



Her hand puppets, including Finn the dolphin, create a channel of communication with the children – but her own facial expressions also reflect the emotions under discussion: Prof. Dr. Ute Koglin at a kindergarten in Oldenburg.

# Mission: To convey emotions

Ute Koglin uses a toy dolphin and snail shell when she applies her scientific concepts.  
A portrait of an expert in educational psychology

Ute Koglin's closest colleagues are Ferdi, Finn and Lobo. Finn is out and about at the moment. Ferdi is perched on the bookshelf and Lobo is sitting on an office chair, smiling rather idiotically and revealing four sharp teeth. "Oh, excuse me, just put him to one side," says Ute Koglin. Lobo is a bright green dragon, a cuddly toy like Ferdi and Finn. When Ute Koglin goes to give a training session at a kindergarten or

primary school, she always has one of her animals with her. Finn the dolphin is currently with Ute Koglin's students at a kindergarten in Oldenburg. "What a shame, I would have liked to introduce you to him as well," says Ute Koglin.

Children love Finn, Lobo and Ferdi the chameleon. They stroke the animals and hug them goodbye. "The best way to reach children is using hand puppets. It's no different today than in

the old days. At some point the children completely forget we are there and just talk directly to the puppets," says Koglin. With the soft toys the children are more open and less inhibited than when an adult talks directly to them.

Such openness is key to Ute Koglin's work. Ute Koglin is a psychologist. She holds the Oldenburg University Chair for the Psychology of Special Education and Rehabilitation Counselling. Koglin

researches "the social-emotional skills in children from kindergarten to adolescence," as it says on her website. She deals with the question of what constitutes "normal" behaviour in children and what skills they have at particular ages. She tries to determine what is going wrong when children are unable to master certain tasks, when they become aggressive or anxious. And she works on methods to promote these skills. "The first step is to recognise the problems early on and to provide a correct diagnosis of the problematic behaviour – only then can you help," she says.

Most of her research in recent years has focussed on aggression. Her postdoctoral dissertation addressed "Aggressive Behaviour in Children: Current Research Trends and Methods of Prevention. Today we know a lot about how this sort of behaviour develops," she says. Genetic, psychological and social aspects all play a role. Boys tend to be more aggressive than girls; that is common knowledge now. The family is also key. Children who are beaten and tyrannised from an early age quickly learn that you can achieve your goals by using violence – and they adopt this behaviour themselves. "The earlier we can show children that there are alternatives, the better our chances are of preventing this behaviour from manifesting."

## "The best way to reach children is using hand puppets"

Ute Koglin plays some video footage from a kindergarten, a role-playing game. A boy has deliberately sat down on a girl's chair. Finn steps in. He asks how the children are feeling. He tells them to say what they want loudly and clearly. "You're sitting on my chair. I want you to get up," says the girl, almost whispering. The boy does get up but Finn interrupts: "Say that a little bit louder! The girl repeats the words, this

time in a loud voice." "Very good," says Finn and nods with his little grey head. "Well done!"

Ute Koglin's training sessions deal to a large extent with emotions. The children learn from one another what it feels like when someone is nasty to them. They understand when and why someone is sad. This sounds almost trivial, like basic "common sense". But there are children who have difficulties with such things. Children who have experienced a lot of violence at home, for example, or who are lonely. There are children who suffer from high levels of anxiety and perceive their surroundings as hostile. Markedly aggressive children, on the other hand, are almost unable to recognise fear in the faces of others. Normally an expression of fear will inhibit aggression. But this mechanism does not function in aggressive people. And aggressive people often perceive even neutral expressions in people around them as aggressive – and flare up accordingly. The social training sessions in kindergartens and schools help children learn what feelings "look" like and how to resolve conflicts peacefully. This is why Ute Koglin refers to her social training sessions as "psychological vaccinations".

She reaches for a cardboard box. It contains playing cards, emotion cards showing children with different facial expressions. The children have fish tails – they are mermaid children. Next to the box are two small plastic bags filled with snail shells. "This is the training kit that goes with Finn, everything relates to the sea," says Koglin. Finn tells stories from his world. This allows him to deliver important messages to the children in a fun and easy way. Ute Koglin developed the contents of the training sessions together with other researchers from Lower Saxony and Bremen who also work at the Nordwestdeutsches Präventionsforum. One of the forum's aims is to professionalise psychological support for children and provide it with a scientific basis. "There are plenty of social training and prevention programmes across Germany, but

some of them are pretty amateurish," Koglin says. "They all mean well but some lack the scientific underpinnings. Little is gained by investing a lot of energy in the wrong thing." She uses her own training kits to show nursery and school teachers how to provide children with proper psychological support. She has developed many of the exercises herself. In the training sessions which she and her students carry out personally, she tests the effectiveness of these exercises – for example by comparing the children's behaviour; comparing children who have undergone social training with those who are unschooled. She also organises further education for kindergarten and school teachers.

