

FAQs

*“The child and his exoneration
from the shadows of great anxiety”*

Often asked questions regarding the picture book which is offering help to parents and children with traumatic war- and flight experience

by Susanne Stein

What is the contents of the trauma picture book?

The picture book consists of four parts:

- Pages 4 – 29 show a picture-story. The story tells about a child experiencing a traumatic situation during war. Child and parents flee into a safe country. The child however is still pursued by fear until it manages to free himself with various means of assistance.
- Pages 30 – 37 present brief educational guidance for parents of traumatized children
- Pages 38 – 43 may be used as a drawing-book on various subjects for children who are interested.
- Pages 44 – 45 provide information about the author and the large support-group which took part in setting up, publishing and translating this picture book
- Pages 46 and 47 of the German edition includes useful information for helpers lacking therapeutic training on traumata

The trauma picture book is meant for whom?

Originally the picture book was meant for joint use within the families concerned:

- For children from war countries, who endured overwhelming fear during their flight to a safe country and who are still suffering in one way or the other after being safe.
- For parents who want better understanding of the present situation and who want to help their child

In the meantime, the book is also used by colleagues (associates) and voluntary members, who assist refugee children in play- schools, schools, clubs, societies, and lodgings. This makes me happy. There is some more advice for them on how to use the book further below. Paediatricians, alternative practitioners, psychotherapists, and trauma psychotherapists have asked for the picture book and their comments were very favourable.

Can the book be bought?

The trauma picture book is a voluntary project. Downloads of the picture book are free of charge. Purchasing books is not possible. The original idea is, that members of organizations with use of colour printers either do their own downloads or use a copy shop.

However, occasionally I get a small number of copies free of charge from organizations or companies. This enables me to post one or the other copy - provided I get a stamped and addressed envelope (DIN-A.4) for postage. Prior to this kindly enquire per mail to Trauma-Bildbuch@hamburg.de whether stock is available.

Furthermore, it is imperative to let me know, which language is required.

How can the trauma picture book help at its best?

- It is easier for children to understand themselves. It is relieving to find a reason or a (psycho)logical explanation for persisting anxiety or for bodily signs of stress. A possible sense of shame and a feeling of guilt is being decreased. Their confidence is being strengthened.
- Parents and supporters get a better understanding of the children. They come to know, how to ease the situation for their children and to realize which behavior could result in additional problems. It also helps when parents or supporters are feeling powerless.
- It is meant as entrance door to a trauma therapy and this door opens a fraction. The mostly unknown possibility of therapy becomes visible.

Is the trauma picture book a substitute for a therapy?

Unfortunately, this is not possible. The trauma picture book is just a small help. It is a “crutch which helps to get through difficult times while having an injured leg - till the wound either heals or can be treated by a specialist”. The trauma picture book cannot cure the suffering, but hopefully make it easier and strengthen confidence – following a Chinese proverb “better to light a candle instead of moaning about darkness”

The technical terminology would say: The picture book can contribute towards stabilization, activation of resources and towards psychoeducation. Hopefully, it reliefs the strain and makes life easier for parents and children.

How to make positive use of the trauma picture book?

As a supporter, you could offer the picture book to parents or children or you look through it together. For persons concerned it is important to keep up the following attitude: You accompany children or adults friendly, modestly, and compassionately while browsing through the book. You realize their feelings and you reply to their questions. You know nothing better, you establish no diagnosis. You offer explanations. You present means of

support. If it is of use, it is all right. If the afflicted person refuses it, it is rightly his/her decision.

Or, referring to the picture with the crutch: You know that you offer a “crutch” only and that you are not “the doctor”.

What am I supposed to do if the child is being confronted with irksome memories during drawing or viewing pictures?

