



Project report 2014

Big Sister - supportive relationships online over Skype in a non-profit organization



tjejzonen

CHILDHOOD

WORLD CHILDHOOD FOUNDATION

Translated by Karin Skagerberg

SUMMARY

This report is part of a three year long project by Tjejzonen called the Big Sister Webcam project. It has been financed by World Childhood Foundation (August 2011- July 2014). The purpose of the project has been to develop a structure for how adult volunteers and fellow human beings can work with supportive relationships online over Skype.

Experience from the project shows that a great development potential exists when it comes to prevent and relieve psychological illness in young people by supportive relationships online over Skype. It promotes low thresholds and an experience of increased capacity for action for the target group. It also creates meaningful tasks for the volunteers, and economically and effectively uses the professional competence of the employed advisors and coordinators.

The project shows that psychological illness and the feeling of vulnerability in girls, especially in the ages 18 - 25 years old, has increased. This is manifested in the increased interest in supportive relationships online. According to many of the girls within the target group of Tjejzonen, the Student health, regular health care, social services, and psychiatric care is not enough. They also experience the adult world as inflexible in its contact with young people. This in turn leads to a hesitation to seek out and accept help, even though these young girls need it, and should benefit from receiving help at early stages to prevent psychological illness. This has raised questions about the role of non-profit organizations when it comes to working with, and preventing psychological illness.

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INTRODUCTION

I think it's kind of hard to dive deep into my emotions and get lots of attention. That's why I like this more, over Skype [...] I don't like when other people make decisions for me, I mean when adults use the fact that they can control me. I want to feel like an equal [...] I can accept that my parents see me as a child, but with teachers and other adults I sometimes feel that they use their power over me or treat me as if I don't understand anything [...] They can sound condescending when they talk to me or assume things just because I'm young.

Children and young people want to be met with respect and they want to be acknowledged and listened to as fellow human beings. Within the target group of Tjezonen's work, many don't seem to experience this in their closest surroundings. This is why they tend to play it safe and instead seek out the adult world online when they want to talk about things they think are hard or make them feel exposed.

According to the Swedish Media Council, practically every young person in Sweden has access to computers and the internet. A research report by Löfberg and Aspán (2011) shows that many young people feel that they have more room for action online, when it comes to conversations with adults about personal matters. They experience that the interaction with adults is more on their own terms when they are online than offline. Some things that are hard to talk about and tell someone offline, can therefore be expressed online.

Nowadays there are many forums and chats online, most of which are organized by the civil society. It is the opinion of Tjezonen that most of these forums aspire to work on the basis of a child and youth perspective. If they do not, the young people can easily log off without having to explain themselves or being held to account for it, which is a greater risk in the offline world. In this aspect, the internet becomes a tool to regulate closeness and distance to the adult world: a creative way to use modern technology to find and create safe free zones for hard conversations.

The project Big Sister over Skype, that this report is about, intends to, with the help of modern technology, offer such a free zone by way of a supportive relationship online over Skype for girls between the ages of 12-25.

PURPOSE

The purpose of the project has been to prevent and decrease psychological illness within the target group by meeting its needs of supportive relationships online over Skype. This has been done by creating a model that balances the needs and resources of the target group as well as the volunteers, the organization and the society in general.

The questions have been:

- How do we offer supportive relationships online that start from a clear child/youth perspective, so that it is on their terms?
- How do we best obtain a safe, sustainable, quality controlled and economically effective structure when working with lay people online over video calls?
- How do we cherish and develop our specificity and our added value to society as a non-profit organization, without running the risk of becoming a substitute for other public and private social measures?

WEBCAM (VIDEO CALLS) AS A FORM OF COMMUNICATION

When we started the project we parted from the idea that relationships via webcam would be closer to the experience of offline conversations than chat conversations are, and that we because of this would be able to reach girls that we previously had not been able to reach in our work. For example those who, because of their geographical location do not have access to supportive contacts offline, or those who feel limited by communicating only in written text. These ideas were partly confirmed. To a certain extent we did reach other groups, but primarily we increased the action space for the “original” target group.

The specific nature and conditions of video calls have turned out to affect the content and form of the conversations:

- Seeing and hearing each other in real time.
- Visually 2-dimensional communication.
- Less sense of space; the picture is limited to the face.
- No eye contact because the camera is in the way.
- The sound not completely synchronized with the visual.

A crucial factor for the quality of the video calls has turned out to be the technical conditions; such as the quality of sound and image and transition speed. That is why a fast internet connection and a fairly modern computer is key, as well as a microphone and camera of high quality.

Other crucial factors are how used to video calls the user is and how much faith she has in that form of communication. To be able to trust her own emotional reactions and to be able to communicate those emotions, the user needs to believe that the form of communication is “sufficient”. The distance caused by the technical limitations, makes it necessary for the user to “step in” and be part of the other persons space by verbally describing how she reacts (physically and emotionally), to a greater extent than in conversations offline. The distance can also provide courage to talk about things that are hard. In that case, it can be important to “hold” the other person empathically with the voice and words, and in that way compensate for the difficulties in reading facial expressions and body language.

Skype in brief

Skype was founded in 2003. The digital system is provided by Microsoft since 2013 as a software that can be downloaded for free online. Hundreds of millions of people worldwide use Skype, privately as well as in the workplace (<http://www.skype.com/sv/about/>). To be able to use Skype the users need a computer and internet access. For video and voice call function a web camera and a microphone is also needed. These are usually built into newer computers and laptops, but for older computers they may have to be added as external units.

