

SUPPORTING YOUTH THROUGH TEXT AND CHAT HOTLINE SERVICES: KEY CONSIDERATIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION RECOMMENDATIONS



Introduction

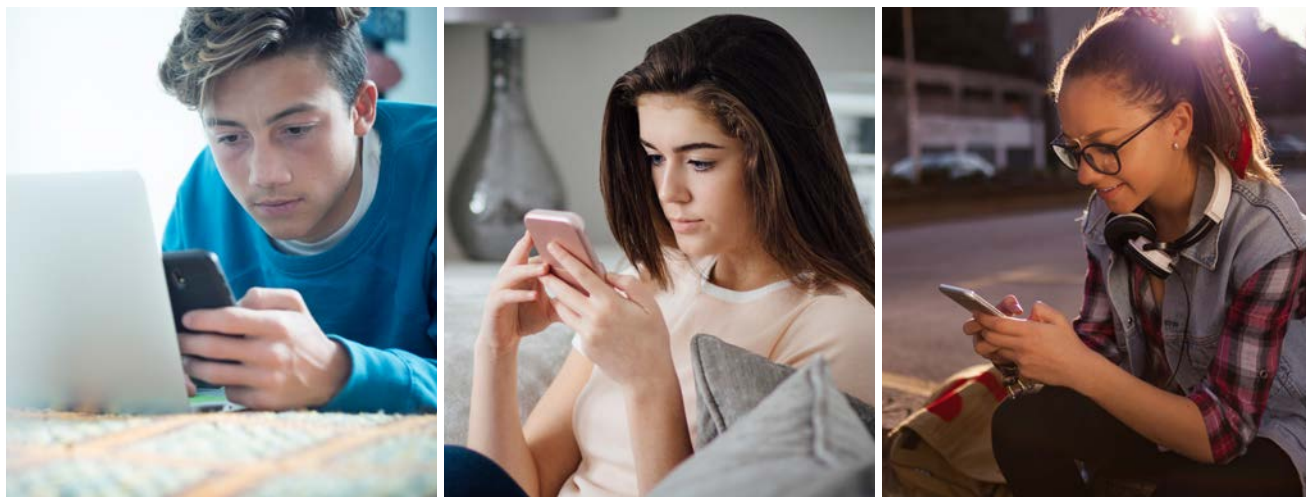
Since 1982, Childhelp, Inc has operated the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline as the only national phone based hotline with a primary specialization of supporting individuals impacted by child abuse and neglect.

Historically, over 90% of callers were adults calling on behalf of children, comprised of family members, mandated reporters, and other concerned citizens. Many callers were also adult survivors of child abuse seeking supportive services. The hotline team recognized that young people needed the type of help provided by the hotline, but youth were not reaching out. Childhelp initially explored text-enabled services on a small scale beginning in 2012 by offering a SMS short code and keyword to help seekers. While it was underutilized, Childhelp did find that the primary users of the text service were youth under the age of 18. This was a stark contrast to the phone calls received on the hotline. In 2016, with these limited findings, the team further hypothesized that youth might be averse to calling for help and began a more in-depth exploration of digital communication modalities consisting of text and live chat, as this appeared to be the preference of youth.

Through a competitive grant process in 2018, Childhelp, Inc was awarded funding through a technology innovation grant (No. 90CA1855) from the Children’s Bureau, Administration for Children and Families of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The Prevent Abuse of Children Text and Chat Hotline (PACTECH) project provided an opportunity to plan, implement, and research text and chat services in the hotline environment with a target population of 13-24 year olds and a primary issue of child maltreatment. This brief is based on the results of the findings over a four year period through program operations and collaboration with researchers, and discusses the key recommendations and best practices established throughout the PACTECH project.



Why add text and chat?



Adolescents view technology as integral to their everyday lives. A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2018, estimated that approximately 95% of teenagers have or use a cell phone and nearly three-quarters of teenagers check for messages and notifications on their phone as soon as they wake up in the morning.¹ Youth increasingly prefer to communicate through digital methods when seeking information and/or accessing support.² This was further confirmed in the research findings of the PACTECH project, which indicated that only 27.1% of youth chat users and 26.6% of youth text users responded “yes” that they would call the hotline if text/chat was not available.³ Offering other modalities to access services can be the difference in a youth deciding to take the next step to reach out for help.

