



Understanding young people's use of technology

If counsellors are able to 'speak the language' of technology, as well as show understanding of the motivations and pressures that young people face online, they will have greater credibility when dealing with contacts about internet safety concerns.

Trying to keep up with the rapid evolutions taking place in young people's digital habits can feel daunting. This guide contains suggestions for addressing this challenge. The suggestions are based on experience from those child helplines - from the Insafe and Child Helpline International community - who have been receiving contacts related to internet safety for a number of years.

UNDERSTANDING MOTIVATIONS:

It is important to have an understanding of the motivations and pressures that young people face in the online world. Young people have the right to enjoy technology and we should empower them to come forward and not judge them if something goes wrong.

For example, some young people feel huge pressure to appear popular online which can lead to them befriending strangers; for others, their online identity and their self-esteem are linked - so when something negative happens online, it can have a severe negative impact on how they view themselves.

Child helplines will, of course, gain insights into trends from the contacts made to them. But they could boost levels of understanding by providing counsellors with key findings from recent research and evidence on young people's online habits and safety concerns, so that they are kept up-to-date.

Similarly, child helplines could encourage counsellors and volunteers to try to keep abreast of the main services and applications used by young people in their country, and develop a general understanding of why young people find them fun, as well as potential risks, basic privacy settings and site / app navigation.

Although it will never be possible to be familiar with all apps and services, it is likely in any given national context that a handful of core services will stand out as most popular. If you have a youth panel (see below) they will be able to help with this.

SPEAKING THE LANGUAGE:

Counsellors will be able to facilitate more meaningful discussions with young people contacting the child helpline and reduce barriers to disclosure, if they are able to 'speak the language' of technology. Again, it is important to recognise that technology is an integral part of young people's lives – recommendations to just 'stop using' a service are unlikely to be followed, and may well discourage the child from further discussion.

Ensure counsellors are confident in exploring a situation and reflecting it back to the child so they can openly talk about the impact it is having on them. This means they will be able to offer support and assess risk even if they are not familiar with the technology being discussed. In any case, the focus of the discussion will often be on behaviours, rather than specifics of a given platform. See Chapter 6 of the Insafe Helplines 2016 report '[Operations, effectiveness and emerging issues for internet safety helplines](#)' for a review of behaviours being discussed during contacts with child helplines.

If necessary, encourage counsellors and volunteers to spend some time using a few of the most popular services and apps, trying out the privacy settings and understanding how to get a 'screen grab' and use the reporting / blocking / safety functions. If counsellors have even a very basic awareness of a service, it will help both counsellor and child feel more confident in their discussion.

Consider developing and maintaining a list of URLs for reporting abuse for the most popular but also upcoming, social media services in your country.

FOCUS ON KEY PRINCIPLES:

Technology trends change so rapidly that it would be impossible for a child helpline counsellor to be an expert in all applications.

However, all counsellors should have a good understanding of core principles around managing profiles and privacy. That way even if they are not familiar with a specific app or service, they can still provide high-level guidance on options to the child.

ACTIVE YOUTH PARTICIPATION:

Youth panels can provide an excellent insight into some of the current pressures that young people are facing online as well as the apps, platforms and services that are popular. Young people 'speak the language' of technology, so will also be able to help guide counsellors on framing discussions on digital experiences and internet safety.

When setting up a youth panel, the following considerations should be factored in:

- It is important that panellists are representative of different backgrounds, cultures and abilities. In addition, panels should not simply be made up of young people who know how to use technology safely and responsibly, and who may therefore not give an accurate view of some of the challenges faced by the wider group.
- When a child helpline decides to work with young people, they need to be clear what they are trying to achieve and what they are looking for from the panel members. It might be helpful to develop a document outlining objectives and working processes.
- Youth panels can also provide valuable advice and insights on the service that the child helpline is providing. They can be engaged in designing and running campaigns and awareness raising activities. It is important that if their views are sought then must also be listened to.
- A professional approach is needed in order to keep young people safe whilst they are participating in the work of the child helpline. Child helplines should document steps taken to safeguard youth panel members while working with the child helpline, as well as protect their privacy and so on. The document describing the objectives and working processes of engaging with a youth panel should also include guidance on any recruitment considerations, such as how to handle applications from young people who may be vulnerable themselves, or processes for ensuring parental consent.

It is important that child helplines are familiar with the key apps, platforms and services that young people are using. Having a youth panel can help to keep staff more up to date, bringing huge benefits to the child helpline: it can be challenging for a young person to have the confidence to contact a child helpline in the first place, and speaking to a counsellor who can engage confidently on their issue will make a huge difference. Having first hand insight into what young people are doing online and how they are using technology is a crucial part of this.

EXPERTS:

Take advantage of any local expertise available to give counsellors briefings on new trends and developments online. There may be in-house expertise or you may be able to invite key partners from law enforcement and industry for example, to provide their perspectives.

USING EXISTING RESOURCES:

If there are good internet safety resources available within your national context – from NGOs, industry or Government – counsellors should be provided with URLs, so that they can signpost them to callers.

If there is nothing available yet nationally, there are a number of excellent resources available from the international community in a range of languages – where relevant, child helplines may find it useful to invest a little time in finding appropriate resources online that they can signposts to users.

Similarly, staff cannot be expected to know everything about every app – but being able to access that information is key. A youth panel will be able to help here, and again, counsellors can be directed to existing resources. The Better Internet for Kids (BIK) [Guide to Online Services](#) lists over 70 different apps and platforms at present and is regularly updated – many listed services contain links to related safety resources which may be of use to either counsellor or caller.

FURTHER READING:

The following resources may be of interest:

- [Global Kids Online](#), [EU Kids Online](#) and [Net Children Go Mobile](#)
- [FOSI GRID](#)
- Insafe network – www.betterinternetforkids.eu
- [Making it Work – Our story on active youth participation. Child Helpline International's Youth Advisory Council Youth Manual](#)

