced through their IP address, and thus forced into taking various measures. This type of recruiting also requires a lot of time and resources. The project manager needs to create a secure relationship with those who apply and wait for a sufficient number of registered participants before the group can begin. This in turn means the already trained volunteers may have to wait and are therefore at risk of disappearing off on other assignments, overseas job, or studies.

### **With Pre-registration via the Website**

In the spring of 2016, we tried to lower the threshold further in terms of registration. We offered interested girls to register for support groups via an anonymous registration form on the website. There they fill in their email address, age, motivation for registering, and if there was anything specific they wanted to talk about. The project manager confirmed their registration and also sent instructions for logging in to the group chat. The theme group "Bullying" received 12 complete registrations but only two of them joined the group once it started. The same pattern was reflected in the theme group "Sexual Assault". This probably shows the importance of creating a lasting relationship between the participants and Tjeizonen already at pre-registration to obtain sufficient and recurring participants- or of recruiting significantly more participants and count on only a few joining.

Another aspect is that registrations via the form on the website were made by more of the younger girls than via email. It may be that an 11-year-old's registration is generally more spontaneous and "short-lived" and therefore a 1-2 month wait may be too long for their needs and interests to remain. 1-2 months, after all, is a much longer time in an 11-year-old's life than in a 20-year-old's and a lot can happen along the way that alters their situation.

Support groups with pre-registration directly via the website is therefore good for those who are spontaneous and in a simple way want to express their situation. Maybe it expresses a longing for something rather than a desire to engage in the support group, with all that entails in terms of commitment and responsibility.

## Number of Participants

All support groups, both with and without pre-registration, were attended by anything between 1-10 participants moderated by 1-3 Big Sisters. It quickly became clear that the chat format contributes to the group being more difficult to keep together the

more participants there are. Parallel conversations and cliques formed quickly which was experienced as disorganized.

*I also think it is a bit messy .. would probably be good to have some small groups so that everyone gets to speak*

Therefore, we limited the number of participants to 5-7 people. The closed groups were optimal with 3-5 participants to obtain a sufficiently secure and at the same time stimulating group discussion. Times when only one participant logged in often resulted in beautiful and meaningful conversations between Big Sisters and the participant. However, they had an expectation that there would be a support group. Therefore, we had to end the “Bullying” theme group and theme group “Sexual Assault” after only 2-3 times, when only one or two participants showed up and none of the other pre-registered responded to the project manager's emails. One of the participants had discovered that they wanted their own Big Sister and was therefore offered one and the others transferred to the open groups and individual chats.

## Group or Individual Focus

Something that became clear in the supervision of Big Sisters was that the experience and knowledge of group processes and group dynamics were quite limited. During the volunteer training these topics were addressed. When the theory became practice, it was clear that it was necessary to complement with solid advice on how this could become more concrete based on the life experience of the groups. Many of the Big Sisters were accustomed to individual focus in individual conversations, as participants in support groups also seemed to be to a large extent. Therefore, it became a challenge to keep the group focused and to remember to bring the conversation back to the group after the individual participants received the spotlight. The chat format itself may contribute to the need to highlight this challenge even more in chat groups. Written interaction is a type of communication that, unlike verbal and physical, is clearly defined with turn-taking which leads to parallel conversations and cliques that automatically and quickly focuses on an individual.

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As described above, individuals joined the open support group when really they wanted to get individual counseling but the individual chat was full. This resulted in us taking away the possibility for individual chat in support groups and those in need were referred immediately to individual chat or tjejjouren.se when it was full at Tjejzonen. This proved easier for everyone, because the conditions became clearer, which reassured both the participants and Big Sisters.

