

From the Gaza border to Brooklyn, Israeli-developed Hibuki therapy helps kids cope with war trauma

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January 26, 2024

HUG POWER

A sad-eyed stuffed dog helps empower children after traumatic events, giving them someone to care for



Courtesy/Joint Distribution Committee

A therapist with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee uses a Hibuki doll during a session with a displaced child at a Dead Sea hotel, in an undated photograph.

By

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January 26, 2024

Valentina Liechtenstein was first introduced to the plush dog called Hibuki as a preschool teacher working in the southern Israeli town of Sderot. She didn't think much of the stuffed toy, with elongated arms and sad eyes, until it made its way back into her life in 2014 when her then-5-year-old daughter, Maayan, suffered post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of that summer's Gaza war, Operation Protective Edge.

"My daughter was stuttering, throwing up, her whole body was responding [during the war in 2014]," Liechtenstein, 46, told *eJewishPhilanthropy*, recalling that she was connected to Dr. FloraMor, a psychologist with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee's (JDC) who helped develop the therapy dog Hibuki — Hebrew for "huggie" — specifically for children in the Gaza-border region. Mor continues to run the program during various crises in Israel, along with other programs at JDC related to children's well-being and development around the world.

"[Mor] spent 40 minutes on the phone with me, calmed me down as a mother and then suggested we introduce Hibuki," Liechtenstein recalled. "Hibuki became a member of the family. We dressed Hibuki in baby clothes. Hibuki was with Maayan everywhere; if Maayan had to brush her teeth, Hibuki also brushed teeth. I truly believe in the power of this therapy. I saw within two weeks how she stopped shaking, stopped bedwetting."

The effects of Hibuki were so beneficial to Maayan in 2014 that when Hamas infiltrated Israel on Oct. 7, Liechtenstein immediately pulled the little brown-and-white dog with the floppy ears out of storage.

"Now, in the current war, Maayan [who is now 14] told us that she always thought she was taking care of Hibuki, but she realized Hibuki was helping her take care of herself," Liechtenstein said.

Since the start of the war against Hamas, therapists have used Hibuki dolls to treat more than 1,200 children in Israel.

Halfway around the world, Hibuki has provided similar comfort to Ukrainian refugee children who have endured an entirely different war. Valerie Khaytina, chief external officer at Hebrew Public — a charter school network in New York — has led the initiative to incorporate Hibuki into the curriculum for children who fled their homes when Russia invaded nearly two years ago and have since enrolled in Hebrew Public.

Hibuki was invented in 2006 by Israeli psychologists Shai Hen-Gal and Avi Sadeh to help kids cope with trauma from the Second Lebanon War. It quickly expanded to children throughout the country, beyond the ones living near the Lebanon border. "There was some

Hibuki use during Hurricane Sandy, but it hadn't really left Israel on a large scale," said Khaytina.

That changed during a chance encounter in October 2022.

Khaytina, who is also a Ukrainian-born refugee, was at the home of a friend who was discussing the work of Dr. Dafna Sharon Maksimov, a Belarus-born Israeli psychologist who further developed the Hibuki concept from the original one-to-two session treatment into a longer-term therapy for children affected by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

"A light bulb went off," Khaytina recalled. "I learned it was helping kids in trauma and I brought it [to New York]."

That winter, the school hired Inna Muntyan, a Ukrainian psychologist trained directly by Maksimov, to develop their newly initiated pilot program with four Ukrainian children and one Romanian child. Khaytina, meanwhile, secured a UJA-Federation of New York grant to partner with the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services. The grant money is used toward the costs of eight to 10 therapy sessions per child, which collectively run around \$1,500. Each Hibuki doll costs the school \$25. "Federation has done so much to help Ukrainians," Khaytina said. "I went to them and said, 'If you can support mental health, that is where we need help.'"

"Through the grant we have provided training for more than 40 mental health professionals in the Jewish Board and at local Jewish community centers," she said.

The first child who used Hibuki at Hebrew Public — a then-4-year-old Ukrainian refugee named Svyatik — wouldn't let go of his mom's hand during drop-off, Khaytina recalled. "Then he adjusted to his support person, who was fluent in Ukrainian, but he wouldn't let her go. He wouldn't nap. He was constantly in trauma. A child in trauma can't stay in the present or look to the future, all they can think about is the past and the war," Khaytina continued. "Physically he was in the U.S. but he was only talking about war and his house in Ukraine. He was drawing pictures of explosions."

"After Inna worked with him for three sessions, he was already napping with Hibuki. After five sessions, he was letting go, making friends and being present. [Hibuki] did wonders," Khaytina said of the pilot program. "I am not a mental health person, but as an observer I have learned what this therapy can do for kids."

Khaytina said that the first step of introducing Hibuki is to "empower the child, they went from being a victim not knowing what to do during explosions in their country into making them into a hero; here is Hibuki, who is much weaker than you are."

Maksimov told eJP that when the war in Ukraine broke out nearly two years ago, "we quickly adapted our Hibuki therapy methodology."

Maksimov outlined the four goals of Hibuki therapy: “working with the kids who have war trauma; professional development for educators and psychologists who work with traumatized kids; research; and partnerships to give business opportunities amid war.”

“We partnered with a small factory in Ukraine and brought them back to life,” Maksimov said, “they are now producing Hibuki dolls for use all over the world.”

Khaytina said that this school year, “we kicked off Hibuki on a much larger scale,” adding that it is expanding in the U.S. beyond New York. Among other children who benefit from Hibuki include those who are dealing with gun violence or whose parents are divorcing.

Back at Hebrew Public in New York, when Svyatik, the traumatized Ukrainian child, started kindergarten in September, Hibuki came too. But he doesn’t rely on the toy as much as he did the year prior — when another student in class started crying, he handed her his Hibuki for a hug.