A community online
Young people helping young people on the Childline message boards

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Childline evidence briefings

The NSPCC are developing a pool of evidence to aid understanding of the difference Childline makes to young people’s lives, and its role within the support and safeguarding sectors. This series of evidence briefings summarises our work so far. Briefings draw on routinely collected data, and research and evaluation, which includes the voice of young people and the views of internal and external stakeholders. Undertaking systematic research in an anonymous helpline context is challenging,¹ and so this evidence base will continue to develop over the coming years.

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1. Introduction

What is Childline?

Childline is a free, 24-hour confidential service. It gives young people access to emotional support when they need it, and someone to turn to when they are in distress or danger. Childline started as a telephone service in 1986 but now also offers a suite of online resources and support to help young people talk about, understand, and cope with the problems they are facing. Childline services include:

- A telephone counselling helpline
- Online instant-message counselling and email
- Online digital information, guidance and self-help resources
- Moderated peer-to-peer message boards.

What are the Childline message boards?

The message boards were established in 2010. They are an online space where young people can post about their experiences and ask questions, and also give advice to their peers. They are publicly available and can be accessed anonymously.

All message board posts are checked by a ‘host’ before they are accepted and go online. This is to ensure they do not breach ‘house rules’ and to ensure effective safeguarding and support. Message board hosts guide young people around the boards, encourage community engagement, reply where appropriate, and gather feedback. The boards aim to facilitate a safe, non-judgemental, peer-to-peer community. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the message boards typically received about 5,000 posts each month.
2. Executive summary

The research

Childline wanted to understand if and how young people benefit from using the message boards, and whether using the boards supports their help-seeking journey. Childline also wanted young people’s insights to inform the development of the Childline message boards.

The research was co-produced by a lead researcher, young people from the NeurOX YPAG* (aged 14–18 years), and the NSPCC. They worked together virtually, during the COVID-19 pandemic, using a combination of online meetings and offline research activities. Together, they selected the focus for the research – emotional abuse and neglect – and a relevant sample of message board threads to analyse. They then used:

- Thematic analysis – to explore the experiences, needs, and help-seeking intentions of the message board users.
- Conversation analysis – to explore how peer-to-peer interactions worked online and what features of conversations supported help-seeking.

Involving young people in this study was vital. The YPAG discussed their findings with Childline, providing a distinct perspective and range of recommendations to improve the message boards that other researchers had not always considered.

Headline findings

The research found evidence of reduced distress among the young people that had sought help on the Childline message boards. It also found that some young people were more willing to seek and accept help because of their interactions online.

Analysis showed how the support offered to message board users by their peers could help overcome well-known barriers to help-seeking. For example, it:

- increased young people’s knowledge or understanding of their problem
- made them feel less isolated
- reduced their fear about what might happen next
- encouraged and motivated them to reach out to others.

* The Young People’s Advisory Group from the Neuroscience, Ethics and Society department at Oxford University.
Analysing online conversations also highlighted features of peer responses that had greater positive benefits. Peer support was more effective when responses were:

- timely and numerous
- compassionate
- non-judgemental.

Positive responses from young people seeking help suggested they felt connected to their peers online, and felt part of a safe and supportive community, sharing their knowledge and experiences.

**Overview of recommendations**

Recommendations were put forward to Childline, based on the findings of the research. These aim to help young people get, and give, advice and support quicker and more easily.

- Improve the design and functionality of the message boards:
  - Make them more appealing and accessible.
  - Improve how themes and topics are organised on the boards.
  - Improve filter and ‘reply’ functions.
  - Highlight messages that have not received a response.

- Guide users to get and give the most benefit from the message boards:
  - Provide guidance for peer supporters to help them write sensitive and compassionate responses to young people seeking help.
  - Provide guidance for new message board users to help them write messages that will receive a response from peer supporters.

- Involve young people in designing and testing future changes to the message boards.

- Carry out further research to explore help-seeking and peer support in more depth and for different areas of need.
3. Findings

An analytical approach to understand help-seeking

Previous research has documented individual, social and systematic factors that prevent young people from seeking help with their mental health. It has also shown that young people often prefer confidential, informal, online, peer-to-peer sources of help and support.