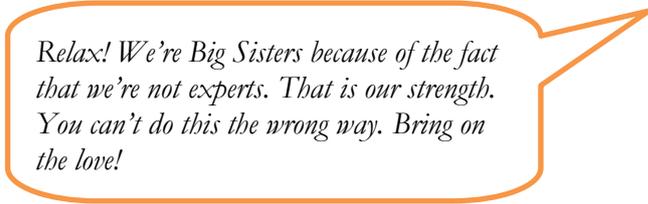
The user creates an account that is used in the communication with other users. The Skype users communicate via voice calls, chat (instant messaging) or video calls. These features can also be combined in different ways. Skype can be upgraded with a payment service, which allows the user to access group video calls and phone calls and text messages worldwide.

Skype at Tjejzonen

Tjejzonen has been using Skype for the Big Sister project since 2011. Each volunteer receives her own Skype sister account that is used when communicating with “her” Little Sister.

Since 2012 Skype is also used when coordinating volunteers. The volunteers that don’t live in Stockholm are recruited and coached individually and in groups via video calls over Skype.

SISTERHOOD AT TJEJZONEN



Relax! We're Big Sisters because of the fact that we're not experts. That is our strength. You can't do this the wrong way. Bring on the love!

Faith in the human need of interpersonal relationships permeates the project. The role of the Big Sister is that of a fellow human being. The method used is based upon the experience and competence developed at Tjejzonen in the work with young girls since 1998. The term method is here used as a broad concept consisting of:

- Basic values – questions of ethics and the view of human beings at Tjejzonen.
- Approach – the role of sisterhood and how we relate to each other/the target group.
- Organizational model – the way we organize and structure our projects.
- Methodology – the way we meet and talk to the target group/the Big Sisters/ each other.

This is a process that is continually developing in step with the needs of the target group, the volunteers, the organization, and the surrounding world.

Genuine dialogue

One of the research projects in which Tjejzonen has participated (Löfberg & Aspán 2011) has shown that young people are more prone to being open to adults when online than offline. This is used in the relationship of WCS (Web Cam Sisters) and is experienced as important to maintain a sense of capacity for action for the Little Sister. In the WCS-relationships we aim for an interaction built upon a genuine dialogue. A genuine dialogue means that the Big Sister and Little Sister "gather up" around one or more topics, instead of the Big Sister informing about different things. Genuine dialogue is about reflecting and investigating the meanings of things together (Löfberg 2012). The opposite of a genuine dialogue is according to Löfberg ritualized dialogue. The ritualized dialogue is controlled by the adult in a question and answer- structured dialogue where the adult has prerogative to decide what needs to be discussed.

We usually use a couple of images to symbolize the core of the WCS-relationships. The first one is that of a growing flower which needs soil, nutrition and sun to be able to grow. The flower symbolizes the Little Sister. A Big Sister can give some extra nourishment to the Little Sister, but can, and should never do more than just that. It's good enough to be the extra soil that makes the flower grow a little more, and take what it needs from its surroundings. This way, the WCS-relationships can serve as both a complement, and an independent alternative, when supporting young people in society.



Fotoakuten.se

The other image is that of a rowing boat that the Little Sister rows. The Big Sister can be in the boat and keep the Little Sister company. She can sometimes comfort the Little Sister when the rowing gets tough, and encourage the Little Sister to row herself when she is afraid to do so. From time to time the Big Sister can stand on the dock and just wave if the Little Sister doesn't want company in the boat.



Foto:Tom Gill - flickr.com

It can be challenging to “just” listen - especially when it comes to tough subjects such as abuse or thoughts of suicide. It's important to stress that listening is not synonymous with doing nothing - quite the opposite. To listen is to make room for reflection, which in turn can release capacity for action.

When it comes to Little Sisters that are very exposed and in need of external help, the coordinator steps in and provides extra help, as far as possible in dialogue with the Little Sister. Experience show that the different functions of the Big Sister and the coordinator complements one another and facilitates the mission and the structure around it. The Big Sister does not have to evaluate and take responsibility for possible contacts with social services and psychiatric health care. The coordinator can make interventions to “push” the Little Sister in the right

direction, while the listening and room for reflection still exist between the Big Sister and the Little Sister. This division of roles has also made it possible for us to maintain a low threshold for the Little Sisters, making it possible for almost anyone, regardless of what problems they have, to get a Big Sister. However, certain limitations exist in regard to the conditions we part from in our work. The Big Sister project is driven by the trust in people's will and need of human relationships, and in the relationship competence of the volunteers. A Big Sister has the role of a fellow human and our approach has developed throughout the years at Tjezonen. That is why we call it Sisterhood with the Tjezonen approach.

For many of the newly recruited volunteers it is often quite challenging to part from a listening and child/youth oriented perspective in this way. They can experience that they are just standing by and watching, as this approach does not give the same immediate confirmation that a more problem solving approach does. For a "helper" it can be more satisfying to solve problems than to listen and confirm.

Some of the Little Sisters are used to being considered walking "problems" that the experience of being treated as humans and not being identified by their problems can be an entirely new experience for them.

This leads us back to the recurrent basic question: Why and for whom do we do this? There is no right answer to this question - the answers vary from person to person, but continually needs to be problematized and reflected upon. This is the purpose of the mandatory training and coaching that Tjezonen provides for the volunteers. This also serves to increase faith in their own ability to be a good enough fellow human and listener, and that this is, and has to be sufficient in this context. Tjezonen is nor a public or a private social service – it is a non-profit organization that organizes volunteers and offers a safe place for resource strengthening meetings between fellow human beings.

SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS OVER SKYPE AT TJEZONEN

All the work that Tjezonen does, including this project, has sprung from the needs of the target group. This means that we aim to meet the target group on their terms as far as it is technically and ethically possible. That is what we perceive as the core of the so called child perspective.