*Can I get a private chat room for a little while? The individual chat is full!*

### **Problem or Resource Oriented**

The volunteer training, which all volunteers receive before they become Big Sisters at Tjejzonen, talks a lot about the resource oriented conversation in different ways- a particular challenge for the Big Sisters working in support groups themed "Eating Disorders", but also in the open support group. When the participants were asked to come up with suggestions for topics of conversation the suggested topics were rarely based on resources, such as "what makes me feel good," or "things that make me want to live." Rather there was a recurring desire to talk about anxiety, self-harm, violence victimization, and weight anxiety. We chose not to use these themes as conversation topics but we used them as titles for the closed support groups to provide clarity and to ensure the participants that they would meet people with the same or similar experiences as them. The topics that worked best in the open support groups were quite general and open threads with space for both the serious and the light such as school, family, love, what we are passionate about, and the future. As an example, the theme of war and peace which opened up different perspectives:

*:) I think I'm fighting a major war inside but right now everything is becoming completely dark*

The groups where we had defined themes such as sexual abuse, eating disorder issues, and bullying became automatically more problem oriented from the start. In the group themed eating disorder issues, it turned out that some people were too sick from an ongoing eating disorder in order to function in a group. It was difficult for the Big Sisters to handle and break the triggering and destructive messages. The lesson was that if the group focuses on psychiatric problems the recruitment should be less anonymous, more targeted, and preferably in collaboration with professionals. In

such groups, those with more difficult problems either need to be offered professional support and/or additional support so the group remains a place for shared growth and positive change, as it is intended, not a "competition in eating disorders" as participants put it. In summation, both open groups with resource oriented topics and groups based on different kinds of problems are needed. The determinants are the resources available in terms of technology, moderation, additional support, knowledge, experience, and time.

*The eating disorder group chat will help a lot. I got to talk to others who have been in a similar situation, which led me to find the "fighting spirit" to get healthy and so on.*

## Continuous or Temporary

During the project we offered both recurring and more temporary support groups, in open and closed forms. In every group format there were many returning participants, whether it was with or without pre-registration. With exception to the first semester, we also noticed it was somewhat "slow" before the girls started to connect again after a break (summer or Christmas). The closed support groups with pre-registration was limited to five meetings, which worked well in theory because they all really wanted- and thought it was important for them- to participate. In reality, they tend to forget, cannot be bothered, technical problems etc. It will never be how you plan, and this is our experience with groups in general. Support Groups Online is no exception.

The models we came up with that worked best for the target group, were:

- the open, continuous- which ran like similar programs at Tjeizonen- with high availability and anonymity. Continuity in itself means security. If it wasn't good one evening they just had to try again the next. Participants did not have to remember and plan their participation in advance but could make it more spontaneous and as needed.

*I thought it was good to just get to purge a little bit and chat generally. Now I feel more like I'm not alone :)*

- the closed, limited- where the restrictions were the primary thing that provided the security to talk about things and situations perceived as difficult and that demanded trust. This group format required support from the project manager in the form of dialogue with the participants and reminder emails before the meetings. On the whole a more personal approach. The limitations, in terms of number of meets, gave security to the Big Sisters as they used a

manual that stated the theme and form of the conversations. It also gave clarity to the participants, who in the dialogue were given information about when and how the support group would meet and could ask and give feedback in dialogue with the project manager. The limitations also resulted in a personal commitment by the participants that in itself may create a significant effect of anticipation. Just signing up for a group, to talk about difficult things and situations, is a marker that can create a sense of empowerment and be an important part of a process of change, whether the person then participates in the group or not.

*I like the sense of community, and, like, the feeling that others get it and are not so afraid to talk about it*

## Degree of Structure

During the project, we have tried various degrees of structure. Everything from completely open, where participants had to decide then and there what they want to talk about, to following certain themes and exercises based on a manual. It has become clear that one model does not fit all. However, it is stabilizing with a certain degree of structure.

*Can't we determine a topic that we're talking about, it feels really messy*

*I think it's good that it's okay to leave the subject a bit so you don't feel trapped in a subject*

The presence of Big Sisters in itself creates a certain structure and probably an expectation that there is a responsible adult presence.

*I think you Big Sisters are good team leaders- it makes it possible to chat. Have been through some group chats when you can't talk at all because everything is completely incohesive and no one keeps track or anything, this was great*

Key elements of the structure have been the layout and the use of starter topics, the method manual and the check-in.

