

# ‘Don’t just listen: Tell me what to do!’

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## Abstract

Counselling is not a well-understood concept. Many people who haven’t undergone counselling believe a counsellor’s role is to listen to a person tell their problem and then ‘help’ them by giving advice about what they should do. Children and young people struggle with the idea that a counsellor is not a human form of Google. It is not easy for them to hear that their problem is complex and that sometimes working out an action plan themselves, with guidance from a trained counsellor, offers better value to their lives in the long run. Kids Helpline is an Australian child and youth-focused telephone and online counselling service with a long-term view of what ‘helping’ looks like. The free-call 24/7 counselling line challenges young clients to see beyond the immediate gratification of receiving instantaneous ‘answers’ to problems, and to value more highly the process of learning problem-solving and decision-making skills, transferable from issue to issue over the course of a lifetime. This article seeks to highlight the early intervention and prevention role that child helplines play in young people’s lives, encouraging and strengthening children and young people’s early forays into exploring consequential thinking. The article describes the processes used by Kids Helpline counsellors to encourage children and young people to become action planners, and demonstrates young people’s capacity to appreciate complexity and personal development.

## Introduction

Counselling as a concept and practice is not well understood by the general public. Child helplines, offering child-centred counselling, are even less fathomable — particularly to children and young people. Yet child helplines have been responding to the diverse needs of children and young people around the globe for more than twenty-five years. Child helplines are now operating in countries in every region of the world, including the Asia-Pacific and the Middle East. Kids Helpline is the Australian child helpline, operating 24/7 out of a Brisbane-based national telephone and online counselling call centre since 1991. The helpline is one of many services delivered by the national family and youth-focused charity **yourtown**. The service is staffed by professionally qualified psychologists, social workers and counsellors, with free counselling offered to all children and young people up to and including twenty-five years of age. Children and young people can access a counsellor using phone, webchat or email. For ease of reading, this article will refer to all those contacting a Kids Helpline counsellor through any of these media as ‘callers’.

Many people, if asked, would tell you that Kids Helpline was like a mini-Lifeline, an emergency telephone number kids can ring if they are in crisis and need an adult to get them to safety or to talk them out of killing themselves. Indeed, Kids Helpline has become well known over many years for its highly effective responses to young people experiencing thoughts of suicide, winning a LiFE award from Suicide Prevention Australia in 2009 as well as assessing situations of child abuse and steering children through the navigational maze of statutory reporting so skilfully that it has been awarded the national NAPCAN (National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect) 'Play Your Part' child protection award for the past two years.

Kids Helpline counsellors and their peers at other countries' child helpline services offer far more than a crisis line emergency response to serious issues faced by children and young people, however. Child helplines also focus on operationalising the principles of positive youth development programs as articulated by Seymour (2012). These include promoting decision-making and problem-solving skills development around any issue of concern to a caller using exploration, teaching and coaching to reflect young people's strengths and increase their responsibility for self (Gregor 2004). Such coaching and teaching occur within a wider social environment, which may encourage young people to look for easy answers and cause confusion about how counselling works.

This article points to the specific needs of children and young people in communicating their problems and concerns, the challenges in helping them forgo the idea of instant answers and the individualised and child-centred practices used by Kids Helpline counsellors to help children develop decision-making and problem-solving skills.

## **Kids Helpline's practice framework**

Kids Helpline engages young people across the full spectrum of public health service models. Universal early intervention and prevention strategies are made available across Australia at no cost, using the preferred communication media of children and young people: the telephone and digital media. The service's tag line, 'Any time, Any Reason — No Problem Too Large or Too Small', aims to encourage all young Australians to pick up the phone and chat to a counsellor about any issue on their mind.

The therapeutic framework into which counsellors are inducted is relationship based and child centred. This means that counsellors are encouraged to examine their own feelings, actions and reactions, and bring this self-knowledge to the development of non-judgemental attitudes and empathy for others within the counselling relationship. It incorporates an age and developmental stage framework for practice, acknowledging the unique methods that children and young people employ to communicate with adults, and the need for trusting relationships to be built before effective problem articulation and resolution can occur.

Counsellors are trained not only in core and advanced counselling competencies, but also the practice values that Kids Helpline believes are essential to achieving the service objective: 'to listen and respond to the needs of children and young people and where appropriate support children and young people to develop strategies and skills to better manage their lives'. These operationalised values focus on

empowering children and young people to deal with problems by helping them to identify and develop their strengths and resources, and exemplify Seymour's Good Practice Principle of '*Learning and Development*' (2012). The objectives of counsellor training include building therapeutic relationships with children and young people that strengthen resilience, encourage, validate and gently challenge, while assessing their unique needs and teaching them decision-making and problem-solving skills. This counselling approach reframes requests for instant advice and simple answers into guidance towards longer term planning and skills building. Through offering these strategies to callers, it is believed they will be equipped to deal more effectively with multiple issues over the course of their lives, and avoid many of the high-risk behaviours and actions that can have a negative impact well into adulthood.