The courage and dedication of the Little Sisters when they seek our support is astonishing. Most of them have done it on their own, and the majority of them find us by "googling". Some of them receive information from parents or the school councilor, or have seen information about us in their school. A few have read articles in magazines about Tjezonen.

It seems like the need of a Big Sister emerges when they feel that they have things or situations they need to talk about or reflect upon with a fellow human being outside of the family. This is not particularly different from supportive relationships off-line:



I could talk about everything, and she didn't judge me.

I wanted someone extra to be able to talk to openly, but who didn't know me personally.

She doesn't know anyone that I know, that was important to me.

More specifically for Big Sisters over Skype was the feeling of empowerment and control:

You can keep it a secret.

You don't have the feeling that everything has to work out, as you do with IRL friends.

Something that has turned out to be a big advantage, also mentioned in many of the evaluations, is the possibility to switch ways of communication. WCS have had the need to switch between webcam, voice calls, chat conversations, e-mail, and a combination of these, depending on:

- Technical capacity, such as the quality of the internet connection, how and if the camera and microphone works, as well as knowledge about how to solve technical problems.
- Where, when and how. For example, if the Little Sister is out walking, in a bus stop, home alone, in a public place etc.
- Conversation topics, such as ones that can be experienced as tough or shameful. These seem easier to write about, in an e-mail or in a chat conversation.

An explanation for this might be that the Little Sisters become more and more used to communicating via many different types of communication. To shift between different communication ways seem to be a pragmatic and natural way to adapt to different situations and places. This also seems to be an important way to regulate emotional intimacy and distance in the relationship with the Big Sister. This way a sufficiently equal balance of power is reached, giving the Little Sisters a feeling of capacity for action, which in turn makes conversations about tough topics easier.

It's easier to write than to say it out loud if you feel ashamed..

it feels nicer and safer to be able to see the other person

Sometimes we used the chat, sometimes we talked and sometimes we used the webcam. It worked well when we could do either or, because sometimes it was too hard to talk and then we could chat.

The Little Sisters

In terms of age, the Little Sisters stretch over the entire target group of Tjeizonen. The biggest group are those aged 11- 15, and the smallest group those aged 20-25.

As a basis, the WCS-pairs talk one hour a week during a maximum of a year, with brakes for summer and christmas. All the WCS-pairs had in average had 14 conversations, 2 at the least, and 35 at the most. In general, the older the Little Sisters are, the better they are at respecting the time frame, and these relationships have in general also lasted longer. However, there are exceptions in both age groups. Many factors contribute of course, but it seems like the emotional need combined with the ability to take social responsibility to some extent determines how stable the relationship is and how long it lasts. For example, an 11-year old that lives with a parent with addiction can very well be more mature when it comes to social codes and responsibility than a 23-year old with a personality disorder.

Recruitment and selection

The Little Sisters are recruited via the web page and the network of contacts with organizations and institutions that Tjeizonen possesses. Most of the Little Sisters that have answered our evaluations say that they “googled” and found the Tjeizonen web page on their own or by getting information from a school councilor.

Most of them e-mail the coordinator asking to get a Big Sister. The majority prefer to remain anonymous, and we seldom get to know more than the age of the Little Sisters. A sort of “blind date”-situation occurs, since the pairs only get matched by age. An age difference of about 10 years between the Little Sister and the Big Sister has turned out to be appropriate. There are many reasons for this:

1. Reciprocity - The age difference is small enough for the Big Sister to be able to recall what it was like to be 10 years younger.
2. Balance of power - The age difference is small enough for the Big Sister not to become a substitute for a parent or councilor.
3. Clear role - The age difference is big enough not to create competition between the two or become a substitute for friends of the same age as the Little Sister.

A few limitations contribute to a natural selection of the Little Sisters as well as for the Big Sisters:

- Personal incentive - This is a hosting project, which means that only the Little Sisters that contact Tjejzonen themselves receive a Big Sister.
- Communication – The communication is in Swedish, and as a start in writing. The Little Sisters reads through the conditions and communicates via e-mail with the coordinator before getting matched with a Big Sister, which means they have to be able to communicate in writing.
- Conditions – Before getting paired up with a Big Sister, the Little Sisters read through the conditions. If the Little Sister cannot accept or later on do not abide by the conditions in a satisfying way, the coordinator steps in to see what can be done. In some cases the relationship is ended, most of the time due to the Little Sister needing psychiatric help or her inability to keep in touch or answer e-mails in reasonable time.
- Waiting time - It takes between a week and six months to receive a Big Sister, depending on how many that are available. This allows the decision to ask for a Big Sister to be well-reasoned and something the Little Sister has reflected upon.
- Technology – The Little Sisters need access to a computer or a smartphone with internet access to be able to use the software (in this case Skype) that is used for the project.

The Big Sisters

The Big Sisters at Tjejzonen are all dedicated fellow human beings that voluntarily take on the mission with great interest and care. They are amateurs in the true sense of the word: lovers, someone who does something because she loves it (the word amateur comes from the french word amateur).

Tjejzonen has deliberately chosen not to use manuals or conversation methods, and fully trusts the relationship competence that naturally exists in human beings. Due to the fact that the mission often requires conversations that are emotionally delicate, the selection of Big Sisters is crucial. Classical selection criteria in recruiting volunteers for social projects, such as age or education level, have turned out to be of little importance. Important when recruiting a person as a Big Sister are other factors, such as:

- Confidence in the Little Sister, the organization, the coordinator and in her own ability.
- Commitment and awareness of their own driving force.
- Clear mission: what the organization and the target group expects from the volunteer.
- Careful recruiting process where the volunteer herself chooses her mission.

