

# Empowerment through teddy bears

## A CONVERSATION WITH FREDERIK HANSEN\* ON THE TEDDY TELEPHONE SHOW

### *The Teddy Telephone Show*

*The Teddy Telephone Show* is a 40-episode TV series for preschoolers, starring teddy bears who are home alone and call their best friends in kindergarten for assistance (Ill. 1). The teddy bears need help with everything from making a marmalade sandwich to tackling being bullied by the other bears. Luckily the children know what to do. In the show, the children are the experts on their own lives and get empowered through the teddy bears.

### *What is the idea behind The Teddy Telephone Show?*

**Hansen:** The keyword for me is authenticity. I realised that in documentaries with preschoolers we get authentic images, but not in other formats. What we wanted to get were interviews, dialogues, statements, opinions from preschoolers. Preschoolers tend to analyse and please the adults. So instead of actually answering what is in their heart, 4- and 5-year-olds often try to figure out what the right answer is. I really wanted to crack the code: how can we have children talk from an authentic point of view, where they aren't trying to please anyone, but where the things they are saying come straight from the heart?

### *How did you crack the code?*

**Hansen:** Sometimes, an apple just lands right in your hand. I was on holiday in Berlin with

my daughter, who was 4 at that time. She was very interested in my iPhone. In Berlin, I wanted to show her the world and all these amazing historic sites and museums. But she just wanted to look at my phone and play games. In the end I thought: OK, instead of constantly being annoyed about that, how can I turn this into a playful situation? So I started to make a game out of it and pretended the mobile rang (makes phone ring sound). She answered the phone and said: "Hello?" Then I pretended to be her teddy bear, who was Elmo from *Sesame Street* at that time. We had left him in the holiday apartment in Berlin and he was home alone there. He called her, because he really needed to pee, but didn't know how to do that. So my daughter totally ignored what was happening around her, totally ignored me, even though she knew I was the one making the voice. She just very patiently explained to Elmo how you go to the toilet. That was fascinating! Then I kept on trying things. Elmo didn't make it to the toilet, he peed a bit on the carpet. Then he had this potty of pee, and my daughter

very genuinely tried to help him and told him that he has to flush that pee away. But again something went wrong and he opened the window and threw the pee out. And then the doorbell rang. There was an angry man outside with pee in his hair. All day through we played this telephone game. And I knew this could lead to something.

### *How did it go on?*

**Hansen:** Well, I had this theory: every day, preschoolers learn something new or acquire new knowledge, every day some new challenge comes up, something that they have to cope with. Every day, to some degree, they also succeed, for example, they get a little bit better at tying their shoes. I tried to find a way how I can use this telephone game to let them pass on their knowledge. When they talk to adults, they try to please them and try to figure out what they want to hear. But if they talk to a teddy bear or plush toy, the answers are really authentic. I guess it has something to do with hierarchy. A plush toy is obviously lower in hierarchy in the children's life. So I help my daughter, my daughter helps her plush toy. That's the whole logic and it worked. In this way we can actually make the children communicate very complex opinions on very complex social situations.

### *What kind of questions do the teddy bears ask?*

**Hansen:** The structure of the show is that the teddy bear calls the children to get help. It always starts with a very practical question which I



Ill. 1: In *The Teddy Telephone Show*, teddy bears are home alone and call their preschool friends in kindergarten to help them cope with different tasks



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Ill. 2: Through the teddy bears the children learn social and empathetic behaviour, e.g. sharing food with friends

know the children can master. So it can be anything from “How do you score a goal in football?” to “How do you make a birthday cake?” Then we construct the story. From the children’s perspective we would say, for example: “You take some whipped cream and some cake and you put it together, and then you put a candle on it. That is a birthday cake. That is fine for now.” So the teddy bear is very happy, and replies: “I will do that!” But when the teddy bear calls back again, we build a problem around the cake, a problem with a social aspect: there is only enough cake for 4 teddy bears, but now a fifth teddy bear will come. What are the teddies supposed to do? Then the children have to figure out a solution. We are not talking about advanced mathematics here, mostly we are talking about the social aspect and what we want our children to learn: there is room for everyone. So the question is: how can we split for the fifth teddy bear? And then they will come up with different kinds of solutions, e.g. taking a little piece from each of the plates and sharing it (Ill. 2). We often end up with the teddy bears calling back with some kind of humorous aspects like: “Now we are done eating, but donkey plush toy has made a

complete mess of himself. Instead of eating the cake, he sat on his cake” – classic slapstick with a photo of a plush toy sitting in whipped cream and making the children laugh and telling him something like: “You should probably go to the toilet, take some toilet paper and wipe your whipped cream bum.”

**To what extent does the show foster resilience?**

**Hansen:** I have a 3-year-old son. For him, the day he was able to put on all of his gear and his boots on his own to go outside with his friends and not stay inside waiting for adults to help him was a moment of getting strong. That was a moment where he went from being a victim – waiting for an adult’s help – to actually taking charge of a situation and making it on his own. That’s fostering resilience. What *The Teddy Telephone Show* does is take those small situations where you go from not being able to being able, these small moments of feeling resilient. Then we go into the social arena which has far bigger impacts.

**How do you produce these authentic moments when you are in a studio?**

**Hansen:** We moved into the kindergarten where we got a room to produce it, have all the cameras and equipment there and start on Monday morning. The doors were open, so in the beginning the children were very excited: what is going on? We answered all their questions. Around noon everybody knew who we were and what we were doing. Then the children started going into their daily routines. So we created a situation saying: “Ok, if anybody wants to ‘play’ *The Teddy Telephone Show*, just come and tell us.” So the door was open, yet of course not while we were shooting. We shot on 2 cameras, miked all the room and only one photographer was handling everything. When everything was running, he was hiding under a blanket with a zoom lens. Then we had a phone and an actor in a cupboard in the kin-

dergarten calling the phone. So they were really talking on the phone. Then, in the postproduction, we dubbed the voices and edited everything. So we really created an adult-free situation in the production.

Working with that phone technology was actually quite challenging – more than once a phone line dropped or something with the connection went wrong – so we had a back-up plan: I was hiding under a blanket in the room with a monitor, and then we made a pretended telephone call. I would call the voices from the blanket. That also worked, because when we were out of sight, we were out of mind.

**What would you hope that children in front of the TV gain from your show?**

**Hansen:** I’m absolutely sure: every time we produce something and show it to children, it should inspire and engage them to turn off the TV and go do it themselves. That is what I think *The Teddy Telephone Show* does. It creates a situation where you recognise the children on the screen being exactly like you and all your friends at kindergarten. They are talking about topics that are the exact same topics that you are interested in, and they are capable of actually conveying information and helping others. They are empathetic; they are loving; they are social. That is what I want to send through the television screen or the iPad into the children so they can turn off the screen and go out and play with their own teddy bears or their own friends and be empathetic, loving people. ■



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