## Teaching decision-making and problem-solving skills

Kids Helpline aims to support children and young people to resolve their issues not through telling young people *what* decisions they should make, but by educating them about *how* to make positive and healthy decisions. Each young person is seen as the expert in their own life and their knowledge about what works or doesn't work for them is the basis of every action plan arising from a counselling session.

At the heart of the process is a micro-skills model of counselling, entailing three stages that assist counsellors to structure and define the nature and goals of the therapeutic interaction:

- Stage 1: Hearing and responding to the client's story
- Stage 2: Mapping the possibilities
- Stage 3: Moving towards change.

Each stage covers widely accepted micro-skills counselling components (see, for example, AIPC 2017). Figure 1 shows the progression of the change process, and demonstrates the interrelationships between the components within each stage. The counselling process does not necessarily follow a linear or circular flow, but each component generally is visited at some point before moving to the next stage.

Stage 1 is focused on hearing and responding to the caller's story and is characterised by three components:

- 1 *Exploring context* uses open, closed and clarifying questions to create a shared understanding of the issue and its context in the caller's life.
- 2 *Engagement* builds rapport with callers through using a non-judgemental tone and matched pace, normalising their emotions and listening for the caller's strengths.
- 3 *Exploring feelings and meaning* requires the counsellor to 'unpack' the issue from the caller's perspective. In this final practice component of Stage 1, the counsellor paraphrases, summarises and selectively reinforces the caller's key disclosures of emotions, beliefs and values, leading to a greater self-awareness for the caller.

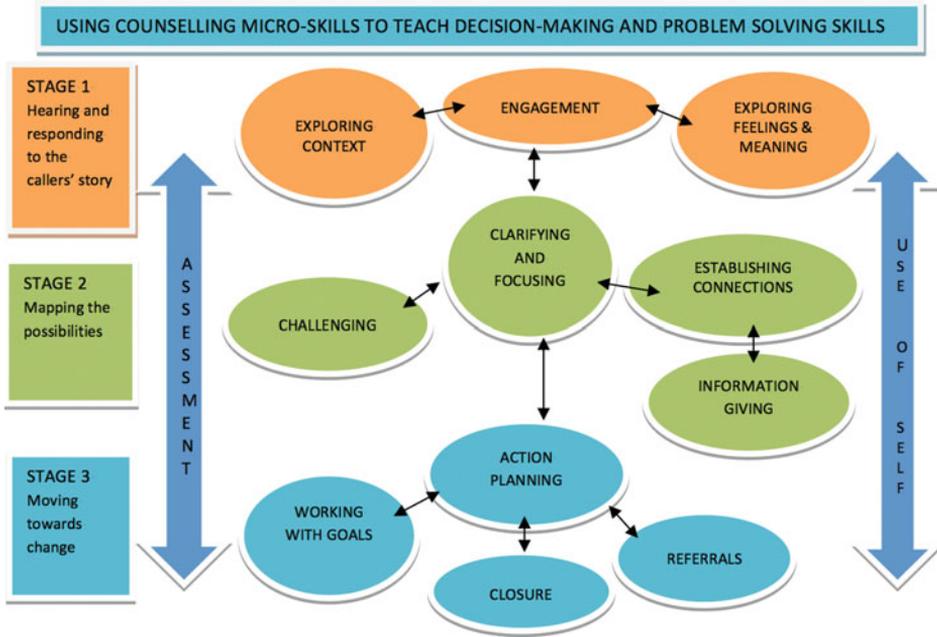


Figure 1  
(Colour online) Teaching decision-making and problem-solving skills using a Micro-Skills counselling model.

Note: The model illustrated above and described in this paper is the author's adaption of traditional models of micro-skills counselling (for example AIPC), and reflects the supervisory analysis processes used to review Kids Helpline counsellor practice.

Stage 2 involves mapping the possibilities and has four components:

- 1 *Clarifying and focusing* are two separate, but linked, practice activities. First, this component supports children and young people to cut through confusing extraneous issues and identify the primary problem needing resolution. Second, it involves summarising the content of the call that has occurred so far to provide structure and direction before moving towards the idea of change.
- 2 The counsellor also seeks to *establish connections* between events, reactions and emotions, and to identify patterns or repeated events and themes in a caller's life.
- 3 Commonly, counsellors empathically *challenge* discrepancies and incongruences that may arise from previous unhelpful ways of thinking, which create barriers to problem solving.
- 4 *Information giving* provides callers with accurate and appropriate knowledge relating to their issues in order to assist them with an optimal selection of options in Stage 3.

Stage three also has four components.

- 1 *Working with goals* encourages callers to consider previous similar experiences, and the resulting outcomes and solutions, and to articulate their new desired

outcomes and goals. This component empowers callers to generate ideas about strategies which could lead to achievement of their desired outcomes and goals, and to discuss the potential consequences of each option. Callers are then supported to select their preferred option, leading to the desired outcome or goal.

