Southwest Interdisciplinary Research Center
Arizona State University

Childhelp®
Founded in 1959 by Sara O'Meara and Yvonne Fedderson
PREVENTION and TREATMENT of CHILD ABUSE

March 2019

PACTECH TOPICAL BRIEF 1

Text and Chat in Hotlines: Initial Discussion of Best Practices

PACTECH Background

Childhelp is the lead agency for the Prevent Abuse of Children Text and Chat Hotline (PACTECH) Project. PACTECH will determine best practices and protocols pertaining to the use of text and chat in the child abuse and neglect environment through work with experts across the nation through a National Hotline Consortium and an Advisory Committee consisting of experts in their respective fields.
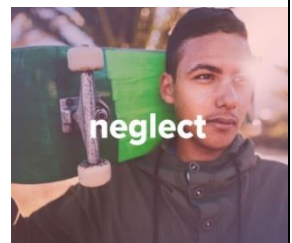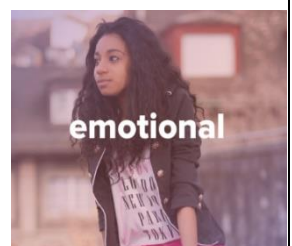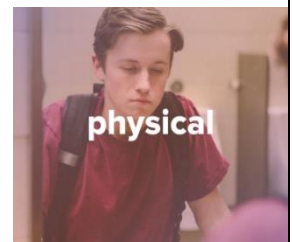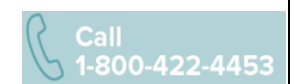
Crisis helplines, also called hotlines or helplines have existed for decades and most provide support for a specific issue such as: suicide prevention, domestic violence, or child abuse. Despite the history of such helplines, the utilization rates by youth are exceedingly low. One study found that only 2.1% of youth utilized such services (Gould et al., 2006). In response to these low use rates, some helplines are now offering an option to interact via text message and chat sessions as there is a growing body of literature indicating the effectiveness of text and chat based helplines for youth.

Text

For several years text messaging has been the preferred mode of communication for youth (Lenhart et al, 2010). Youth report several benefits to text communication such as perceived privacy and an improved ability to discuss personal matters (Lenhart et al, 2010). Further, multiple studies indicated that youth preferred to utilize more modern modes of communication when seeking help (Gould et. al., 2006; Evans, et al., 2013). For that reason, text messaging offers an innovative, youth-friendly way to increase access to help seeking services (DeJonckheere, et. al, 2017). Additionally, multiple studies have indicated the efficacy of text based helplines in improving help-seeking behavior. One study showed the benefits of a text based helpline for youth engagement in help seeking behavior, with an increase in program utilization and high program satisfaction (Evans, et al., 2013).
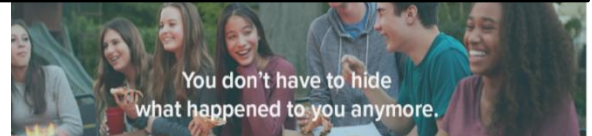
Chat

According to a recent study evaluating the loveisrespect (LIR) and the National Domestic Violence (NDV) Hotlines, more people were using online chat to contact help than ever before (McDonnell, et al., 2018). The proportion of contacts to the NDV Hotline by chat or text increased from 2.5% to 13.6% over the two-year period from January 1, 2014-December 31, 2015. The proportion of contacts to the NDV Hotline by phone decreased during the same period. Potential users named online chat as their preferred method to contact. In the same study, an online survey asked website visitors to choose how they would prefer to connect to the NDV Hotline or LIR. Overall, website visitors rated online chat as their preferred method to connect compared to telephone or text. They also rated online chat as the easiest, safest, and most private mode of contact. Texting is offered at a nominal cost and a phone is required whereas with chat, there are no costs per message and marginalized groups can visit libraries and community centers for access to the internet (McDonnell, et al., 2018).

sexual

Call
1-800-422-4453

physical

Text
1-800-422-4453

emotional

Chat
Coming Soon

neglect

Qualitative Focus Group Data on Best Practices

A focus group with members from the National Hotline Consortium (NHC) was arranged by the Childhelp National Abuse Hotline. The Southwest Interdisciplinary Research Center conducted the focus group on March 15, 2019 in Washington, DC. The goal of the focus group was to ask NHC members about best practices for implementing text and chat in their hotlines. Nine members were present and three participants attended via phone. Focus group participants represented various hotlines including RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network), POLARIS (National Human Trafficking Hotline), NCVC (National Center for Victims of Crime), Pathways, and Childhelp. Topics covered included: marketing, policies and procedures, staff training, mandatory reporting, evaluation, collecting and storing data. Highlights from the focus group are described below.

MARKETING STRATEGIES

Marketing strategies are essential to reaching target populations. Based on the focus group conversations, social media is a prominent way NHC members market and advertise to various target audiences.

The following social media channels were discussed as the most popular:

- Facebook
- Instagram
- Twitter
- YouTube

Other outlets highlighted as useful:

- Google
- Websites
- Billboards

POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

As technology evolves, hotlines must be vigilant in protecting the responder and caller, thus an important topic to discuss is policies relevant to external links and videos. Participants in the focus group agreed, policies are essential to train staff properly on how to handle external content. Responses included:

- Do NOT open attachments or click on links
- Send content to law enforcement on USB drive
- Extensive malware scan weekly
- Quarantine machine if links are opened

STAFF TRAINING

Participants discussed how hotline interactions are different with each modality. A conversation over the phone is different from a conversation on text or chat. Therefore, staff training is necessary every time you add a different feature to the hotline. Other topics under training were:

- Know your staff and their strengths
- Provide flexible scheduling
- Set up safe words for text and chat
- Have language and translation services
- Focus on safety and confidentiality

BEST PRACTICES FOR TEXT AND CHAT

You don't have to hide what happened to you anymore.

Overall, major helplines understand that it is necessary to offer some form of online emotional support to stay relevant in a world where people are using the internet for crisis intervention. The focus group findings supported the development of best practices specific for online crisis intervention.

Social media presents a great opportunity for direct engagement with supporters, clients and fellow organizations. The majority of focus group participants reported that any online interaction, whether via chat or text, takes much more time than a phone call. In addition, it is critical to know that the nature of phone calls is quite different from text and chat. Therefore, training is essential to explain the nuances of text and chat as well as make certain that staff is equipped to handle different literacy levels and has the ability to build a rapport with the help seeker.

Related to continuous quality improvement, it is also important for supervisors to watch text and chat exchanges to provide feedback and quality assurance. An organization's ability to provide digital services is only as good as the technology infrastructure supporting it. A critical element to providing digital advocacy is a comprehensive audit of an organization's technology, including both hardware and software.

It is also important to know what you want from the technology vendor before you offer text and chat. Customization is vital in order to have control over the data. Policies and procedures on protecting caller identity and data storage are critical, with the majority of focus group participants stating they collected data that are necessary and retained data for only as long as there is utility.

Furthermore, it is vital to do monthly evaluations of data and processes through staff assessments and data audits. There has to be a regular review of transcripts for checking the phrasing of messages and interactions.

GET HELP NOW

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