Technology has changed the manner in which individuals communicate and interact with each other. From the availability of information online to numerous platforms in which individuals can interact with one another from anywhere in the world, technology is influencing the dynamics of personal and professional relationships. It is important for hotlines to acknowledge and respond to these changes in order to best serve youth impacted by maltreatment. When working in victim services, specifically in the hotline/helpline industry, **top considerations include safety, privacy, and feeling comfortable in reaching out for assistance.** Reaching out for help is difficult, and the more service providers can establish models that allow easy access to support and assistance, there is a greater likelihood that help will occur sooner.

“Thank you so much, you really have made me feel better about this. I will keep this text to remind me it’s not my fault.”

- 15 year-old girl reaching out to the Childhelp Hotline

¹Pew Research Center, May 2018, “Teens, Social Media & Technology 2018”

²Hutchinson, A. Text Messaging is the Dominant Form of Communication Among Teens [Report]. August 7, 2015. Social Media Today. <https://www.socialmediatoday.com/social-networks/adhutchinson/2015-08-07/text-messaging-dominant-form-communication-among-teens>. Accessed August 7, 2018

³<https://childhelphotline.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/PACTECH-Final-Data-Report-September-2022.pdf>

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Implementing text and live chat services is a foundational programmatic shift and comes with an increase in cost, but it is also a critical way to connect with youth who may not otherwise reach out for help.

The benefits of implementing text and/or live chat services include:

- Reaching youth who are resistant or unable to call.
- Increased accessibility to professional support.
- Increased disclosure autonomy.

There are also challenges to be aware of, such as:

- Higher handle time per interaction.
- Increased cost per interaction in comparison to phone calls.
- Complexity in establishing rapport and connection through written words alone.

Overall, the benefits outweigh the challenges and will likely continue to be the preference of youth for years to come.

For hotlines specifically supporting victims of maltreatment, it is essential to consider various technology platforms to ensure all individuals have a manner to connect to help in a way that feels most comfortable and appropriate for their individual needs.

This guide is designed to assist organizations in understanding the multiple considerations in implementing and maintaining high quality services, through text and live chat in the hotline environment, specifically interacting with youth ages 13 to 24.

Growth Projection Considerations:

- Soft launch with low volume
- Volume increases in direct correlation to outreach efforts
- Be prepared for anomalies (i.e., COVID-19) and how those may impact volume



Implementation Considerations

Raise Awareness of Service

- Explore outreach and engagement strategies early. It is important to raise awareness of the program/resource so those needing support know the service exists.
- Determine where the target population is likely to spend time, where they consume information, and how they develop trust and brand recognition
- Partner with individuals in the target population to understand use need and behavior through focus groups or advisory committees.
- Design a website that is clear in how to contact the service, who it serves, and which issues it assists with.
- Consider paid and unpaid opportunities to raise awareness, such as social media, streaming service advertising, boosting online search results, and traditional marketing materials.

Awareness efforts through TikTok and Instagram resulted in the largest youth engagement.



Technology

- Invest in technology that can meet the needs for both the service and data collection/reporting, and has the flexibility for remote work, if desired.
- Assemble a strong IT implementation team with an understanding of how technology is leveraged with program service and needs.
- Consider how users will interface with the service. Text requires enabling the existing phone number or creating a short code and keyword while chat uses a webpage for entry to the service.⁴
- Develop automatic bounce back messages to address terms of service, misuse of service, and mandated reporting. Automation at the front end ensures consistency and efficiency in the process and all users receiving the same required information.
- Determine if pre contact questions will be asked to collect information before being connected. This assists the counselor by having preliminary information to guide the interaction.
- Recruit for and hire a workforce that is familiar and proficient with technology.
- Consider what information is available from the user to the agency related to privacy. IP address and SMS information can be visible for a confidential environment or unavailable for an anonymous environment.
- Cultivate a plan for misuse of service, including both bots and malicious users.

⁴https://assets.ctfassets.net/2fcb2lkzww1t/60V81bFc0aPZePXc08v5T8/c338cfc10220b5ddc1632734d06bbfff/Short_Code_vs_Toll-Free_SMS_Whitepaper.pdf

Staffing and Training

Text and chat services appeal to a younger demographic and require longer interactions, many of which may include disclosures of traumatic details. Supporting the frontline workforce in a trauma-informed manner is critical to high quality services and reducing burnout and turnover. Wellness initiatives are beneficial in establishing an environment in which staff are able to provide high quality services to those seeking help while ensuring their well-being.