## **Starter Topics**

The model that we found worked best in the open groups were using a specific starter topic (such as school, family, what I'm passionate about). Starter topics were helpful tools to lean on for both participants and Big Sisters. It could also be used to set boundaries and to "re-group" when the conversation veered off course. At the same time, it was okay to change the subject if it was fine with all participants; this meant the starter topic often served as inspiration for other topics and discussions. When a starter topic did not work it was easy for Big Sisters to help participants change to a more inspiring conversation.

## **Method Manual**

We initially used method manuals for support in the closed groups- mainly to safeguard the group and Big Sisters when difficult and sensitive subjects were discussed. The more experienced Big Sisters became and the more trust they had for the participants and the participants for each other, the less the manual was used. At times when the conversation became slow the manual was used for support and inspiration. Other than that, the participants decided what they wanted to talk about.

## **Check-in/Check-out**

An additional way to structure the group was to start from- and return to- the classic group method "check-in". This enables everyone to speak in turn so no one gets left out. This method was particularly fruitful at the start and finish. Big Sisters began by introducing themselves, for example: "My name is Elin, I'm 27 years old and I study biology. I love to sing in the choir and be a Big Sister at Tjejzonen". It sets the tone for the participants who then introduced themselves similarly in turn. The presentations proved to be an easy way to get the participants to acknowledge one another and enable curiosity and recognition. When it was time to end it was a nice tapering and clear way to end the conversation when everyone who wanted to could say how they experienced the conversation and add anything further before the group ended. It was more important to finish with a check-out in the groups that had spoken about the difficult and sensitive issues, in order to relieve anxiety and to get a return to the here and now. For example: "Thank you for today! It's been amazing to see how brave you all are and how well you support each other in all this difficulty! When we finish I'll sit down and drink a cup of tea. What will you do after this? ".

## **Leadership**

When we trained Big Sisters we talked a lot about what kind of leader they were supposed to be in support groups. What does it mean to moderate a support group with self-help focus? Big Sisters feel that the participants want "a rock" which



reassures the group and helps to set boundaries. But it's a tricky balancing act to take a step back and wait for the conversation and risk the chance that participants log out, or push and try to get the conversation going and risk being too controlling of the group as the conversation becomes more between Big Sisters and participants, instead of between participants.

In group it is very much about "kick-starting" then having a "cool head" and the guts to trust that it runs by itself. Providing support groups online does not entail knowing how the group will take shape and to be a Big Sister means to bear the variations. It takes a while for many Big Sisters to gain trust for the group, themselves, and the other Big Sisters and gain experience that makes them not as emotionally involved as in the beginning of the assignment, and thus can have a better overview and listen

more focused. It is not about emotional disconnection, but rather to practice the ability to manage and cope with the emotions brought by the participants' stories. Otherwise, the needs of the Big Sisters easily come into focus and settles like a grid over the conversation, which can affect group dynamics and may cause the conversation to suddenly be more about the adults' needs than the young people's needs.

*One becomes "cooler" with experience as a Big Sister and listen better.*

## Challenges with the Support Group via Chat

### Chat Format

To "type- talk" in real time, in groups with no other means of communication, has its challenges and benefits. Benefits include anonymity, accessibility, and gives the target group the opportunity to regulate closeness and distance, in terms of social interaction. The challenges are mainly the lack of bodily and auditory communication, making it sometimes difficult to keep the group together. The conversations tend to split into parallel tracks of individual conversations, which will be perceived as disorganized. Possibly, it is due to the participants' varying typing speeds causing the clear turn-taking that a chat conversation has, to become more difficult and less spontaneous in a group. Perhaps it is also due to the lack of experience of talking in groups. This tendency to split can be offset somewhat by limiting the number of participants and, as group leaders, be sure to always bring back the individual conversations to the group.