- Clear approach that permeates the organization as a whole.
- Teamwork with the coordinator and conscientiousness when it comes to reporting and coaching.
- Process minded training of volunteers that aims to activate and stimulate critical reflection around oneself, the Little Sister, and the relationship, giving basic knowledge in conversation methodology.

Many non-profit organizations with focus on social work recruit volunteers that study these types of subjects. Tjejzonen does this as well. But we have noticed that for example psychology students, and those who study to become social workers tend to struggle with their nascent role as professionals, which can make the role of a listening fellow human being more challenging. It tends to be harder for these Big Sisters to “just” listen to the Little Sister and her story. It can also be harder to create scopes and follow the guidelines of the mission. Faith in the Little Sister, the coordinator and the relationship process seems more challenging for these volunteers.

Vignettes

I had lots of different types of conversations with my Big Sister - in one conversation we could be extremely serious and talk about serious things, and in the other just laugh through the whole conversation.

The relationships evolve in different ways depending on the person and the situation. When the matching has been made, the WCS get in contact via e-mail and decide a date for their first Skype conversation. Just like in relationships in general, these are very different but the Little Sister in general tend to trust both the Big Sisters and Tjejzonen. This often opens into a flying start:

It feels safe to seek help at Tjejzonen because they know what you go through in certain stages.

I think I felt like I could trust her because she's sitting there, somewhere in Sweden, and doesn't know who I am. And she talks to me because she wants to, not because she's getting paid for it.

The following three vignettes: Ellen 12 years old; Emma 17 years old; and Lina 22 years old, are examples of what the different WCS relationships can look like. These girls do not exist for real, but are a mix of many different people and situations, and serve to illustrate examples.

Ellen 12 years old

Hi! I would very much like to have get a Big Sister. I would be grateful for a reply!

Ellen was paired up with the Big Sister Anna, 21 years old and a student of economics. They agreed on a time to Skype the same week. Both of them were nervous about the first conversation. Anna reported back to the coordinator:

It went well, she told me about herself, how old she was, and her family. It was sad that she was so down about her cat, but I could really relate.

She opened up right from the beginning, which felt great, she seemed excited to get a Big Sister. I thought about her being so open right from the beginning, she mostly wanted to tell someone how worried about her cat she was, whether it would survive or not.

She wanted to chat first and use the video next time we talk, so we can try it then, for today everything went well.

After the first conversation they went on to switch between the ways of communication but mostly used the web cam. The conversations were mostly about fiends and pets. Ellen and Anna quickly established a good contact and laughed a lot together. After two months Anna received an e-mail in which Ellen told her that she hurt herself and had thoughts of suicide.

Anna brought up what Ellen had written in her e-mail when they talked the next time. Ellen then turned of the web camera and went over to chat. It became clear that Ellen had had these tough thoughts from time to time during over a year, and Anna was the first person to find out.

Anna was very worried about her Little Sister and received extra support from the coordinator to better tackle and listen to what Ellen needed to talk about. Anna asked what kind of support Ellen had in her life. Ellen told her that she liked the school councilor a lot and that she talked to her on a regular basis. The school councilor had also been in contact with the social services, that had talked to her parents about the abuse that the school had shed light on. Anna felt better knowing that the social services and the school councilor were involved, and it made it easier for her to let the responsibility for Ellen rest between the conversations.

They kept having their conversations once a week and sometimes Ellen e-mails when she needed to “write her heart out” and to regulate her anxiety during the week. The conversations contained a mix of laughter, fun, Yohio (a pop artist), existential questions, trouble with friends, and deep anxiety.

After six months Ellen told Anna that she was going to move to a family home for a while, and that she was very nervous about it. Ellen and Anna talked about the family home and the fact that it was located in the country side and had lots of animals, which was fun and exciting. Ellen was also struggling with feelings of guilt towards her parents, but did not want to talk about what had happened in the family.

When a couple of months remained of their WCS-relationship, Anna brought up the question about ending the relationship. Ellen was very sad and Anna became worried about what would happen to Ellen after they had finished their relationship, she brought this up with the

coordinator. Since Ellen seemed to have a good network of people around her, Anna had faith in that things would work out for Ellen. During the time that remained they talked a little about the ending in all of their conversations: how the relationship had been and what would happen when it ended.

Anna reported this to the coordinator about the last conversation:

Ellen and I have now had our last Skype session. She showed me her new kittens and we talked about the future and what the year that had passed had been like. We both had tears in our eyes when we said goodbye. I love-bombed her and told her how awesome she is and how great everything is going to be for her, she has been so strong. It was a bit sad and with a little pain in the heart, but it feels good that she said that I had helped her so much. Nice little Ellen.

After they ended the WCS relationship they had sporadic conversations via e-mail. The coordinator made an evaluation, and then another one when a year had passed. In the last evaluation Ellen wrote:

It helped me grow a lot, at that age I didn't like talking much and had trouble establishing new contacts. My Big Sister and I had a very nice and close, and I'm so happy about that, she helped me cope. She helped me look at things differently, in a way I didn't see them because I was so pessimistic.

After the conversations I felt like like not everything was useless, and I have learned that there are good hearted people. I know now that there is a lot of support to get, and that if I need help I will find a way to get it. To be able to share your thoughts with someone older and with more experience have meant a lot, I have also better learned how to behave in conversations with other people. It was different when it was someone who just listened, but who also talked about her own experiences, unlike all the psychologists I have talked to.

