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NEWS FROM THE WORK OF EMERGENCY PEDAGOGY



Freunde der
Erziehungskunst
Rudolf Steiners

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22

“Man is only fully human when he plays.” FRIEDRICH SCHILLER

Play is a fundamental need for children and a key component of healthy development. The scientific community now has ample evidence of the great value of play, as well as the risks that arise when children lack opportunities to play. Play is particularly significant in the context of traumatic experiences: it provides support on various levels and enables children to process what they have been through.

Traumatic experiences are always disruptive in nature. They tear children away from their familiar daily routines, from relationships and from their sense of security. Through shared play, however, children can reconnect with themselves and their peers. Creativity, joy, self-efficacy and a sense of belonging become tangible, and distressing experiences can be processed in an age-appropriate way.

A striking example of this emerged following the floods in the Ahr Valley in 2021. The devastating consequences of the disaster directly affected many people. Zoe Besand reports on her observations on the ground. There are the children at the Pustebume kindergarten on the edge of the Ahr Valley, processing what they have experienced through play: cars are buried in the sand and dug out again; in their play, the children flee from the water to the playhouse – through play, they begin to heal; in their play, a fairy appears and works her magic so they can breathe underwater. In play, there can be a happy ending. You can read more about this from page 25.

Educators made similar observations in their work with children in Lebanon, many of whom had experienced displacement, violence, or neglect. There, too, it became clear just how great the need for play was. The children wanted one thing above all else: to play. Play offered them a space where they could be children again, free from fear and overwhelming stress.

But what happens when natural disasters, war, or other crises no longer allow for this space to play? In acute emergencies, parents' focus is understandably initially and primarily on securing food, shelter and accommodation. Schools and nurseries are often closed – and the children? What happens to them during this time? And what can be done to prevent trauma-related disorders from arising in the first place?

It was from these questions that the Friends' emergency education programme emerged in 2006. In 2026, we will be celebrating 20 years of emergency education – two decades of continuous development, practical experience, and a deepened understanding of how children and young people can be supported following traumatic experiences.

Emergency Education is founded on the anthroposophical view of the human being, as well as Waldorf education and Waldorf kindergarten education. Fittingly, 2026 also marks a special anniversary for the Waldorf kindergarten: 100 years of Waldorf kindergarten education.

Wherever emergency educators are at work, they also encounter very young children. The question of how we can best support them remains central – and play is, and always will be, an essential key.



*With heartfelt thanks
for your support
of our emergency
pedagogical work*

Fiona Bay

Breaking the 'silence': emergency educational support for young children following the earthquake

Shortly after the earthquake that severely affected parts of Turkey and Syria in 2023, the Friends of Waldorf Education began implementing emergency educational measures. The Turkish Waldorf teacher Cansu Kaygısız Vardar, who is currently also writing her doctoral thesis in the field of early childhood education, has been an important partner for us in this endeavour, and played a key role in setting up so-called 'Child Friendly Spaces' (child protection centres). In her very personal account, she describes how important warmth, rhythm and stability are, particularly for young children, following such serious traumatic experiences.

When the severe earthquake struck eleven towns in southern and south-eastern Turkey in February 2023, I knew immediately that I wanted, above all, to help the young children in this situation. Together with an emergency educational team from the Friends of Waldorf Education, I travelled to the area just one month after the disaster. We wanted to reach the children as quickly as possible. Once there, it became clear just how difficult the situation was, especially for the young children. We immediately observed all the behaviours described in the specialist literature as examples of how children react under stress: anger, lashing out, or crying, as well as difficulties in socialising, listening, concentrating and following instructions. All of this was clearly visible. And then there was the 'silence' that is not described in the textbooks, namely, a deep, unsettling silence that was still present even three months after the earthquake. It means that children cannot express their thoughts and feelings and that they are 'stuck'. We wanted to overcome this silence, and it was clear to us that to do so, the children needed reliable op-





portunities to play, move about and socialise. For this reason, we set up two Child Friendly Spaces for young children in Hatay.

In these spaces, the children find warmth: in the way the teachers treat them, in the herbal teas, and in the freshly baked bread. Warmth is the first step towards overcoming stress and building trust. After that, rhythm, play and art take centre stage. To enable children to express and thus process their feelings, they need constant opportunities to sing, paint, run, play and laugh. Listening to stories being read aloud is also very important – as is the chance to create their own stories.

At the beginning, the traumatic effects of the earthquake were clearly visible in the children. I saw children running non-stop, as if they hadn't managed to escape the earthquake in time. Then there were children playing in the smallest of spaces, even though they had an area of 50 square metres at their disposal – a clear sign that they had no inner space in which to spread out freely. Some played alone, even though there were 20 children in the same room. I listened to their conversations and stories about the earthquake and watched games in which injured people were taken to hospital by ambulance. Many children showed fear at every loud noise. A child with short hair crouched in the corner and pulled out her hair. Above all, however, it was difficult to detect a sparkle in the children's eyes.

At the end of each intervention module, which lasted around four months, it was time to say goodbye

to the children. We saw children who were completely different from those at the start. They talked, played, created things and – most importantly – told jokes.

I saw the girl who had stopped pulling out her hair – now with long hair. At the same time, I also saw relieved mothers who had been given the chance to have time for themselves again, to make friends, to talk about their worries, and to receive support for their children's development.

