

“It was the bus driver”

A CONVERSATION WITH KIRSTIN DAWIN*

What work do you do on a daily basis?

Dawin: At the KinderschutzZentrum [Centre for Child Protection] in Munich we offer advice and therapy to children, adolescents and adults (Ill. 1) – in other words, families – in which children have experienced violence, usually within the family but sometimes also outside the family. This could be physical violence, sexual violence, neglect, psychological violence or “high conflict”. High conflict, too, is now regarded as a form of violence which has an effect on children, i.e. when parents remain in acute conflict with one another for a long time after their separation.

Can you outline any examples of when children and adolescents have managed to remain or become resilient in very difficult circumstances?

Dawin: I remember an adolescent from a family – let’s call her Lena – where, right from the start, the family had been under great strain due to poverty and the father’s psychiatric illness. And in addition to the existing pressures within the family, this girl was also sexually abused by her older brother. For a lengthy period of time, he sought her out in her room and raped her. When I think of resilience, I think of this girl. Despite these extremely difficult conditions and the violation of her physical and sexual integrity, she was able to counterbalance much of what was not possible at

home with her intelligence and likeable manner, her good school results, and with the help of many of her teachers, who supported her and saw that she could make something of herself. This made her feel: “I have control over my own life” – and this internal locus of control or self-efficacy is an important part of resilience.

What else helped her?

Dawin: A break in contact with her brother, and establishing contact with others who had been through something similar. This helped her to realise: “I am not the only girl in the world this has happened to.” And her friends were very important: doing totally different things with her peer group, sharing “make-up tips”, going shopping, music, and things like that; doing things with her friends – experiencing the nicer side of life. Friendships and her clique,

I believe, were almost the most important things with regard to resilience. Her family was already by no means as central in her life as it had been. But of course, the parents’ reaction is always very important to all children: will their reaction be positive and protective, reproachful or incredulous? And of course, if children are believed straight away, this is an enormous plus when it comes to working through the experience.

What are the less well-known forms of violence towards children you have come across in your work?

Dawin: I think the most difficult thing to recognise after sexual abuse is psychological abuse, psychological violence: children who are constantly told, “You’re good for nothing”, “You’ve never been good at anything”, “I don’t love you”; children who have to deal

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with constant degradation, humiliation, and deprivation of love. A child who is being beaten knows – I hope – that parents are not allowed to do that, and will perhaps tell somebody at some point. But for victims of psychological violence, it is normal to be treated in this way. This is why they find it difficult to broach the issue.

I have also come across many children living with mentally ill parents. In such cases, the parents often bind their children into their illness. There are cases, for example, where the mothers themselves have such low self-worth that they shield their children and bind them very very tightly to themselves. The children are not allowed to have any friends, go to children's birthday parties or stay overnight with other people because the mother is so afraid that she thinks, "If I let them go a little, then I will lose them altogether." Then, in puberty at the latest, the result is often acute conflict; children then have to fight even harder for their autonomy.

Can you think of another example on the subject of resilience?

Dawin: There was a young woman who was raped by her father multiple times as an adolescent, and whose mother turned a blind eye and wouldn't believe it. She then became pregnant by her father and had the child, with everything that having such a child entails. She told us that the person who had given her support and – so to speak – helped her survive in spite of this massive violence, was the bus driver. She always took the same bus to school, and she had the same bus driver every morning. She always sat on the seat directly behind him. He always greeted her and asked, "How are you today?" and "So, what are

you doing at school at the moment?" Whenever she was ill he asked, "So, where have you been?" It was actually relatively superficial, but he was there every day and was interested in her. Somehow, in his eyes, she counted for something; in his eyes, she was important. And this really struck me deeply, as well as making me really pleased that she had at least experienced this bus driver as a warm-hearted person. There was otherwise no one like this in her childhood or youth.

What can we learn from this?

Dawin: We can be the friendly bus driver, interested and attentive, a well-meaning neighbour who once in a while asks, "So, how're you doing?" and "How was your first day at school?" Children can derive strength from this friendly attentiveness.

In your experience, how can I best support preschool children?

Dawin: Very young children are mainly, and often exclusively, in their familial environment. They have very few opportunities to come into contact with

these "helpful bus drivers". So, for example, with nursery children it's nursery teachers who play an important role, pick up on a child's potential or interests, and are then able to respond to these.