The hardest part was when we had to end the relationship and couldn't talk on a regular basis, but also the fact that we couldn't meet. It has meant so much to me, Anna is so important to me and such a sweet person that I can hardly believe she exists for real. It would have been nice to get that proven. Right now we don't have any contact, but I have her as a secure base. If my world falls apart, I know that I can write to her and that feels good.

Emma 17 years old

Hello!

I'm a girl called Emma, 17 years young. I have things inside of me that I'd like to talk to someone about, I really need a "Big Sister over Skype". If you need more info about me, just ask! :)

Emma waited for a month and then received Big Sister Hanna, 27 years old who worked as a care administrator in geriatric care.

The first rapport from Hanna to the coordinator said:

Talking comes easily to Emma and she seems to be a happy girl with lots of energy.. She was very curious about me and I answered truthfully about my background, hopefully that makes her feel more secure and makes it easier for her to open up to me. It was so much fun to be able to see her, and we smiled and laughed.

It was extra fun that she gave me immediate feedback before we ended our first conversation. She said it was the first time she felt that somebody understood her, although she had seen counselors before. So I felt that a quick get-to-know-each other conversation seemed to mean a lot to her. It's nice to hear that just your being there means something. We also realized that we are the same sign in the Chinese horoscope since there's exactly 10 years between us, these things are always fun!

At the end of the conversation, when we were going to decide on a time for our next conversation and I asked which time was best for her, she said it was best when her parents weren't up/at home so that she could talk about more serious things. That's when I realized that she wanted to talk about something specific. We decided to talk on Wednesday at 10 pm, hopefully that's late enough for her to feel that she can speak openly without being afraid that her parents will hear.

It pretty soon became clear that Emma had thoughts about her weight and food. She seemed very ambitious in school, but also quite lonely. When Hanna asked if she would be willing to see the school nurse to talk about her feelings regarding this, she was not at all interested and quickly changed the subject.

After three months at a coaching session in group, Hanna brought up her feelings of inadequacy and that she didn't seem to get through to her Little Sister. She felt that as soon as she tried to talk about something more delicate, Emma became terse. This in turn, led to that Hanna felt like a "question machine". In their next conversation Hanna tried to talk to Emma about their relationship, that she had noticed how Emma became terse when she tried to ask about weight or her relationship to food, and she wondered what it was like for Emma to talk about these things. This opened into an open-hearted conversation where Emma admitted to having a lot more problems with food than she had earlier led on: she threw up after almost every meal to ease her anxiety and control her fear of gaining weight.

The conversations went much back and forth. Some days Hanna got the feeling that Emma was close to talking to the school nurse. On one occasion she had been standing outside her office for a long time, but when the nurse arrived and asked if she had something on her mind, Emma had told her that she was just waiting for a friend. Emma didn't seem to consider talking to her parents an option: "we don't have that kind of relationship".

The ambivalence of Emma was hard to deal with for Hanna and after consulting the coordinator she decided to make an agreement with Emma: They would have, as a mutual goal, for Emma to dare talk to the school nurse about her situation before their WCS-relationship was over. Emma seemed shaken up by the fact that only three months remained of their relationship but agreed to the proposal eventually. She tried talking to the school nurse a number of times:

BS: How did it feel?

LS: Bad of course. Very hopeless also.

BS: What do you mean hopeless?

LS: That I fail every time I try. I feel hopeless. As if I'm back to square one again.

BS: Hmm yes, I understand that it feels hard then.

LS: Ja, pretty hard. I'll write her an e-mail soon..

Eventually she built up the courage to talk to the school nurse but did not get the feedback she wished for, and many times she was willing to give up:

LS: She was kind of a pain in the butt today, but I guess I have to go a few times more anyway..

BS: In what way was she a pain in the butt?

LS: Today she wondered how I ate, when I ate, what happens when I eat "too much" or "too little".. It was all we talked about..

BS: Ah OK, why were those questions hard??

LS: I just thought she was a little too much, she didn't focus on how I feel, she just wanted to know my routines.

BS: Ah OK. Did you say that, that you'd rather talk about something else? Like how you feel, instead of talking about the routines?

LS: No, I didn't. She had this chart on her wall that she kept pointing to, it had arrows all over the place. It was very confusing, so I just chose not to ask anything..

BS: Hmm alright.. yes, maybe it was a bit confusing? Or complicated. When you just wanted to talk. Maybe next time you can try and make the conversation go in another direction, towards what you want to talk about?

LS: Yes, I guess I'll do that!

The WCS-relationship ended with a lot of pep talk and cheering from the Big Sister. After this, they did not have any contact and Emma did not participate in the evaluation that was sent to her. But she did answer in a follow-up evaluation six months after the WCS relationship had ended:

It was so much fun and helped a lot. I always wanted a Big Sister to talk to. I always felt sad somehow and wanted somebody older to talk to, who could give me advice and listen. I used to talk to the teachers in school, but most of the time it felt like I was in their way.. To have a Big Sister helped me a lot. I could talk to her about my problems instead. She was there and listened, and I always longed for our conversations. We always had something to discuss, and all the time I felt like time passed too quickly and I always wanted to talk more. It was always nice to feel that there was someone there who actually listened and comforted me when I felt sad.

Lina 22 years old

Hi!

I would like a Skype sister! Is there a possibility to get one?

I am 22 years old and would like to talk about things that happen in my life.

Best regards,

Lina

Lina received a Big Sister who was 33 years old and had her own business in the restaurant sector. Already during the first conversation, that was via chat, Lina talked about her difficult

childhood and described her current situation as “unsustainable”. The conversations came, to the most part, to be about this and about her anxiety. When they talked about positive things, the topics were music, artists, dreams about the future and pets. Lina had a dog that meant a lot to her and that she blogged about. Lina took good care of her Big Sister. Every time she talked about something that was extra hard, for example how she had been abused by her alcoholic father during her childhood, she checked how her Big Sister was feeling and turned the focus to her, telling her how important and unique she was to Lina.