- 2 *Action planning* encourages callers to articulate the strategies needed to achieve the nominated goal, including who else might help and timeframes for action. This component may also include counsellors and callers role-playing potentially difficult conversations with others involved in the issue, so callers will feel prepared — thus increasing their confidence.
- 3 *Referrals* to other agencies are offered if specialist support is included in the action plan.
- 4 Finally the point of *closure* arrives, where salient points, goals and actions are summarised and callers are provided with the opportunity to reflect on the call and outcomes. Counsellors then suggest children and young people call back and speak to the same counsellor to ‘check in’ following plan implementation, discuss any roadblocks and reinforce positive behaviours and skill development.

*Assessment* and *use of self* are continuous metacognition processes requiring the counsellor to consciously think about what they are thinking, doing and feeling across all stages (Ridley et al. 2011).

### **‘Tell me what to do’: Challenging the desire for immediate answers**

The difficulties inherent in the task of gently challenging young people who contact child helplines in highly distressed states demanding solutions to their problems cannot be overstated. Young callers often pick up the phone to ring Kids Helpline with a predetermined expectation of what they will be offered, and it can be a tricky job to bring callers to an alternative view of what counselling entails. If their presentation involves a complex issue, then the model of counselling described above will commence, resulting in a far more lengthy and unexpected process. Callers may find that their counsellor, rather than providing a list of ‘solutions’ to the problem — much as in the manner of a human Google search program — instead slows down the process of communication with them, and commences a series of questions that may appear quite obscure to the caller and can be a source of great frustration to them.

Each year, Kids Helpline conducts a survey to ascertain the level of satisfaction and short-term impact felt by its young clients after experiencing a counselling session. Predominantly, feedback is positive. Six hundred and twenty five children and young people aged between five and twenty-five years responded to the 2016 survey. More than four out of five indicated satisfaction with the service and nine out of ten reported they would recommend the service to a friend. Despite these high levels of expressed satisfaction, some young people articulated their frustration at not being given advice and answers.

Actually tell me what to do.

Give me advice on how to deal with my problems.

Give me more solutions and not ask so many questions.

Inform me on how to deal with my everyday problems.

I think suggesting more ways to solve the problem would be more helpful.

It is difficult to not wonder when interpreting this qualitative feedback whether the 'Age of Google' and instant online 'answers', regardless of the quality of the information found on the internet, is a source of this confusion and annoyance (Poundstone 2016).

Not all callers feel this frustration however. Many callers who experience a comprehensive counselling session using the micro-skills model described above report significant benefits, even when not getting what they expected. Three out of four respondents to the 2016 satisfaction survey reported that they had more ideas about what to do about their problem, as well as feeling more capable to deal with their problem.

They don't always just give u the answers but ask u questions that allow yourself to figure it out yourself when you don't realize it. Also u can come back to the same person. The kids help line have thought deeply about how they can satisfy us the most.

I like how the questions asked really made me think about my situation and all of the information available.

Having someone who takes the time to listen and doesn't judge, can make useful suggestion on how to manage the situation without bombarding you with all these solutions that might not fit you. The people I've spoken to are really good at getting where you're at and are responding in a way that actually helps. They know when just to listen and when to offer ways of coping.

Kids Help Line is best used as a service by which one reflects upon themselves — although speaking to the councilors feels rather cold and distant, instead of achieving any sense of connection, it allows one to have another person act as a mirror for themselves. The most is not learned through wise answers that solve our life's problems, but instead in the moment of a heated, emotional reply to a question that cuts a bit too close to home. It's at this point where one can realise the truth about how they think, feel, about what is bothering them, and come to accept and cooperate with the emotions they are feeling at the time.

How caring the counsellor was and how patiently she talked with me and how appropriately she asked questions to get to what was bothering me.

They listen to you and ask you different types of questions to dissect your emotions and thoughts regarding that situation.

This feedback points not only to Kids Helpline counsellor expertise in applying the practice model used to teach decision-making and problem-solving skills to children and young people, but also to the effectiveness of the model in moving callers towards greater self-knowledge and feelings of empowerment.

## Conclusion

Kids Helpline provides multi-faceted responses to a range of issues about which children and young people seek help. Although the child helpline is well known for its role in providing crisis-response services for serious presentations involving the safety of callers, the service is less known for its role as educators and coaches, teaching children and young people decision-making and problem-solving skills. While some unenthusiastic caller feedback about their counselling experience highlights the complexities of challenging young people's desire for simple answers to multifaceted life problems, significantly high levels of satisfaction and positive stories demonstrate that young people do value increased self-awareness and the building of lifelong personal development skills. Most importantly, the comprehensive statements describing the factors that led to 'feeling helped' reveal the deep desire of young people to give voice to their experiences and to convey their appreciation of the developmentally challenging counselling practice used by Kids Helpline.

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