## **Anxiety and Severe Mental Illness**

Many of those who seek Tjejzonen support suffer from anxiety and mental illnesses of various kinds. Support groups are not exempt and this can be challenging for both Big Sisters and participants because the anxiety does not leave room for listening and constructive interaction. It is more about bearing it for the moment and waiting for the anxiety to subside. To exclude or invite someone with heavy anxiety to leave the group is therefore not so simple. Especially challenging are the few individuals with emotional instability that are intense and recurring. Even if they change aliases, they are quite easily recognized by their "chat voice", their interaction style, the choice of words, and story. These individuals are often simultaneously in several of Tjejzonen's support programs and probably also in other's support programs. Often, these people use online support as a way to "stay afloat" in their mental illness.

It is like a water strider who keeps afloat on the water surface. A survival strategy that suppresses anxiety and probably maintains a kind of balance in life. These individuals are found mainly in the open groups that have high anonymity. We tried to support these individuals by referring to personal support and encourage direct contact with the project manager so she in turn, along with the person, could find appropriate ways forward which would be more constructive. Unfortunately, not many dare to break their anonymity and instead continue to come back to support groups in the protection of anonymity. But for Big Sisters it is easier- or less difficult- to set boundaries and prioritize the group when they know that the project manager and personal support is available for those with extraordinary needs.

## **Trolls**

Tjejzonen has been remarkably free from people who do not belong to the target group in our programs over the years. We do not know what it may be due to. Either our idea that the many anonymous forums are exposed to cyber-hate and persons under the protection of anonymity vent various needs, so-called trolls, is false, or we are fortunate and have a kind of image that protects us from trolls and other nuisances. Therefore, it was a completely new experience when we tried themes in the open groups which seemed to trigger some people. One such topic was "Sex and Boundaries," another was "Good Enough". Perhaps it was a coincidence that these people showed up precisely at those times or it was the themes that got them going. Several of the participants became angry and left the group quickly. This teaches us to be quick and alert as participants who do not follow the guidelines can be ruled out quickly so the group dynamic is not disturbed too much. Themes that may be triggering in various ways fit better in closed groups where anonymity is not so high.

## **Deprioritized Needs**

Tjeizonen seems to meet many of the needs of the target group with Support Groups Online, but we have chosen not to accommodate some of the most common requests. These include accessibility (opening hours, amount of groups, and optimal technology) which are primarily limited by finances and resources. This is also limited by the very purpose of the support, which is that it should be a complement in the lives of young people. In this case a limitation is preferred.

There have also been several who wanted the opportunity to continue conversations without moderators after meetings. We have opted out of that opportunity because we primarily care about privacy and security in our groups. Moreover, there are already plenty of social venues on the internet outside Tjeizonen.

Topics have been an ongoing discussion with the target group, through evaluations and emails. Many have wanted us to start with severe psychiatric issues in the open

groups, with themes like self-harm and anxiety. However, we noticed that it became more inclusive and less problem oriented when we started from the more neutral starting themes and Big Sisters felt less pressure to be "experts" on specific issues.

## **Organizational Challenges**

For Tjeizonen it has been a challenge, based on the project plan, to balance the needs of the target group, the volunteers, and the organization. It is mainly the organizational deliberations that challenged us most, such as:

- Whose needs are most important – target group-volunteers-organization-funders-society? It may seem obvious to always prioritize the needs of the target group because Tjeizonen wants to work primarily on the target group's mission, based on a clear child and adolescent perspective. As a non-profit organization Tjeizonen is dependent on good relations and a mutual understanding regarding the purpose and objectives of funders and networks in the community. Tjeizonen should be a free zone for the target audience where we are a "fly on the wall" so we can hear, understand, and be the target group's voice in society. This is an intermediate area that demands respect and careful balance, which is not always possible to easily do between all the different needs.
- To be or not to be anonymous? Many in the target group have the need for high anonymity in order to have the courage to take the first step to talk. Unfortunately, it

is rarely enough with "storytelling" and witnessing of individual stories and other qualitative accounts, to prove the benefits the organization has on society. There is a concern regarding the ability to measure effect and monitor specific individuals with high anonymity- which funders and society has a great need for at the moment. More and more resources are used for administrative intervention in the form of impact reports, statistics, surveys, evaluations, and activity reports- both financial and narrative. It is an organizational challenge to maintain high anonymity and simultaneously measure the effect in a quantitative manner.