The frontline workforce in text/chat services also require a specific set of **core competencies** in order to interact successfully with help seekers:

- Service specific **knowledge**
- **Skills** to interact proficiently in written format while utilizing technology
- Healthy **attitudes/perceptions** related to mental health support.

The Childhelp Counselor evidence-informed core competencies are available in Appendix A.

Conducting assessments based on the core competencies in the recruitment process is essential for both technology proficiency and counseling abilities. Completing post training assessment, specifically on the knowledge content along with demonstration of a comprehensive understanding and ability to apply the established best practice model for interacting through text/chat will lay the foundation for successful interactions.

The PACTECH evidenced-informed practice model guides counselors through providing both support and resources. Text and chat conversations were analyzed, focusing on patterns across the most successful conversations. The practice model is built on the key findings of the importance of tailoring the approach to the situation, empathizing with the help-seeker, and communicating clearly.

The stages of text/chat conversations provides guidance, but without scripting, to ensure that the conversation is individualized and natural. The model is circular to imply that there are instances where the interaction may require the counselor to circle back to a previous stage to best understand and/or support the help seeker. Further detail of the PACTECH practice model is available in Appendix B.

PACTECH conducted research with **Dr. Laura Schwab-Reese** of Purdue University to aid in the development of core competencies and best practice model.

In addition to program and topic specific training, text and chat requires its own dedicated focus. There are unique nuances to working with technology in a supportive setting and specifically to supporting youth through solely written interactions.



PACTECH prioritized counselor well-being by providing safe spaces to support one another, including:

- Team communication (formal and informal)
- Team building opportunities
- Focus group participation
- Reflective Supervision model to provide opportunities for regular support and reflection with supervisor
- Open discussions of compassion fatigue and compassion satisfaction

To read topical briefs on PACTECH counselor focus group findings on compassion fatigue and satisfaction visit our website at: childhelpline.org/research/#topical

Training should intentionally reinforce the knowledge, skills, and abilities reflected in the established core competencies. Topical areas of importance include:

Technology

- Mechanically interacting with technology to ensure contacts are handled properly and closed when interaction is over so content is not sent and not seen.

Child Developmental Knowledge

- Recognizing reading and developmental levels ensures the user is able to understand the information and help being provided.

Clear Communication

- Intentional word choice and punctuation is important because there is increased risk for misinterpretation.

Best Practices in Developing Rapport

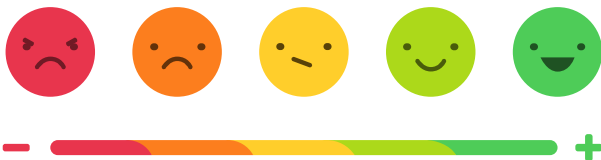
- Rapport building has increased complexity in written format. Ensure time is taken and pace is provided before moving on to action planning or providing immediate resources.



Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI)

Successful text/chat services require ongoing assessment post implementation. Key areas to consider for CQI include:

- **Ongoing monthly trainings**
- **Monthly evaluation**
 - Measurable & objective
 - Space for narrative on subjective observations
 - Training on scaling of the counselor evaluations so fidelity between supervisors occurs
- **Reflective Supervision**
 - Use as opportunity to highlight successful techniques and talk through struggles.
 - Often a place where unintentional bias is recognized (e.g., if interactions with teenagers seem judgmental, this is a great place to explore the observations).
- **Standard practice**
 - Quality Coordinator—designated person that will look at the data and trends
 - Multiple learning opportunities (visual, online, in person)
 - Peer mentoring
 - Evaluation of written skills (i.e., typos, confusing grammar/punctuation, repetitive statements, ability to be clear and concise in messaging)
 - Assess micro counseling skills in transcripts (e.g., conveying empathy, active listening efforts, warm versus cold tone, developmentally appropriate language use)



Legal Considerations

Hotlines have many legal considerations and text/chat services require additional planning.