After a while, it became more and more difficult to end the conversations, Thoughts about death started to come up at the end of the conversations, making it hard for the Big Sister to maintain the boundaries they had agreed on:

LS: I'm going to get a knife now, because you're leaving me
BS: don't you want to talk next week?
LS: I know you have to follow the rules
I do. But I would rather talk everyday
BS: I'm not leaving you because I don't care. You have to understand that
LS: Yes, I understand that too, I know

The coordinator contacted Lina and helped the WCS with the problem with boundaries. She explained the rules and once again pointed out that the Big Sister is a fellow human being, not an expert. After this, Lina calmed down a bit and did not have these kinds of outbursts towards her Big Sister, and they could go back to having their conversations once a week. Lina received lots of help at home, from social services and the psychiatric health care. However she had switched administrators and contact persons so many times she had lost count. The help she was given during the year she was in contact with Tjezonen was temporary hospitalizations because of a suicide risk; housing support; and medication.

The conversations seesawed from black to white. One conversation alone could seesaw between her dog, how amazing a certain artist was, how fun it had been to trash a car when she had been out partying and been “totally hammered”, how worried she was about a friend who hurt herself, anxiety, and thoughts of suicide. It was hard for the Big Sister to cope, she felt inadequate and lots of support from the coordinator was needed. After a while she felt more at ease and realized that what she did for the Little Sister was more than enough.

When it became time to end the relationship the situation for Lina had stabilized a lot. She received non-institutionalized care and had good contact with the head nurse. She had also more or less stopped hurting herself, and reflected upon this with her Big Sister:

LS: I really regret what I did.. but at the same time I think it was my way of surviving. I probably would have killed myself a long time ago if I wouldn't have kept hurting myself that way, I kind of didn't have choice. I couldn't just die. It sounds stupid but that's the way it is.. or, in the beginning I kind of thought I was going to die, which I think you remember, I've had thoughts of suicide from time to time. But I am so glad I failed. Sometimes it's good to be a bit of a failure, you know :-)

At the time of the last conversation Lina was head over heels in love. The ending was touching for both of the sisters, but also quite easy going. Because of Lina's difficulties with relational boundaries, and her weak psychological health, The Big Sister was encouraged not to continue having contact in private with her Little Sister, and this did not come up:

LS: I want to say something now! Thank you for receiving this broken girl who hurt herself and overdosed all the time. Thanks for putting up with me when I was at my worst. Thanks for always being there, supporting me, and taking care of me. I love you, Big Sister!

BS: OOhh, my eyes are tearing up now !! That's so sweet of you to say, and THANK YOU <3

LS: <3 <3 <3 will miss you!

BS: I hope everything works out GOOD for you in life, that you don't have to hurt yourself and take pills. That you get to be a happy girl at the best time of her life, who can enjoy her new sweet girlfriend

Reality almost always tops fiction. These stories illustrate what relationships between WCS can look like, but the diversity is just as big as the number of WCS pairs. What they have in common is the need to be listened to, and to have a Big Sister that cares and wants what is best for her. The harder the lives are, or have been, for the Little Sisters, the harder it seems to be for the surrounding world to help. It is also possible to understand, through this, the importance of early help and prevention. Those who did not receive enough help during a childhood of being bullied, abused or neglected, become terribly mangled and hurt, Lina is an example of this.

DISCUSSION

Lives to be lived, not problems to be solved

Out of the more than 10 000 contacts Tjeizonen had during 2013, around 80 % had problems with mental health and/or vulnerability. According to many of the girls within the target group of Tjeizonen, the Student health, regular health care, social services, and psychiatric care is not enough. They also experience the adult world as inflexible in their contact with young people. This in turn leads to that many young girls hesitate to seek out and accept help, even though they need it, and should benefit from receiving help at early stages to prevent psychological illness. At Tjeizonen, both Little Sisters and Big Sister stand in line to get help/give support online. The girls say that the relationship with a Big Sister online means a lot to them and gives them a sense of capacity for action in life, sometimes it is even a question of life or death. This has raised questions about the role of non-profit organizations when it comes to working with and preventing psychological illness. Are we a complement or a substitute for professional support and help, and what could be the consequences regarding quality, ethics, sustainability and economy?

In todays society we see a lot of different methods forming and spreading when it comes to preventing and working with psychological illness, also within the non-profit sector. This is probably an attempt to finding effective and functional ways to help people give help, but economical incentives also play a part since a specific method is possible to sell and scientifically evaluate in an entirely different way than the broad concept of common humanity. A wave of professionalization runs through the non-profit sector of today, where occasional projects, fundraisers and spirit of enterprising is key to the survival of these organizations. The classical image of the peculiar nature and intrinsic value of non-profit organizations is fading and a complex picture is painted: public, private, and non-profit organizations within social care are mixing. How does this affect an organization like Tjeizonen, and a project like this?

It is like trying to fit round balls into squared holes. Because if the non-profit organization within the field does not have an peculiar nature, but rather becomes a cheap and arbitrary substitute for the public and private social services, it stops benefitting the target group and the public health. In that case we need to think again!

This are problems we have been struggling with when working with this project. We have tried to cherish our peculiar nature as a complement, not a substitute for public and private social care. This has deliberately turned into an approach that incorporates a view of human beings and ethics, but is not based upon a certain method. We cherish relationships between fellow human beings, where every Big Sister and Little Sister is a unique pair, and Tjeizonen with its employees provides a safe place for this relationship. With the help of professional coordinators that cherish these pairs and provide extra support and help maintaing boundaries we handle the growing psychological illness and vulnerability in young girls. Since everything depends on us employing professional coordinators, it is the economic situation that decides how many girls become Big Sisters and Little Sisters.

