



# Kids Help Line

## Delivering services and support

Kids Help Line is a national telephone and web-based counselling service for young people aged five to 18 years. It is free, anonymous and confidential. Kids Help Line is a leader in web-based counselling for children and young people, having launched the service, a world first, in 1999.

Kids Help Line believe the opportunity to use the online channel has assisted many young people with severe problems who would not otherwise seek help from other sources.

### Using the Internet to support kids

The Kids Help Line illustrates the potential of ICT to provide flexible service and options for clients seeking help. It employs over 100 paid counsellors and has strong connections with international counselling services. Annual expenditure is \$5 million with the main sources of funding being the Boystown lottery, Optus and the Australian Government.

Each week Kids Help Line counsellors respond to over 9000 telephone calls and 500 online contacts (web and email). Each year around 1.5 million calls are made to Kids Help Line by children and young people around Australia.

The website provides young people with access to counsellors via web counselling (real time 'chat') and email. It also has information on issues such as family relationships, bullying and homelessness and hosts a directory of almost 8000 other helping agencies around Australia.

The online counselling service started in 2000 and since then nearly 50 000 children and young people have used the service, with the rate of use doubling each year. The issues young people discuss online are more complex and severe than those dealt with on the telephone. Child abuse, mental health concerns, self harm and suicide are frequently disclosed. Feedback from young people using the service indicates that they feel safer, more anonymous and more in control of their emotions using web counselling, and that sensitive, difficult, and deeply personal issues are easier to write about than talk about.



In 2003 Kids Help Line added visual tools to web counselling for young people to use to 'show' emotions and feelings rather than having to describe them in words. Being able to communicate with counsellors visually, in addition to text, means young people have more ways to express themselves and be understood in a medium they find relevant and engaging. The tools enable kids to design the look of the counselling screen they use to talk with their counsellor. They also include a set of coloured jewels which represent the most common emotions expressed by young people during counselling such as sad, depressed, angry and frustrated. Each has several relevant

words attached to provide kids with a broader emotional vocabulary and a way of linking words to their feelings. The interface also features images, screensavers, postcards, and inspiring and cool quotes that kids can browse and download while waiting for their counsellor.

These tools are the result of prototype work on interactive online counselling tools designed by students and staff at the Centre for Creative Industries Research and Applications at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT), in close collaboration with Kids Help Line, funded by the Australian Research Council.

ICT is an integral part of Kids Help Line's operations, organisational culture and service delivery. The organisation's ICT use has expanded to include computerised messaging, rostering, case management, data management and human resources management for counselling and management staff.

A major aspect of the system is the ability for counsellors to communicate in real time with supervisors. Supervisors can monitor, intercept or join the interaction between counsellor and client using the telephone or computerised messaging system and provide support and



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guidance. This is particularly effective for managing probationary counsellors or those responding to young people who are suicidal.

Counsellors input information into a client database after every interaction, phone or online, to form one of Australia's largest information databases on young people and their issues. This information is used to inform counsellors' training needs, monitor trends in the issues affecting young people, advocate on behalf of young people, and influence policy and decision making. The media, government and universities also use this information regularly.

Kids Help Line has been able to provide an immediate response in times of crisis such as September 11 or the Canberra bushfires. The telephone system can be easily programmed so that callers from affected areas can be sent to the top of the call queue and get through to a counsellor immediately.

### **Benefits and success factors**

Kids Help Line is successful because it is accessible. It is a kid-centred, innovative and accessible service and website that appeals to its target client group. It is also free, anonymous and reliable. There are very few services for young people aged under 18 that young people view as friendly and accessible.

Young people value the anonymity and sense of control over when and how to seek help and what they say. The website is simple in design in order to be accessible over low bandwidth. Young people can contact counsellors 24 hours a day without being screened in advance or having to make an appointment. This is important to young people and the quality of the service is largely spread by word of mouth.



Effective ICT use by the Kids Help Line also enables a two-tier supervision model for counsellors. A shift supervisor works on all shifts to provide support, guidance and debriefing. They can have three-way conversations and use the Internet to access the latest information. Each counsellor meets with a clinical supervisor at least once a month for professional development and performance appraisal that may include tape and transcript analysis. Group supervision provides a chance for peer support and the sharing of practice wisdom.

### **Barriers**

One of the biggest challenges for Kids Help Line's online counselling service was transferring counselling skills from voice to text format. Because voice speed, tone and pitch are absent, it can be difficult at times for counsellors and young clients to assess information, reflect on something that either party has expressed, or express emotions and feelings.

Kids Help Line had to evaluate and consider the legal, ethical, insurance and counselling implications of providing online counselling. As the service was an innovation, there was no research or evidence-based feedback to support the concept. This made it difficult to respond to professional organisations that opposed the concept, however the development of web counselling was driven by the voices of young people who requested online options for seeking help.



Responding to the many children and young people who access the telephone and online services has been difficult at times. Sometimes only half of those who call have been answered, so staffing must be carefully managed to provide as many counsellors as possible during peak times. Counsellors work shift hours to meet demands.

### Key lessons

- Always listen to the people who use the service.
- Continually refresh, share and market knowledge development.
- Support the staff.
- Have accessible management.
- Establish and maintain key partnerships and collaborative arrangements.

### References

Kids Help Line [www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au)

QUT Creative Industries and Applications Centre (CIRAC) [www.creativeindustries.qut.com/research/cirac](http://www.creativeindustries.qut.com/research/cirac)

## COMMUNITY CONNECTIVITY

### More information

In these case studies, communities, nonprofit organisations and groups share their experiences and lessons they have learnt using ICT: enhancing capability and service delivery; supporting and building communities, networks and connections; and overcoming barriers and challenges.

*Australia's Strategic Framework for the Information Economy 2004–2006* emphasises the need to ensure that all Australians can participate in the benefits of the information economy.

Key strategies in 2004–06 will be to strengthen collaboration and capabilities in nonprofit organisations, facilitate the creative use of ICT for building stronger communities and social cohesion, and develop networks, capabilities and tools to enable participation by people who are facing economic, geographic or social barriers.

**For more information visit the DCITA website [www.dcita.gov.au](http://www.dcita.gov.au) or email [community.connectivity@dcita.gov.au](mailto:community.connectivity@dcita.gov.au).**

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