And what anyone as an individual can do? Well, of course, if I'm at the playground and I notice that a mother is dealing with her child in a particularly harsh way, I could, for example, approach her in a friendly way by saying, "So, you're having a stressful day, too?" – because everyone has been abrasive towards their child at some point. Or I could look at the child in a kind way and say, "Look, I've got another bucket here", or I could spend a few moments with this child just being friendly and attentive. And then in nursery, if I realise that there are children who are always invited to birthday parties or to other children's houses to play, but there is one child who is unpopular and difficult, then I could say, "S/he could come to play at our house some time." This is a question of how far you're prepared to go beyond your comfort zone.

What kind of things are important in primary school, between the ages of 6 and 10?

Dawin: At this age, the non-familial environment already has a much greater role to play. It's the time when children start attending clubs or holiday camps and even sometimes staying overnight at friends' houses. When children realise they can do something they really enjoy, this makes them more resilient. It's about noticing what they like doing and not harping on about their weaknesses – we all have those, don't we? It's about looking to see who can do what well, and where I can offer support. I can do this as a neighbour, a teacher, an advisor; in actual fact, anyone can do it. You could say to another father, "Wow, your child is really great at climbing!"

What is helpful during puberty?

Dawin: I think in periods when children are going through a lot of conflict with parents, it's really helpful if children can say, "Well, my parents, they've totally lost the plot at the moment. They're probably not even my real parents!" (laughs) – meaning "there must have been a mistake". If alternative adults are available for the children – whether these be neighbours, godfathers, godmothers, friends of parents, or football coaches –, and if the parents allow it, the children can seek them out as important points of contact who are not in any kind of competition with the parents, and this can be very helpful. It's important that in difficult periods parents have faith that their relationship with their pubescent children will bear up and will improve. Parents should also offer a withdrawn or hostile child a supportive relationship; this could mean having a coffee together, showing interest in the things adolescents and their friends like and enjoy doing, or doing an activity of their choice together.

Are there any "helpful stories" in such cases, something that children can symbolically hold on to?

Dawin: Yes, of course. Firstly, there are lots of books available in the field of advice and therapy which communicate to children, by psychoeducative means, for example, what it means to be mentally ill. Or they explain alcohol dependency to children. And then suddenly it is something that is comprehensible and not something that simply befalls them.

We can of course also develop stories with children. Or children have already developed stories themselves which we can work on further with them, and which feature protective characters or protective animals created by their imaginations. This kind of thing is great.

Can you give a concrete example?

Dawin: In therapeutic play, children sometimes re-enact situations in which the villain – the uncle, the dad, the mum, or whoever – is severely punished or tied up by the Kasperle or policeman [similar to Punch and Judy in the UK], is eaten by the crocodile, cannot escape, or is taken to hospital. These are stories in which the children can take action, and the person who has done something to them has to face a consequence (Ill. 2). And in fact it's a consequence which they themselves execute in the role of the policeman, crocodile, robber, magician, etc. Here, we notice how much of a relief it is to children, and how much pleasure it gives them, to get outside this feeling of powerlessness and of being a victim.

Bonding is key

Can you give parents a few tips on how they can help their children become more resilient?

Dawin: That very much depends on the child's age. With young children, the most important thing is bonding, bonding, bonding – and reliability, availability and predictability. If you have a good bond with your child, a secure bond, you have created a good

foundation. And then you have to recognise when it's time to increase the child's autonomy so as not to be overprotective. It also inhibits a child's resilience if I take away his/her decisions, solve all his/her problems, and remove all obstacles. It's also about developing the child's ability to solve problems. I could say, for example, "OK, so you've had an argument, or, so you've had a problem at school – what are you going to do now?" If necessary, I help with the problem, but I shouldn't shoulder all the burden for the child. It's about giving the child boundaries, rules and orientation and saying, "No, that's enough, that's not allowed." In other situations I could say to a child, "You can decide now; this is your room for manoeuvre." And this always needs to be changed and adapted as the child gets older.

The most important thing is to communicate to the child, "You're fine just as you are, you're important, and I think you're great." And I think this is what has sometimes taken too much of a back seat, particularly nowadays, when children have so much going on – going here and there in the afternoons, constantly studying and achieving. It's important to convey to a child that "over and above your achievements and what you can do, you are fine just as you are, you're important and great". I believe children can't hear this enough. ■

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