More than 100 children have now played in our Child Friendly Space. Over a period of four months at a time, for three hours a day, we supported them in building their own future. All this work has clearly shown us that, through warmth, rhythm, art, play and stories, we can help children adapt to life at an early stage. It has also highlighted to us the importance of time and support for mothers in order to continue the healing process.

Even three years after the earthquake, many people are still living in tents and shipping containers. Children continue to see destruction. They continue to hear their families' traumatic accounts of the earthquake – even if they themselves were not yet born at the time. This means there is still a great need for spaces where young children can play.

And there remains a need to consider how best to support children born into disaster-stricken environments.

*Cansu Kaygısız Vardar,
Project Manager Emergency Pedagogy, Turkey*

Zoe Besand is a Waldorf kindergarten teacher and has been a regular volunteer with the educational emergency response teams of The Friends of Waldorf Education for over 13 years, taking part in missions around the world. We asked her to share her impressions with us.

In November 2013, I received a request via the Waldorf kindergarten mailing list asking whether there was a Waldorf kindergarten teacher who could accompany an emergency education team from the Friends of Waldorf Education to a Syrian refugee camp in northern Iraq to organise activ-

ities for the young children there. At the time, I was working in a Waldorf kindergarten in Berlin Kreuzberg and had two Syrian boys in my group. The war in their parents' homeland was clearly affecting the children and was very much on our minds. My first assignment: blue and white are the colours of the tents and tarpaulins providing shelter here in Domiz, northern Iraq, for the 140,000 mostly Kurdish refugees from Syria. Protection was critical: from the scorching summer sun, with temperatures reaching up to 50 degrees, from the dust, and in the winter from the cold, mud, wind and snow. The ground here is loamy and sticks to your wellies. Nevertheless, people are neatly dressed, and laundry is drying everywhere between the tents. On a stone it says: “Hope is everything!”



The mission in Domiz was followed by further missions in northern Iraq, Nepal, Slovenia, Lebanon and the Ahr Valley. Everywhere I met children who were so keen to imitate, who soaked up everything offered to them like sponges: singing, dancing, playing games and doing crafts. How delighted the children were during the sing-along “Show us your feet, show us your shoes”, when they realised what the movements were telling them. Beaming with joy, they pointed to the washing drying on a line between the tents.

After the major flooding, I supported the Pustblume nursery on the edge of the Ahr Valley as an emergency teacher. Here I observed how the children process their experiences through play: cars are buried in the sand and dug out again; in play, the children flee from the water to the playhouse; in play, they begin to heal; in play, a fairy appears and casts a spell so they can breathe underwater. In play, there can be a happy ending.

I was particularly struck by the account of a nursery teacher who told me that she had forgotten almost all the songs, games and rhymes she had regularly used with the children before the disaster. Only a few, namely those recited every day at the nursery, such as the meal-time rhyme, were still accessible after the horror of the flood.

So, I wish for every child to have caring, nurturing people around them who bring firm rituals into the children's lives, rituals that touch the children's souls so deeply that they can draw on them even in times of need. The trauma therapist Kati Bohnet from Berlin calls these rituals ‘brushing teeth for the soul’.

For me, emergency educational interventions are an opportunity to rebuild connections that have been severed by a traumatic event. They give me the assurance that children and adults are seen and acknowledged in their experiences and their struggle to survive. During these interventions, I am inspired and grateful to witness that there are people everywhere who mobilise their strength so that the children entrusted to them do not break under the weight of their traumatic experiences.

I have gained hope that a small spark can ignite the power of self-healing, that every child has a bright future. After the many experiences during these missions, which have been very instructive for me too, I am certain: joy heals! And as it says on the stone in the middle of the refugee camp: hope is everything!



Ethiopia: **Help in the** **Tigray Region**

In Ethiopia's Tigray region, following a successful emergency education project with the local school and the Fink Society's kindergarten, we are able to build on the work we have already begun. Funded by the WDR Christmas Miracle, the project focuses on food security for children and young people in a region that is still characterised by infrastructure deficits as a result of ongoing conflicts and a protracted rehabilitation process following the devastating war.

Iraq: **Project visit to a** **partner organisation**

Our colleagues Lina Bäuerle and Fabian Krämer travelled to Kurdistan, Iraq, at the beginning of February for a week-long project visit. Our local partner organisation, Island of Hope, offers emergency and trauma-informed educational activities for children, as well as training courses for those working in

the fields of education and social services. The aim of the visit was to gain a better understanding of the local structures and challenges and to look to the future together: how can local organisations become more self-reliant, what resources are available locally, and how can we bridge the gap between (German) bureaucracy, local policies, and the growing psychosocial needs on the ground?

Gaza: **Emergency educational** **support for children**

For a very long time, the situation in Gaza was so unstable that it was virtually impossible to carry out emergency educational work there. Finally, in January 2026, the project 'Healing and Learning: A Response to Trauma in Gaza and the Collapse of the Education System' was able to begin. In partnership with the "NAWA Centre for Arts and Association", children aged between four and twelve in central Gaza are once again being offered a safe space where they receive psy-

chosocial support in the form of emergency educational activities, designed to help them and their parents come to terms with their trauma.

Ukraine: **Our support continues**

Following many years of major projects in the Ukraine, we are delighted to be able to continue working with seven local partner organisations this year. A project was launched on 1 January 2026 to support the emergency and trauma educators we have trained in continuing their vital work in this field. The war continues, and the winter months are particularly difficult for the people there. We are delighted to be able to continue supporting them!



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