- Volunteers or employees? Where is the line when it becomes more "efficient" with staff than volunteers and what added value do volunteers bring? It is again a question of what benefit the organization has in society, the impact the support has on the target group, but also the volunteers. To recruit, train, and supervise volunteers in their challenging and self-developing assignments, may have more impact on society than to be able to count another x number of conversations with the target group? Meanwhile, the conversations may never be too many because there are always new young people who need to be listened to, and kept for a moment by a fellow human being at Tjejzonen.
- Include or exclude participants in the groups? Where is the line between preventive and reactive work and how does the organization include and exclude participants with extraordinary needs? As long as we have a high level of anonymity it is not possible to separate individuals. Those who want to be at Tjejzonen will be, no matter what we adults say and it is always possible to change the alias or try another helpline. We can set limits by regulating the availability and stick to the framework and guidelines we have tested, for example, no individual conversations in support groups. They are instead directly referred to individual chat support. In support groups we needed the framework to be extra clear because an individual can quickly capsize the group dynamic. We also have an advantage that many non-profits lack-employed staff to coordinate and supervise the volunteers. This way, they will never be alone to take responsibility for any measures that need to be taken. In this way we protect both the volunteers and the target group.
- Where is the line between patience and "curling"? You can never really know if the support given will help and not hinder the participants. We cannot follow up with individuals if they don't update us on their own accord. This is challenging for both Tjejzonen and volunteers. Here it is the trust in the volunteers' social and emotional competence and the professionalism of the employees that shows the way.

To offer support groups is an organizational challenge. Perhaps this is precisely why there are still so few groups available online within the non-profit sector. It takes knowledge, flexibility, continuity, and sustainability. Many non-profit organizations have problems with this, especially with continuity and sustainability. We hope that our experience in this project will inspire funders and organizations in a way that more will develop and provide support groups online. We feel it is an important complement to the diversity of individual support available today in civil society.

## **Big Sisters in Support Groups**

When we recruited volunteers to the project we very clearly informed them that it was a development project. This led to driven and dedicated volunteers with confidence in the project and the project manager. They perceived the volunteer training as adequate, and the further education which was offered during the semesters, was appreciated. Tjeizonen's recruitment process consists of several stages. First, knowledge of Tjeizonen and formalities such as: policies, criminal records, and a written agreement as well as an interview. If there are doubts about a candidate a new interview by another employee will be conducted before they qualify for training. The training is given in the form of initial and assignment, which is then extended in the form of regular classes and group mentoring at Tjeizonen.

Volunteers felt that backup and feedback from Tjeizonen was important in their assignment. During the support group meetings, the teamwork in the backchannel (a private chat room for Big Sisters) with the other Big Sisters was vital, as well as having the project manual ready next to the computer. The manual outlined procedures, guidelines, technical approach, conversational methodology for inspiration, plans for additional severe issues, and a reference list. To have the manual beside them was a security, even though the need for it waned over time the more experienced Big Sisters became.

The project manager was present as additional support in the backchannel during the first meetings, and at times where especially difficult conversations demanded direct supervision. The chat tool "Campfire" consisted of a group chat tool that was adapted to the project. It had its limitations but the Big Sisters thought it was easy to learn and it was stable in terms of operation. Initially the Big Sisters divided up the moderating into clear roles; a Big Sister who was in close interaction with the participants "frog perspective", one that had more overview and made sure everyone had space and times were kept "bird's eye", and in some cases a third Big Sister who acted as an

extra resource in the backchannel. Structuring thusly was helpful initially but it receded quite naturally and was not needed after a while.