- Develop a comprehensive Terms of Service, and implement a way for users to accept terms before accessing the service (such as a checkbox or typing 'yes').
- Provide clear disclaimers regarding mandated reporting requirements around danger to self/others and child abuse disclosures.
- Consider disclaimers regarding use of data for quality assurance and/or research purposes.
- Determine if the service is confidential or anonymous. If the hotline is anonymous, there is no access to information, including an IP address or SMS number. In a confidential setting, you may have access to certain information about the help seeker but make an effort to keep it private.
- Determine a length of time which text and/or chat transcripts are retained. Considerations include:
 - Does the technology system have a setting to adjust?
 - How long is needed for quality review?
 - What are legal requirements for retention of reports made to external parties (law enforcement, child welfare agencies, etc.)?

PROS AND CONS TO HAVING ACCESS TO IDENTIFYING INFORMATION

Pros:

- Having the ability to access information to send help in crisis situations, such as suicidal or homicidal ideation, or active child abuse
- Allows for access to information to address substantial misuse, in partnership with law enforcement agencies

Cons:

- Users can be hesitant to utilize services
- Users can mask the true IP address or SMS number which can result in invalid information

Misuse of Hotline Services

Misuse is an inevitable component of hotline text/chat services. Misuse can be in the form of automated bots, or human behavior such as pranks, attempts to use the hotline for services it is not able to perform, and obscene/perpetrator behavior. These situations are both challenging to address and taxing on the workforce.

TIPS

- Develop a behavioral based process to reduce bot contacts. Examples include typing a word to consent or adding a pre survey.
- Leverage user information, such as IP address, SMS number, device information (if available) to reduce and address extremely repetitive contacts that have evidence of malicious intent.
- Train front line workforce to set and uphold healthy boundaries for appropriate hotline use and allow them to end conversations that fail to respect those boundaries with a standardized written warning script.
- Establish a protocol for when it is appropriate and necessary to notify authorities or reporting agencies of overt threats of abuse/extreme perpetrator contacts.



Evaluation of Practice

Evaluation of services begins in the implementation phase and assists in developing evidence informed practices. In order to design a text/chat program thoroughly, the following questions should be asked:

- What issue/problem is being addressed?
- Who is the primary user or target population?
- What is the intended outcome of the service?
- What are metrics of quality/success?
 - Is it measurable?
 - User input/feedback
 - Workforce input/feedback
- Would there be a benefit to partner with academic researchers to assist in the development of evidence informed practices?

PACTECH collaborated with quantitative researchers early in the implementation process to assist in the development of data collection tools and variables, including pre and post surveys, and to provide evaluation services to understand trends and outcomes. PACTECH added a qualitative researcher once the service was implemented to assist in the development of an evidence informed practice model (Appendix B) and to examine successful counseling interventions leading to positive outcomes from the user perspective. Detailed research questions and findings are available at childhelpline.org/research.

Data Collection

The richness of quantitative data collected by hotlines is often underestimated. It is important to think about the broad range of data elements that can contribute to robust analysis. This vast array of data can inform a program dashboard, evaluation, and research.

Pilot Period	Pre-survey (help seeker input)
Post-survey (help seeker input)	Standardized data collection form (staff input)

Pilot Period

A vital component of the implementation phase is a pilot period. The pilot period can allow time to:

- Familiarize staff with data collection variables.
- Clarify and standardize definitions of data collection variables.
- Collect and analyze feedback on survey questions and concerns that arise from users and/or staff.
- Collaborate with researchers to ensure fidelity in data collection.
- Make changes to data variables and pre/post survey questions, as necessary.

Document any changes made during the pilot period both for timeline purposes and justification to reflect back on.

Survey Considerations

Surveys allow for rich analysis when thoughtfully designed.

- Consider reading level so the majority of users will understand the questions being asked.
- Consider providing instructions on how to “opt out” of a question. This allows help seekers to still receive help if they choose not to answer a particular question.
- Questions need to be brief, intentional, and aligned with the outcomes being measured. This process takes time and rounds of revision.
- Keep questions simple and age appropriate, and scaled to the most important information being evaluated.
- Determine if open-ended or closed-ended questions are most appropriate for the service. Open-ended questions allow the help seeker to provide very specific information but also allows opportunity for personal or situation-specific information to be left without interaction with a team member. Close-ended questions can be more efficient to answer and provide consistent data relevant to what information is being sought.
- Pre-survey information gathered through automated technology allows the data to be collected prior to connecting to a live team member, thus reducing the time and expense associated with overall time of live contact.
- Pre-survey information also prepares the team member with insight into who the help seeker is, which assists in ensuring the interaction happens in a developmentally appropriate manner.
- Post-survey questions evaluate short-term outcomes and can result in information being provided that help seekers may be less willing to provide up front but may be willing to provide once a relationship has been developed.
- Design post survey questions based on desired evaluation outcomes which could be:
 - Assessment of the workforce.
 - Assessment of the help seeker perceptions of the help/info provided.
 - A combination of both.