## "Little is gained by investing a lot of energy in the wrong thing"

But group social training sessions are not enough. Children also need individual support for their development. Kindergarten teachers are ideally suited to provide this because of the many hours they spend with the children every day. And in kindergarten children are not under pressure to learn, as they are in school. But here, too, before a child can be helped, it is critical to first pinpoint any developmental deficits. To this end Ute Koglin worked together with Franz Petermann, a pioneer of psychology in paediatrics at Bremen University, to develop teaching kits for kindergarten and school teachers that enable them to accurately assess a child's level of development. Their books for "Observing and Documenting Development" have become standard texts. They contain a series of tasks – logic problems and skill tests – which quickly reveal whether a child's level of development is normal for its age and which can easily be integrated into regular preschool activities. The teachers can opt for simpler exercises if a child has problems and thus quickly deter-



How does it feel when I'm sad or angry? And how do I recognise these emotions in others? The water nymphs in the training kits help to find answers here.

mine how far it is lagging behind other children of the same age. The books come with documentation sheets where the teachers can record the children's developmental steps in detail.

Koglin and Petermann developed these exercises on the basis of the so-called developmental milestones – skills which 95 percent of children attain at certain ages. These milestones have been recognised as the official measurement parameters in developmental psychology for many years. "They are also used by paediatricians," Koglin says. "So now kindergarten teachers and doctors use the same basis and can better share information about a child's development levels – and also better explain to parents where their child is having problems." Koglin and Petermann have also developed documentary material for crèches, because for some years now parents have been putting their children into childcare

at ever younger ages – sometimes only months after birth. For many childcare workers this is a new experience. So they are happy to have material to hand which helps them assess the development of even very young infants.

### "Now kindergarten teachers and doctors use the same basis"

As soon as they recognise a developmental deficit the childcare worker can provide the child with the "right learning opportunity" to practice. "Sometimes the problem is not very big at all," says Koglin, "but you just have to recognise it. In one of our studies we observed that children from the countryside are often unable to climb stairs properly. They can't climb steps one step at a time. This is simply because a lot of

farmhouses only use the rooms on the ground floor. So when they come to kindergarten the children have never practised climbing stairs."

Ute Koglin is happy that she ended up in Oldenburg. Here she can perfectly combine basic psychological research with the practical work of special education. And she also likes working hands-on with children. She smiles as she speaks – as she talks about how the children write her letters weeks after the training sessions to ask how Finn is doing. She is full of ideas for improving the training. "Next on the agenda is the teaching material for Finn," she says. A few months ago she went diving in the Maldives. She has always loved snorkelling, but this time she was underwater in full diving gear. "It was incredible. A ray stopped right in front of us to warm itself in the sun." But what she loved most was the masked porcupinefish, a small round fish with

a pouty mouth which raises its spikes when it feels threatened. Its eyelids are slightly droopy, which makes it look rather sleepy. "It's perfect for children. We need to make the drawings we use much more detailed, more beautiful, more true to life."

Before she came to Oldenburg she spent some time as the deputy Chair for Development and Pedagogical Psychology at the University of Bremen. After that she could have become a Professor for Child Health Psychology at Bremen University. But she opted for Oldenburg instead – because of the direct access to practical work through her students from Special Needs Education. But she still lives in Bremen, where she grew up: "It's hard to believe I did my Abitur in Bremen and still managed to make

### "An emotional rollercoaster – I wanted to know what was behind it"

something of myself!" she laughs. At the age of 13 she had a poster of an F14 fighter jet in her bedroom. That's what she was into at the time. But ultimately it was people that interested her.

When her grandmother no longer wanted to live on her own, Ute Koglin's mother brought her to live with them. Ute Koglin witnessed her grandmother's deterioration. She did not know the word dementia at the time. But when one day her grandmother asked, "What's your name then?", it was very distressing. "Then came the emotional roller-coaster of adolescence. I spent a lot of time wondering why my friends and classmates were behaving the way they were – I wanted to know what was behind it."

And then there was Klaus Berger, who taught psychology at her grammar school. Berger was actually an economist but his way of explaining psychology was so witty and fascinating that his pupils were totally captivated. "He was such a good teacher that even after our final exams we still all turned up

for his lessons on time – even though they were on Fridays first thing in the morning." As time went by Ute Koglin found out that six of Berger's pupils went on to do PhDs in psychology.

Ute Koglin went to university in Bremen. After her BA in 1998 she went to the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, just as the Erlangen-Nürnberg study was being launched – the first German longitudinal study of more than 600 children, in which psychologists analysed the effectiveness of social training.

Children are the main focus of her research. "I hope I can make a difference by providing support for children at an early age. More money should really be invested in this early support." She's an avid people-watcher. Parents with children, and children among themselves. She finds it amusing that adults sometimes behave just like children – in the train for example, when someone cheekily refuses to get up from a seat that is reserved for someone else. The response is not "I'm going to get my Mummy if you don't move," but "I'm going to get the inspector" instead. Ute Koglin has no children of her own. But she does have Gesi, a black-and-white striped cat with a thick white stripe across its nose. Gesi is 18 already and has been with Ute Koglin throughout her academic career. There are endless photos of Gesi lying among books. "If I'd been working too long, she would come over and lay her paws across the laptop."

Gesi in Bremen, Ferdi, Finn and Lobo in Oldenburg. And next up the masked porcupinefish. Ute Koglin's life is full of loveable creatures. Ute Koglin likes the friendly atmosphere at her department in Oldenburg. "No elbows, it's not always that way." But perhaps it's because of the way she is that no one feels the need to use their elbows around her. She takes people seriously, she cares about other people. On the table in her office is a small plate of sweets. Little chocolate bars and wine gums. They're vegan of course, so that during her consultation hours the students can help themselves. (ts)

