

Draft Paper for Presentation at the Inclusive Interdisciplinary Conference on Violence

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“What Happened to Koozoo?” a children’s book about vulnerability

The book about Koozoo was born out of the need for a tool that would make it easier for teachers of young children to broach the subject of vulnerability and personal safety with the children in their kindergartens. There are beautifully written and illustrated children’s books that deal with the topic of bullying or differentness, some using animals as protagonists, some using human characters. However, the very few books that focus on abuse, exclusively tell stories that present human children and adults. Young children tend to be overwhelmed by the directness of such stories, and because they often find it too stressful to identify with the characters, they are likely to refuse to engage with the story-telling. This is why I chose (together with my colleague Tamar Verete-Zehavi) to write a book about three chameleons, a bird and a rabbit.

The story about Koozoo and his friends is an open-ended tale, where we don’t know for sure what happened to Koozoo, but we do know that something hurtful occurred. Adults reading the book can tell immediately where the plot takes a turn from innocence to possible danger, and then to the signs of trauma. Children on the other hand, will apply their personal experiences to their understanding of the story, and if these life events do not include any form of abuse, they will not read that into the story.

Getting into the system

Upon writing the book, I wanted to immediately have it used in the entire kindergarten system! My goal was to have a book about Koozoo in every kindergarten, as an accessible tool for teachers to discuss and teach about the topic of abuse and vulnerability, about personal safety and empowerment. I also believe that teachers will be able to identify children who experience abuse in their lives, and take the first steps necessary in breaking the cycle. I decided to dedicate the first year of Koozoo’s existence to studying and discovering the most effective way for bringing him and his story into the system.

My research began in the offices of the superintendents of the early childhood settings. I read the book to five superintendents, and while they were all reacting positively to the book, I was amazed at how each one gave me feedback from a completely different perspective. One of them focused on the technical challenges I would encounter in my attempt to doing research in the kindergartens, and immediately provided me with

contacts who would be able to support me. The second superintendent was excited about the book, and began giving me suggestions for improvements in the layout and design of the book itself. The next reaction I got matched some of the concerns I had expected to come across – worries about disclosures, the difficulties in dealing with complex populations, kindergarten teachers possibly being hassled or even attacked by abusive parents, and maybe even lawsuits against teachers who report cases of abuse. The superintendent from the religious sector was very interested in the book, expressed her pleasure with the fact that these were (sexless) animals, and how the missing anatomical details made this book more accessible to the population she was dealing with.

So now I knew that if I were to involve kindergarten teachers in my research, there would be no resistance or disapproval on the part of the superintendents. I also realized that it would be necessary to provide the teachers with some basic guidelines regarding ways to deal with situations of disclosure and their responsibility to report cases of abuse. It was only later, after recording reactions and feedback from the teachers upon their initial encounter with the book, when I came to understand their need for more in-depth recommendations regarding ways for working with this book. In the course of this year, that which had started out as a one-page guideline had developed into a four-page handbook.

The study

This qualitative study aimed at gaining a better understanding of the attitudes, issues and needs of kindergarten teachers, when given the opportunity to use a book that tells the story of hurt and vulnerability to the children in their classrooms. I broke the study into three parts: In the first part I read the book to the teacher, and recorded her reactions and thoughts regarding the story. In the second part the teachers were to read the book to small groups of children (4 children at most) – at first from beginning to end without any discussions, simply hearing the children's reactions and thoughts regarding what they thought may have happened to Koozoo. They were encouraged to do a second reading, where they were to use the book to call attention to various themes that appear in the story, now turning the book into a focused learning opportunity. The third part of the study included an interview with the teacher after having used the book in her kindergarten, where I was able to ascertain needs that had arisen as well as get more feedback on the story itself.

My study was relatively small-scale, I approached 25 teachers, and 18 agreed to read the book in their kindergartens. In reading the book to the teachers, which was the first step in my study, I encountered the expected reactions of fear – what if a child tells me he or she is being abused? What do I do? How do I react? The first idea that comes to mind with adults, who have heard the story, is that Koozoo has been abused. Maybe

physically, possibly sexually, and certainly emotionally abused. This thought, by the way, is not the main focus in the answers and hypotheses given by children, when asked what they think may have happened to Koozoo. Reading the book to children has allowed teachers and parents (many of the teachers decided to take the book home and read to their own children) to peek through the window of the lives of the children in their care, and learn about experiences that are not usually part of everyday conversations.