I talked to trauma-therapists about this important question which very often came up during various activities and I got the following advice for “laypersons” – for those without expert knowledge and without training on trauma. My special thanks go to Annette Junge Schepermann, psychologist and trauma specialist for children at Hamburg:

Dealing with possibly traumatized children means to consequently rely on resources and to avoid all intervention. Otherwise a traumatic flood of raw memory fragments could be triggered. It is useful and mostly adequate if you do something with the child where it can experience its strength or where it can achieve something new and good. As soon as a child senses, that you encourage him and that you want to help, it will enjoy it. Just by doing this you do a lot for these children, without having to touch painful memories. Rehabilitation of traumatic events should be done by experts.

In case a child starts speaking innately about terrible incidents or starts drawing awful memories it makes sense to keep in mind the following advice:

- Acknowledge in your own words that what had happened was awful, however without going into details which probably are traumatic: “I am sure that what happened has been very, very awful for you”. That is sufficient. It is important to acknowledge the victim-status of the person or family concerned without ifs and buts. This is an indication that you did realize the extent of the “horror”. At the same time one should adamantly focus on existing strength and resources and possibly on existing positive strokes of fate within the experienced nightmare. Console the child if necessary. If you pay attention to this advice and otherwise just act wholeheartedly you sure will make everything perfectly right.
- Do not do any research. Abstain from information – even if you are interested yourself. Should the child want to speak about traumatic details it possibly should draw the incident or it should be re-enacted event with little dolls while talking. Encourage the child to talk in third-person in the perspective of an eagle: “Then Ahmed ran as fast as he could” instead of saying “I ran as fast as I could”. This does help to put up a certain distance between the child and what has happened. I prevent that the child is being flooded with raw emotions and body sensations stemming from the trauma situation.
- As soon as possible you should return calm and clear to the mental orientation of resources: “*What did help you to get out of this awful situation?*” And if there is no answer from the child you just ask: “*When do you feel good today?*” “*Whom and what do you like best?*” Or “*What should we play, do or draw now to make you feel*

happy again?" There of course it does help to know the child a bit better. Then you know what it loves to do. Or you find out whatever it likes to do in this situation. In case the child drew or re-enacted the traumatic situation you can invite it to bring the "story" to a good end and fantasize about it – what should possibly have happened to achieve a happy- end, either by drawing or by acting the positive outcome. Mostly this has an immediate consoling and calming effect and matches simple interventions used by trauma specialists working with children

In case you are still worried about the child, please do not hesitate to talk to his parents or to specialized therapists about it.

Why does the trauma picture book not show any trauma of adults?

The situation of refugee families very often is much more complicated and dramatic than presented in the trauma picture book. Parents could be traumatized too, family members could have died, possibly there have been several situations with fear and anxiety. Unfortunately, there is much more suffering than is presented here. Those who are concerned surely need additional help. The trauma picture book "only" shows the perspective of a child who fled with its parents and who now lives here.

By means of reduction the book consciously concentrates on the essence of something and on something which still is manageable. The trauma picture book is supposed to help directly or indirectly children who are traumatized by war by means of understanding, practical help, encouragement and advice to therapy possibilities. More cannot and shall not be achieved.

How come that you - being a teacher, change agent and agent of human resources - have created a trauma picture book?

This is how it happened: Autumn 2013 my husband and I brought a small donation to a refugee lodging in Hamburg. Then something happened. We got to know fascinating people who had survived many ordeals. It was quickly realized that donations were o.k. but not sufficient. Talks, visits, and mutual get-togethers were more important. In a while we became closer and our relations intensified. Fund raising campaigns were to follow and the idea for a trauma picture book cropped up. Why? Close by we noticed, how bright children openly or hidden suffered and how affectionate parents had no idea how to help. At the same time, we encountered power and lust for life. This gave me the idea to use my educational skills und psychological knowledge as well as my creativity on such a picture book.

Thereby I was actively supported by many persons around me, i.e. a diploma psychologist, a doctor, specialized on psychosomatic medicine and psycho-analysis and two trauma specialists of the foundation Children for Tomorrow in the hospital UKE. Further information referring to this one can find in the imprint of the trauma picture book on page 44 and 45.