All Big Sisters wanted to continue the project in year two, validating that they thought it was a meaningful and challenging assignment. Two of the Big Sisters in the second year, who had chosen to moderate the closed groups were transferred to open groups but were not comfortable there. Self-selection arising from careful and clear recruitment proves to be important to get the right person in the right position. In this case, the assignment changed quite radically in the midst of the ongoing project, because it was a development project, which meant that it did not fit everyone throughout.

The hardest part of support groups for the moderating Big Sisters was when the conversations did not start as well as the difficult balancing between either trying to push the conversation so it gets going, with the risk of Big Sisters dominating the group or "to have a cool head," take a step back as a Big Sister and await the participants and perhaps risking they log out.

Something that was also seen as particularly challenging was when participants had severe psychiatric problems or completely different needs than other participants. Whose needs are most important; those who shout the loudest or the those who are quiet? Where is the line to include or exclude, and when and how do you exclude a participant?

The most difficult part for the Big Sisters was also to learn to endure during the times when things did not go as intended. Therefore, the support from Tjeizonen, the project manager, and the other Big Sisters was important.

What was perceived by moderating Big Sisters as the most fun with the support groups was when the group itself carries the conversation and the participants supported and cheered each other, when the participants were inspired by the starting topics, and affirmed each other and the group.

*The dream scenario is when support groups are self-sustaining so we Big Sisters can sit back and hand over the conversation to the group.*

## Lessons Learned and Reflections

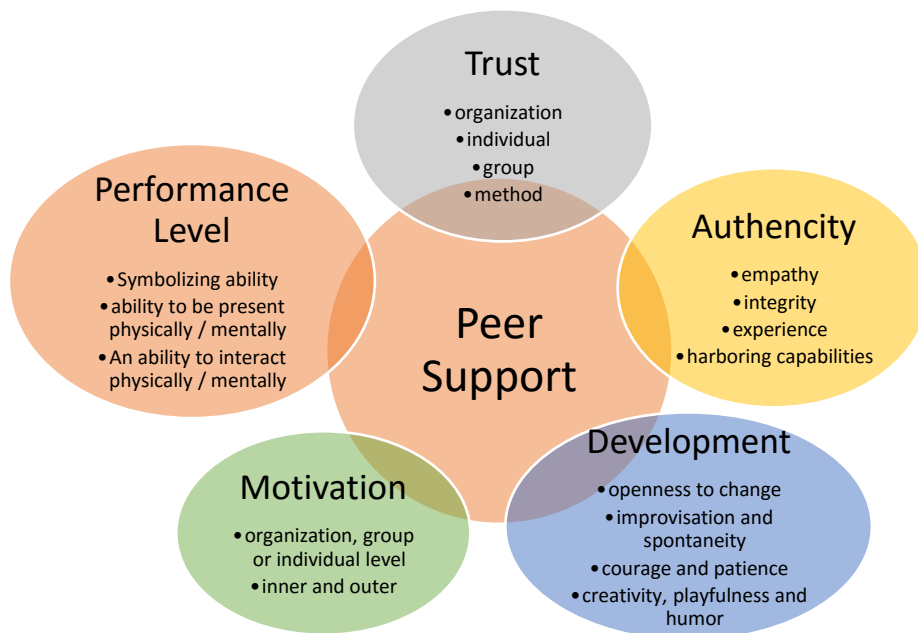
*No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the whole (...)*

*From Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions (1623) by John Donne*

Something that became clear during the project is how the interaction in groups are like night and day. When the group dynamic is at its best it is an amazing and unbeatable form of support. When it does not work, it can almost become a disaster. The individual support conversations, that are Tjejzonen's main activity, often have a smoother and more predictable dynamic and is naturally a less complex interactive situation because there simply are not as many involved as there are in a support group.

The goal of the project was to design a model for Tjejzonen's support groups online. Shaping a kind of method that could balance all variables and form "The Promised Land" in terms of interaction quality. We've tried a number of models and methods, and learned that it is possible to make a good effort in terms of their application, but ultimately it is the quality of the peer support that determines how the group dynamics form. And the quality of peer support depends on what each one contributes to the group. Support group leaders can inspire, set an example, and monitor to make sure everyone follows the group's rules and guidelines and thus indirectly affect the quality of peer support.