It is hard to determine the effects of our projects, since they are lives being lived, and not problems being solved. But all the evaluations and follow-ups that are being done continuously point to the subjective experience of enjoyment with both the Big Sisters and the Little Sisters:

The most important thing I take with me is the fact that I'm good enough! It's possible to make a difference by just listening. To give relationships time and have faith in them. I have learned a lot being a Big Sister.

My Big Sister and I laughed at all the crazy stuff I did - I will keep making life easier for myself and think about all our good conversations. It makes me so happy.. to be able to laugh when you have felt like I have felt.. I cannot begin to explain how grateful I am for all of you who have been there for me for this long.. I will feel empty without you.. But it's a way for me to start standing on my own two feet and keep fighting to get well. I am so proud to have been a Little Sister ... sometime in the future, when I'm healthy I will do exactly this: be a support and a help for others!

These praises make it easy to be very proud, for me as the project leader, but also in a bigger perspective when looking at the society. It is therefore crucial with a critical reflection about the role and benefits of the project. For whom do we do this and why? This demands a dynamic reflection on a macro and a microlevel, and that in turn demands cooperation and trusting relationships. This way, the Big Sisters and Little Sisters become important role models when it comes to lives lived with courage and commitment.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The base of the project has been all the Little Sisters and Big sisters that have participated. To see all of you, words can not describe your courage and your will to change and create lives with meaning. On top of this, to get the opportunity to try to create a structure in all this, and the satisfaction it brings when it works, has been incredible. These are lives that are being lived and relationships that develop online - wonders, catastrophes and everything in between. A big and hearty THANK YOU!

The project has rested on a safe ground consisting of the multi-professional team at Tjezonen: Lotta, Eva, Anna S, Anna J, Sanna, Sandra, Lovisa, Amanda, and Helene. Thank you for all the guidance, reflections, and creative advise! And a big thank you to David Clinton for valuable guidance and reflection.

The project has been made possible thanks to the World Childhood Foundation: your economical support and years of valuable trust in Tjezonen. Without your niceties, enthusiasm and courage, and the project administrator Susanne Drakborg, Tjezonen would not have been able to develop the Big Sister online project, thank you!



BACKGROUND

About Tjeizonen

Tjeizonen is a politically and religiously independent non-profit organization. The target group is everyone between 12 and 25 years of age, who defines themselves as a girl. All girls are welcome, irrespective of culture, ethnicity, sexual orientation. Tjeizonen 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 Tjeizonen is built on a belief that the interpersonal meeting and conversation itself can have a healing power. Those who work for Tjeizonen 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.

Tjeizonen 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 Tjeizonen 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, Frisk & Fri, Tjejjouren.se, Killfrågor.se and more.

Today Tjeizonen offers supportive conversations and relationships, both in the physical and virtual reality. Tjeizonen has about 10 000 contacts each year. About 200 volunteers are active within the organization. They are recruited, trained, guided, and coordinated by employed staff.

About the project leader

Maria Munkesjö is a trained musical therapist (Master's degree) and has worked professionally within the non-profit sector with business development, training, supervision, and as project leader for ten years (since 2006 at Tjeizonen).

RESEARCH AND PREVIOUS PROJECTS AT TJEJZONEN

Tjejzonen strives to work for the young generation and tries to meet their needs. With this as a basis the organization develops and is quality controlled. One way to do this is via various research projects. Throughout the years both volunteers and the target group have been subjects to research, ranging from papers by students in different fields to more extensive research projects. Below a few of these projects are presented shortly. These are projects that have been valuable in the development of the Big Sister project online; including both the Big Sister via chat project (Munkesjö 2012) and the Big Sister via Skype, that this report is about.

Development of the chat

During the years 2009-2012 Tjejzonen participated in the research project “Att uttrycka det svåra online. Om ungas sätt att ta det virtuella rummet i anspråk i samtal om den egna livssituationen” (“A study of young people’s use of Internet forums for articulating their life situations”) (Löfberg & Aspán 2011, 2012, 2013) led by Cecilia Löfberg at the department of pedagogy at Stockholm university, and financed by the KK-foundation. Alongside the research project, the development project Chattutveckling på Tjejzonen (Munkesjö 2011) was conducted, financed by the World Childhood Foundation.

The research questions that were examined were primarily which impact support online had for children and young people, and in which way patterns of interaction develop between young people and adults in these communities. An important aspect was the anonymity that the young people experienced in these forums, and how it changed their contact with the adult world. It was clear that the young people using these websites (among others Tjejzonen) experienced that they could talk about sensitive matters without losing their sense of capacity for action.

The interaction between young people and adults is given new conditions online, primarily the young person is given the opportunity to prove themselves to adult world in other ways than offline. The shape of the website, the purpose of the organization, and the support and guidelines provided by the organization, was crucial for how the support was experienced as well as conducted. Tjejzonen was perceived by the young people as a place where adults aimed for genuine dialogues and mutual reflection, this in turn gave them a new sense of perspective and meaning. The volunteers at Tjejzonen experienced the primary support they were given by the organization was support in harboring what the target group shared in the conversations.

As an adult, it is on many occasions a lot easier to be a problem solver. This is a common strategy, also with the volunteers of Tjejzonen, to cope with information given to them about suffering and vulnerability, it also gives the supporter a feeling of being wise and good. Naturally, it is important to be able to intervene, but listening to the person who seeks support must always come first. To be able to take it coolly, and have the courage to stay and listen to the stories of the girls in need, is one of the absolute hardest aspects of being a volunteer at Tjejzonen.