PACTECH pre-survey questions asked the following information:

- Age
- Gender
- State*
- How the user heard about the service

Note: PACTECH questions were at an eighth grade reading level or below for the target population of 13-24 years of age.

*Zip Code was asked in the pilot period and changed to state due to low response rates/opt outs. A significant increase in responses was seen when changed to state.

PACTECH post-survey included the following questions to assess outcomes immediately following hotline interaction:

- Do you feel more positive or hopeful after this text/chat session?
- Did you get the information you needed from this text/chat session?
- Do you feel better prepared to deal with the situation after this text/chat session?
- Do you feel less stress after this text/chat session?
- Was text/chat a good way for you to get help?
- Would you call the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline if text/chat was not available?
- Have you reached out to the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline before?

Standardized Data Collection

Define the variables and information it is important to collect in order to assess services and build evidence informed practices. Data collection should be clear and consistent. Staff training is a key component and includes the following information:

- Standardized data collection elements on the contact record
 - Develop a data dictionary to show a clear definition and understanding of what variables are being captured.
- Understanding the reason for data collection.
- Importance of data fidelity and an established plan of how it will be reviewed and analyzed. This may include:
 - Routinely reviewing text/chat transcripts to ensure accuracy of variables entered in to the contact record.
 - Tying in to the evaluation and supervision process to ensure high quality data collection remains a priority and support is given in understanding data input.
 - Establishing a plan to rollout data collection changes.
 - Having a recorded training on data collection so all team members receive this information in the same manner.

Data Management

Determine what data tells the story of the service from both the programmatic and help seeker perspective. It is imperative to have a plan on storing and managing the data collected. Plan considerations include:

- Leverage technology for storage taking into account security considerations.
- Outline a plan for data access internally and when it is appropriate to share externally.

A plan is important to:

- Increase credibility of the program.
- Inform operational dashboards and external visualization.
- Advance the sustainability of program outcomes.
- Improve operational efficiency.

PACTECH worked in partnership with quantitative researchers from **Arizona State University, Southwest Interdisciplinary Research Center** to develop pre and post survey questions, implement a data collection and fidelity training, and understand help seeker demographics, trends, and post contact outcomes.

Research – Community Partnerships

Community agencies collaborating with academic researchers leads to evidence informed practices specific to the needs of the program and robust outcome analytics. This type of partnership is an investment in time, resources, and finances, but it has the following benefits:

- Objective evaluation of services.
- Co-creation of evidence-informed program practice models developed through an iterative process.
- Alignment of mission driven individuals with unique areas of expertise informing the process. This ensures it is based in solid evaluation practices while still being practical for the program service.
- Ability to have comprehensive data analysis to understand who is utilizing the service as well as outcome performance.

An outcome of the PACTECH community partner-academic research partnership included the Stages of a Text and Chat evidence-informed practice model. Learn more at [ChildhelpHotline.org](https://www.childhelp.org).

Lessons Learned



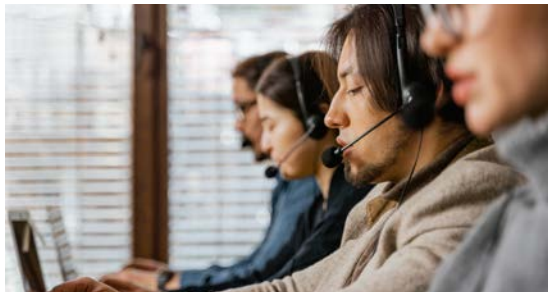
Lesson #1

Text/chat in a hotline environment is complicated. There is much complexity when talking to minors, as minors have different control over what actions can be taken. There are a lot of nuances to making sure that the support provided to youth is applicable and well received.



Lesson #2

Successful conversations with youth maintain a balance between acknowledging the emotional dynamics and providing specific information/guidance/direction pertaining to the situation. Conversations that err by focusing on one component (providing only empathy and statements of care OR simply giving a list of other places to contact or steps to take) often result in youth who do not feel listened to or fully supported.