Aside from the fear reaction, I also realized that something else was going on, that was keeping teachers from opening this line of discussion and teaching with the children. After reading the book to the teachers (each one alone with me), most of them began telling me of their own traumatic experiences of the past. Some simply began crying, and some became deeply thoughtful, and in both cases often stories of past abuse surfaced. I believe they had spent so many years pushing these incidents aside, disconnecting or forgetting as a form of defense mechanism in order to function in their daily lives. And now, when asking what had happened to Koozoo, in their empathy towards him they suddenly found themselves reconnecting to their own dark spaces. Understandably, this will have sparked a sense of resistance towards wanting to deal with Koozoo, with abused children, and inevitably with themselves.

The second phase of my study, where the teachers read the book to small groups of children, happened without me (except for one teacher who insisted I be present while she read the book to a group of children, so that I might give her feedback and directives for future readings). Most teachers took notes of the children's reactions, others wrote down their thoughts regarding the use of the book or their needs for additional information (to be added to the guidelines). It was interesting to notice how long it took for many of the teachers to actually read the book in their kindergartens. At first, upon agreeing to take part in the study, they had expressed a certain eagerness to get started. But once I was no longer there, talking to them, many of them began putting the reading off. It is possible that, as one of the teachers noted directly, if I had offered to be present during their storytelling session, they would have felt safer and braver about venturing into this kind of story.

In the third part of my study, where I met the teachers for a follow-up interview, they shared their notes with me, and responded to my inquiry regarding their own experience in reading the book to the children. Topics that came up were around the necessity for finding a quiet space for uninterrupted reading and sharing, and their surprise that the whole thing was less difficult than they had anticipated. Another theme that came as a pleasant surprise was how many of the teachers had become motivated to use the book as a form of assessment tool, in their quest for better understanding the children who were behaving in distressed ways.

Conclusions

The story about Koozoo and his friends awakened topics that were expected from the start, such as fears around dealing with child abuse, but also presented insights regarding the enormous impact teachers can have on young children, once they overcome the barriers of silence that have been prevalent in their own lives. That being said, in order to be able to read this book to young children, it is important that the adult be aware of what the story arouses in him or her. To what extent do her own experiences of the past affect her willingness and ability to approach the subject of personal safety and abuse? While the act of my reading the story to the teachers, at the first phase of my study, was initially intended to invite feedback and create an interest in using the book, it quickly became part of a process where teachers were facing their own emotional reactions to the story, often telling me of their personal experiences, and thus freeing themselves up to read the book to the children without projecting their own emotions onto them. I realized how my own act of listening to the teachers after reading the book to them, is kin to the listening of the teachers to the children – in both cases it is a giving of space to the telling of personal stories.

After repeatedly meeting responses of fear on the part of the teachers, it became clear to me that “What happened to Koozoo?” should be presented and seen first and foremost as a tool for teaching rules for personal safety and empowerment, and only secondly as a book that invites possible disclosure of abuse. Once the emphasis is put on highlighting the themes that appear in the book, as well as suggesting strategies for working with children on these topics as a form of preventative action, the book becomes less daunting and teachers become more willing to engage.

Themes that the book puts forth include: friendship, empathy, strangers, intuition, trustworthy adults, and the power of telling. When listening to children's reactions, discussions aroused around places that are scary, what to do when friends start acting hurtful, who could I go to if something bad happened to me, and various types of anxieties. In hearing the reports of the teachers, I was impressed by the amount and variety of topics the reading had turned up, way beyond my original intentions and focus.

The importance of the guide booklet was stressed over and over, and the comments and observations I received from the teachers contributed greatly to the expansion of the initial single page of guidelines.

And finally, while many teachers expressed many different reactions of distress, there were also very encouraging responses to the story of Koozoo. My favorite one is: "How could it be, that this book hasn't existed until now?!"

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