If we map the variables of support groups, peer support would be the center and Trust, Authenticity, Development, Motivation and Performance Level the satellites.



In regards to Tjejzonen support groups, we know with certainty that they change according to mood and who is attending, both in terms of group leaders and participants. With simple guidelines like the appropriate number of participants, focus on group, anonymity, and for everyone to be friendly and supportive towards each other, we can try to create the best foundation for good peer support.

The challenge for Tjejzonen is therefore primarily about the readiness to prepare and help the volunteers to manage and cope with variability and the dichotomy, the day-night alternation of smooth and chaos.

Just as participants in a support group needs good foundations for peer support to flourish, the organization needs to give the volunteers good foundations so they thrive in their leadership of the support groups and endure not knowing how the group will form or behave. When peer support and interaction works, aid in the form of support groups is unbeatable!



## Acknowledgements

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All colleagues who contributed their time and wisdom in the project!

World Childhood Foundation and our project officer Susanne Drakborg for many years of support and trust in Tjejzonen!

## History of Tjejzonen

Tjejzonen is the largest and one of the oldest helplines for girls in Sweden, and a sought-after player in terms of prevention and assistance for girls and young women 10-25 years of age. Scientific research and evaluation demonstrates that Tjejzonen's support model is a popular and effective operation for the target group (read more on our website [www.tjejzonen.se/lar-dig-mer/forskning/](http://www.tjejzonen.se/lar-dig-mer/forskning/)).

Tjejzonen operates from a clear child and youth perspective, which means that we adapt programs in dialogue with and based on the target group's needs. This means that we often are the first witness to the violence they live with in their everyday lives. The majority of those who seek out Tjejzonen suffer from stress, mental illness, and many are victims of sexual violence, abuse, dysfunctional families, and lacking social support. The aid being anonymous, accessible, and protected by a vow of silence means that they are less afraid to start talking and putting words to their situation. Many of the girls are periodically recurring in Tjejzonen support programs and this may, thanks to volunteers' active listening and support, gain them increased confidence and trust in the adult world. This creates room for action and roads to support and help in their immediate environment.

According to the Media Council virtually all Swedish young people have access to computers and the internet. Research shows that many young people feel they have more power online, and that the interaction with adults online are more on young people's terms. Things that are expressed online will in some cases never be reflected offline (Löfberg, Aspan, Digital Offerings, 2011). Through the internet, we get in touch with girls across Sweden who would have never talked to anyone about their thoughts and concerns. Our experience at Tjejzonen is that many girls feel they are not taken seriously, are not seen or listened to. They often find it difficult to put their problems into words. When girls can talk about themselves anonymously and try to put their thoughts into words together with adults it creates a foundation for change.

Tjejzonen was founded in 1998 and today has more than 8,000 conversations with young girls every year through 200 voluntarily dedicated Big Sisters. Tjejzonen operates throughout the country and has its head office in Stockholm. Tjejzonen is financed through collection and operating grants from the government, the Stockholm County Council and the City of Stockholm.

## Research and Past Projects at Tjejzonen

Tjejzonen have a desire to work on behalf of young people and try to meet their needs. The organization is developed and quality controlled based on this. One way to do this is by involving research projects. Through the years, research on both the target group and the volunteers has been carried out in the form of anything from student papers to multi-year research projects. Here we briefly present some of the projects that have been important to the development of Tjejzonen programs.

### Chat Development

During 2009-2012 Tjejzonen participated in the research project, *To Express the Difficult Online- About the Youth's Way of Assuming the Virtual Space in Conversation Regarding Their Own Situation* (Löfberg & Aspan 2011, 2012, 2013) under the direction of Cecilia Löfberg from the Pedagogical Institute at Stockholm University with funding from KK-Stiftelsen (Foundation of Knowledge and Competence Development). The development project *Chat Development at Tjejzonen* (Munkesjö 2011) with funding from the World Childhood Foundation ran in parallel with the research.