Lesson #3

The workforce skills that result in the most productive text/chat conversations include a distinct balance of technology savviness and clinically-intentional messaging. Identifying and reinforcing these skills ensures that interactions maintain operational and clinical best practices.



Lesson #4

Training specifically around how to build rapport with youth when voice tone and eye contact are not part of the conversation is critical. Of particular importance is to limit the use of generic/cliché/scripted messages or genuine rapport-building will be negatively impacted. While AI technology may be available, youth still crave human connection when seeking help for interpersonal issues and/or victim services.



Lesson #5

Interactions are more intensive and considerably longer in written form as compared to calls, which can impact staffing and cost per contact. It is important to keep in mind that youth strongly prefer these modalities and may not otherwise reach out for help.

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Lesson #6

Building evaluation capacity internally and externally is required to implement and maintain a high quality service.



Lesson #7

Take time for a pilot period for all text and chat processes and data collection instruments. You don't know what you don't know.



Lesson #8

Develop a data management plan and have a vision for what the data will be used for, including how it can assess and improve work continually.



Lesson #9

An organization's technology staff must take a key role in implementation to coordinate the mechanics/technological side of the service along with the supportive/practical elements of victim services.



Lesson #10

A collaboration between program and research is vital in creating high-quality and sustainable programs that prioritize the needs of those they serve. Having multiple collaborators requires much coordination but when working together to the same end goal, it yields powerful results.

Conclusion

This brief summarizes key elements learned while implementing text and chat services with youth in a child maltreatment setting. While there is great complexity to consider, it is abundantly clear that the addition of text/chat services resulted in more youth directly reaching out for help and feeling supported. Partnerships with academic researchers led to objective and evidence informed findings using quantitative and qualitative research through data, transcript review, and focus groups with hotline staff.

Flexibility was necessary to adapt hotline operations and practices as new findings emerged. Additional information and findings are available at [ChildhelpHotline.org](https://www.childhelp.org).

PACTECH anticipated serving 1,900 youth through text and chat in the first 2 years of operations. Total youth ages 13-24 served was 7,825.



Childhelp Hotline

Knowledge

- Child Welfare laws and systems (including types of abuse, mandated reporting, and difference from adult welfare programs or law enforcement)
- Manifestations of crisis and/or trauma
- Developmental norms and growth (both to interact with youth directly and provide guidance for parents/caregivers)
- Unique needs of various help seekers that commonly reach out to hotline. This may include:
 - LGBTQIA+
 - Minority/undeserved/POC/Diverse ethnicity
 - Youth (children and teens)
 - Adult survivors
 - Parents
 - Perpetrators/obscene/prank
- Psychological aspects of various mental health risks
 - Suicide or self-harm
 - Substance use
 - Mental illness

Skills

- Clinical assessment
 - Ability to prioritize issues
 - Asks questions that seek necessary facts
 - Assesses safety/risk/severity
 - Establishes rapport
 - Establishes and maintains boundaries
- Intervention planning
 - Active problem-solving/suggests solutions
 - Identifies and encourages reasonable actions
 - Identifies and recommends relevant resources
 - Avoids advice-giving or quick fixes
 - Recognizes and addresses resistance/barriers
- Effective communication
 - Clear, concise written language (word choice, grammar, punctuation)
 - Maintain calm, professional, warm tone of voice {Phone}
 - Ability to adapt messaging to cognitive and developmental needs
 - Active listening
 - Crisis de-escalation
 - Strong attention-to-detail (person-centered)
- Data Collection
 - Accurate
 - Objective
 - Comprehensive
 - Recognizes value of data fidelity

Perspectives

- About self
 - Growth mindset/receptive to feedback
 - Implicit bias awareness (about the system, developmental differences, mental health)
 - Self-care and healthy boundaries
- Towards help-seekers
 - Trauma-informed
 - Non-judgmental/de-stigmatizing
 - Collaborative and empowering
 - Honest and genuine
 - Kind and hopeful
 - Cultural competency

This is the intellectual property of Childhelp, Inc. and Purdue University.

The PACTECH practice model guides crisis counselors through providing support and resources. A total of 300 text and chat conversations were analyzed, focusing on patterns across the most successful conversations.

PACTECH Practice Model



For additional information, contact Dr. Laura Schwab-Reese at lschwabr@purdue.edu, Larel Jacobs at ljacobs@childhelp.org or Michelle Fingerman at mfingerman@childhelp.org

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