Childline wanted to learn more about how their message boards fit with young people’s needs and preferences. This research was designed to:

- further understanding about young people’s needs, if and how they benefit from using the message boards, and how online peer support affects their journey to seek help
- gather insights to help Childline develop the message boards
- explore ways to meaningfully involve young people and analyse ‘real world’ Childline message board data.

The research focused on emotional abuse and neglect. The young researchers felt Childline played a unique role in this area, because there is little support elsewhere. The research team selected a sample of message board threads for analysis, which used two methods:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematic analysis</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13 threads were systematically analysed to explore individual:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Facilitators to help-seeking</td>
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<tr>
<td>Barriers to help-seeking</td>
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<tr>
<td>Signs of change resulting from online interaction</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conversation analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20 threads were systematically analysed to explore conversation:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Composition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sequencing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration and timing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** 1,147 threads were identified using selection criteria. 124 were selected for review, to reflect different length and depth of interactions, from which the final sample was chosen.
The analysis was guided by an existing theoretical model. This set out four stages of young people’s help-seeking, against which the message board threads could be compared:

- Aware of problem
- Articulate problem and need for support
- Knowledge of where/how to get help
- Motivated to seek help

**Young people were involved throughout the research process**

The research was co-produced by a team comprising a researcher from Oxford University, ten members (aged 14–18 years) of the NeurOX YPAG, and the NSPCC. Using a combination of online workshops and offline activities, that spanned over 135 hours, the YPAG contributed to all stages of the research:

- Choosing research focus
- Sampling
- Analysis
- Writing
- Editing
- Co-production
- Feeding back

**Analysis showed reduced distress and increased appetite for help-seeking**

Analysis revealed young people were facing a broad range of experiences, feelings and symptoms. These centred around emotional abuse and neglect, such as hostility and bullying by parents and carers, but overlapped with other forms of maltreatment, such as physical abuse. They were suffering mental health symptoms (such as anxiety, depression, self-harm) and other symptoms, like low self-esteem and loneliness.

Young people had a range of motivations for using the message boards. Some were unsure whether what they were experiencing was abuse and wanted validation (or invalidation). Others wanted specific advice or reassurance or were reaching out in a general state of unhappiness or upset.
Looking at the message board posts in this way found evidence of a **positive change in the emotional state of some young people** during their message board interactions. In these instances, young people generally expressed thanks, and said that they felt reassured, happier, more hopeful, and cared for.

Some young people also expressed an **increased appetite or intent for help-seeking**. In these cases, young people seeking help said that they were considering, or were actively planning to, speak to someone else about their experiences, such as a parent or teacher, or another trusted adult.

**Online peer support can overcome barriers to help-seeking**

The conversations between young people showed how online peer support can help overcome barriers to help-seeking:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Young person seeking help needs...</th>
<th>Message board support offers...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experiences of abuse to be validated and taken seriously.</td>
<td>Understanding and compassion, and non-judgemental sharing of experiences with peers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To understand and express their emotions.</td>
<td>Compassionate encouragement by peers, to recognise and express feelings and symptoms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alleviation of fears about what might happen if they speak out – to themselves and others.</td>
<td>Well-informed knowledge and shared lived experience of positive and realistic outcomes.</td>
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<td>Relief from loneliness and isolation.</td>
<td>Connection with empathic individuals and Childline community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhanced knowledge of, and trust in, sources of help.</td>
<td>Well-informed knowledge and shared lived experience of positive help-seeking occasions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Motivation and confidence to engage and share with others.</td>
<td>Social connections and reduced stigma – increasing self-esteem.</td>
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</table>

However, the help-seeking process was less straightforward than the earlier theoretical model had suggested. For young people experiencing emotional abuse and neglect, the process of validation was important across all stages, and young people seemed to move back and forth between the stages. A modified help-seeking model would need to take greater account of young people’s individual environments away from the message boards.
Aspects of online peer support that were most effective

The research looked closely at the conversations between young people on the message boards. This identified elements of online peer support that were important in helping young people feel supported, speak out, and seek further help.

**Flow and coherence** – detailed replies, sharing of experiences and asking questions all helped extend conversations, and showed listening and caring. A lack of questions, abrupt responses or confusing replies could close a conversation down.

Young researcher observation:

* Lots of detail about situation – sharing emotions – when he tells them about how his mum has “all the teachers fooled”, and how the situation is still bad, he gets quick responses.