The research questions investigated were above all the importance children and young people give aid and support forums online and how the interaction patterns develop between children, youths, and adults in various support forums. One of the main things that the young people experienced was anonymity online, and how it changed the contact with the adult world. It turned out that the young people who used the sites (including Tjejzonen.se) felt that they could talk about sensitive issues without losing control.

The interaction between young people and adults are given new opportunities online, especially the young person's opportunity to show themselves to adults in other ways than offline. It was also found that the site's design, the purpose of the organization, and the support and directions given were crucial for the how the support was perceived and implemented (Löfberg 2012). Tjejzonen was above all experienced by

the youths as a place where adults are striving for genuine dialogue and where mutual deliberation gives new perspective and meaning. Tjejzonen volunteers felt that the support they received from the organization was mainly helpful to learn how to bear what the target group talked about during support chats.

Many times it is much easier as an adult to "help" by referring and by being problem solvers. It is a common strategy, even for Tjejzonen volunteers, to put up with stories of deprivation and suffering, and it also assures supporters they are good and wise. Of course, it is important to provide adequate referrals but only after listening to the support seeker. This means "keeping a cool head" and having the courage to stay and listen to the support seeker's stories is one of the most difficult things about the support conversations at Tjejzonen.

### **Personality of the Volunteers**

In Charlotta Lidman-Steerling's Psychology Degree dissertation from 2013 she explored whether volunteers at Tjejzonen differ from the general population. The study was done by a survey showing that Tjejzonen's volunteers are more outgoing, open, friendly, and goal-oriented than the general population.

### **Big Sister Operations**

In Karin Hansson's Master's dissertation in Human Rights from 2011 she examined Tjejzonen's Big Sister program (live/offline) based on CRC article 12 and KASAM. The study is a case study in the form of questionnaires and interviews. It shows that Big Sister programs are a great complement to other social institutions. Little sisters feel that they get a greater sense of cohesion in life. They also matured and gained new perspective and felt listened to- making the model valuable in efforts to implement and enforce the Convention.

At the Health and Medicine Institute of Örebro University the research study *Gender Oriented ANDT Prevention 2011-2014* was performed under the leadership of Camilla Larsson and Madelene Pettersson and the supervision of professor Charli Eriksson. They studied Tjejzonen's Big Sister program (both online and offline) from the aspect "Strengthening Young Girls' Health using Sisterhood." Little sisters felt that Big Sisters were people who listen and act as role models. Tjejzonen and the Big Sister program has proven to be a popular and important activity which can serve as a complement to other programs in the community and help to strengthen the young girls' health. So far, one article is published in BMC Public Health, Madelene Larsson et al (2015): <http://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-016-2850-2>

## The Project's Approach and Ethical Reflections

The material that forms the basis for this report is from the Tjejzonen project *Support Groups Online*. Volunteers are referred to as *Storasyster* (Big Sister) or *SS*, and group participants are referred to as *participants*, *Lillasyster* (Little Sisters), or *LS*.

The project began in August 2014. Support Groups have gone on for three semesters, from January 2015- April 2016. Throughout, a project manager has been employed at 50-75%, and 24 volunteers have worked as Big Sisters without compensation. The project manager has also held the role of coordinator and supervisor. The material consists of:

- Chat logs from 111 group meetings.
- 194 chat reports from Big Sisters (sent to project manager after each group meeting).
- Written evaluations from the Little Sisters who participated in closed groups (17 sent, 4 responses).
- Written evaluations anonymously completed through the website by the Little Sisters who participated in open groups (2 spontaneously written).
- Evaluation with Big Sisters in group on three occasions (one per semester) in person at Tjejzonen.
- Written evaluations from the Big Sisters (17 sent, 11 responded).
- Mentoring of Big Sisters in group on 3 occasions at Tjejzonen.

Information on anonymity, vow of silence, and our right to cite is given to the target group through the website and in the written information that Little Sisters had access to when they signed up for the support group. All quotes are authentic but anonymous and de-identified.

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