The personalities of the volunteers

In her dissertation in Psychology from 2013, Charlotta Lidman examines whether the volunteers of Tjejzonen differ from the average population. The study was conducted by way of a survey

and shows that the volunteers of Tjejzonen are more outgoing, open, and dedicated than the rest of the population.

The Big Sister activity

In her Master's dissertation from 2011, Karin Hansson examines the big Sister project at Tjejzonen (live/offline), parting from Convention of the Rights of the Child and Salutogenesis. The study consists of case studies, conducted by way of surveys and interviews. The study shows that the Big Sister project is a good complement for other social institutions. The Little Sisters experience a greater sense of context, and have also matured and gained new perspectives. They feel listened to, which makes the model a valuable tool when working with and maintaining the Convention of the Rights of the Child.

At the department of Public Health Science at Örebro University, a research study called Genusinriktad ANDT-prevention (Gender-focused ANDT-prevention) 2011-2014 is being conducted by Camilla Larsson and Madelene Pettersson under the supervision of professor Charli Eriksson. They are examining the Big Sister project at Tjejzonen (both on and offline) in view of the aspect "Sisterhood to strengthen the health of young women". The Little Sisters perceive the Big Sisters as people who listen and serve as role models. Tjejzonen and the Big Sister project is a well-liked and purposeful project that can serve as a complement to other projects and organizations by strengthening the health of young women.

PROCEDURE AND ETHICAL REFLECTION

The basis for this report is material gathered from project Big Sister webcam at Tjejzonen. In the report the project is called WCS (Web Cam Sister) or Big Sister online. The volunteers are called Big Sisters or BS, and the girls Little Sisters or LS.

The project started as a pilot project in August 2011. It has been at work in full scale since August 2012 and is estimated to end during the summer of 2014. The statistics presented in the report is based on material from August 2011 - December 2013. A project like the WCS amounts to a few challenges when it comes to how the relationships are calculated and presented statistically, since the diversity is great when it comes to the length and content of the relationships. This report will not further go into this, but instead aim to present a view and sense of what a project like this implies. Those who wish to further study the project are welcome to contact the project leader for a more extensive presentation of the material and procedure.

71 Big Sisters and 81 Little Sisters have participated, as well as a project leader employed at 75 %. The project leader has also served as the coordinator and supervisor. The material mainly consists of:

- A little more than 1000 conversation reports from the Big Sisters (sent to the coordinator after each conversation, see attachment "Report template")
- Written evaluations from Little Sisters after the end of a relationship (38 sent, 22 answered)

- Written follow-up evaluations from Little Sisters, 6-18 months after ending a relationship (17 sent, 7 answered)
- Written evaluations from Big Sisters every year and after the end of a relationship (47 sent, 19 answered)
- Written evaluations from Big Sisters during the autumn of 2013 (40 sent, 26 answered)
- Written follow-up evaluations from Big Sisters 6-18 months after ending a relationship (16 sent, 4 answered)
- Coaching in group, on 10 occasions at Tjejzonen, and 3 via Skype conference.
- Individual coaching, on 36 occasions, the majority via telephone and Skype.

Information about anonymity, confidentiality and right to quotation is given to the target group on the webpage and in the written information given to all Little Sisters before they get a Big Sister (see attachment 1: The Little Sisters of Tjejzonen online): *Quotes may be used for educational purposes and research, but always in form of anonymity, so no one should be able to identify the person.*

All quotes are authentic but anonymous and unidentifiable. In cases when they are not, permission has been given by the person in question.

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ATTACHMENT 1: THE LITTLE SISTERS OF TJEJZONEN ONLINE

What can you talk about?

You decide what you and your Big Sister talk about - no subject is too big or too small!

Who is the Big Sister?

She is a few years older than you and works as a volunteer for Tjejzonen, which means she does this on her spare time for free. She is a fellow human being who wants to listen and support you without judging you, but she is not a substitute for experts or a psychologist.

How does it work?

- You make an appointment with your Big Sister via e-mail
- The Big Sister uses the webcam or chats on Skype via an account specifically for this provided by Tjejzonen.
- The relationship with your Big Sister lasts from a couple of conversations up to a year if it works well and feels good for both of you.
- You talk for about 1 hour/week.

How does the anonymity and confidentiality work?

You get to be anonymous. Tjejzonen only needs to know your age and your e-mail and Skype address.

When you have received this information and we present you with a Big Sister, you agree that Tjejzonen saves the information about your age and your e-mail address. The Big sisters have sworn to secrecy and only talks to the coordinator about their Little Sister, not to anyone outside of Tjejzonen.

Tjejzonen does not contact your family or your school, unless this is something you want. If you have told us your name and where you live, and your life is in danger while you are a Little Sister at Tjejzonen, the confidentiality can be broken if this is necessary to safe your life.

Quotes may be used for educational purposes and research, but always in form of anonymity, so no one should be able to identify the person.

Good to know

- It is important to answer e-mails and stick to appointments that you have agreed upon with your Big Sister, since there are many girls waiting in line to get one.
- The Big Sister does not contact her Little Sister privately or via Facebook or other types of social media.
- The Big Sisters have breaks for summer and during Christmas and New Year.

What do the coordinators at Tjejzonen do?

The coordinator at Tjejzonen takes care of practical issues and is there for both the Big sisters and the Little Sisters. Like the Big Sister, she has also sworn to secrecy. She helps the Little Sister feel as safe as she can with her Big Sister. The coordinator also steps in if extra help is needed. i.the relationship.