**Relationship and rapport** – messages that showed empathy and compassion, and that were informal helped build trust between young people. Impersonal or superficial replies limited ongoing conversation.

Young researcher observation:

* I think when [peer supporters] say stuff along the lines of “here for you” that is the best way for them to encourage longer interaction or conversation. It seems like a barrier for a lot of [young people seeking help] is fear that they will take up too much of other people’s time, so saying stuff like that is important.
Sequencing – help-seeking posts that did not include questions or ask for advice could receive limited responses. Getting numerous replies or getting repeat replies from the same peer supporter built trust and enhanced conversation.

Young researcher observation:

In this conversation, it seemed like the [young person seeking help] liked the sense of there being a fair few people eager to help with their situation so maybe it was worth the slight confusion. Will vary between [young people] whether this kind of jumping in is helpful overall or not.

Duration and spacing – quick responses helped to validate a young person’s experiences and made them feel part of a community. However, rushed, delayed, or erratic responses could shut down a conversation.

Young researcher observation:

If people are given prompt replies, it allows them to feel like their concerns are valued and their problem is not just them being melodramatic (many posts had issues with confidence saying things like “To me it just feels like I’m being pathetic”).

However, quick responses that don’t provide what the HS [help-seeker] needs, eg emotional support, may be detrimental to their use of the threads and therefore their likelihood of using the advice.

Co-production benefited the research and the researchers

Co-producing the research with young people offered benefits for both the quality of the research and the individuals involved:

- Members from the YPAG group said they felt comfortable, trusted and respected while carrying out the research. They valued the online/offline hybrid way of working as this allowed them to interact in group discussions, but also work independently and with autonomy:

  “I like the pre-meeting work a lot as we’re actively engaging in research and not just providing our opinions on the process.”

  “Lots of autonomy. Having the work written down helps as it means that tone is less likely to be conveyed, swinging the points to either side.”

  “I think I have become more confident at speaking to people I don’t know and voicing my opinions.”

- For the research itself, the benefits of involving young people were that:
  - analysis better captured the lived experience of young people
  - reflection between young researchers and lead researcher added nuance
  - young researchers had different ideas about solutions for young people.
4. Recommendations and next steps

The research showed how the Childline message boards can enable young people to support and advise each other online. This interaction can reduce distress, help young people understand and articulate their experiences, and reduce their loneliness. Exchanging compassionate and non-judgemental messages can also help overcome traditional barriers to help-seeking and encourage young people to speak out to others about their problems.

These are encouraging findings. But the research team also developed recommendations to help Childline improve the message boards, and in turn allow young people to give and receive peer support more quickly.

**Enhance the design and functionality of the boards**

Making the message boards more appealing and accessible will ensure young people are directed to relevant content more quickly and feel supported in their journey sooner:

- Improve the ‘reply’ function so it is always clear which message is being responded to.
- Push messages without a peer response to the front and indicate if Childline have offered support in the absence of peer support.
- Provide an option to filter out explicitly traumatic posts.
- Update the organisation of themes and topics.

**Guide young people to seek help and provide support most effectively**

Providing information or guidance to young people seeking help and peer supporters will support young people to initiate and expand online conversations, and therefore get the most out of their time on the message boards:

- Provide guidance to new users to help them write help-seeking posts that are likely to receive a response (e.g., ask questions).
- Provide guidance to peer supporters to help them write consistent, sensitive and compassionate responses.
- Consider how to ‘support the supporters’, so young people are not overburdened and do not experience distress when help-seekers move on from using the boards.
Involve young people in designing and testing changes to the boards

Involving young people at all stages of message board design and development will increase the likelihood that changes improve accessibility and desirability. This could happen through research or user testing processes. For example, young people could inform changes to categorisation and search functions.

Carry out further research

Further studies would be useful for Childline and the wider research community. These could focus on replicating the co-production and analysis methods but exploring a larger sample of message board conversations or different communities of need. Research could also focus on evaluating the impact of any changes made to the message boards.

Next steps for Childline

YPAG members met with Childline managers to discuss their findings and recommendations. Enhancing Childline’s online service is a priority for the NSPCC who want to ensure that all young people can access and benefit from it. Childline are exploring options for updating and developing the message boards, including incorporating findings from this research.
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References

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