

Mission statement of Kids Help Line (KHL):

“Kids Help Line exists to assist people to develop strategies and skills which enable them to more effectively manage their own lives.” (KHL info sheet p1)

Kids Help Line (KHL) strategic vision recognises that young people have the fastest uptake of new technologies and that the development of innovative ways in delivery of service methods is necessary to facilitate help seeking. (REF Richard) The online email and web counselling service for KHL commenced in 2000 to accommodate the growing trends between young people and technology and in 2003 counsellors responded to 6,476 webcounselling clients, 3,331 more than 2002. (ref online counselling info sheet 27). It has become a valuable tool for communication with young Australians, and thus contributes significantly to research and information services within KHL.

Access to the internet has increased dramatically over the past 10 years with 59% of all Australian households with children under the age of 15 owning a computer with internet access, an increase of almost a 40% since 1998. (NOEI) The National Office for Information Economy (2003) in June last year recorded 82% of 14 to 17 year olds using the internet and 85% of these children were accessing the internet from home. The rate of internet use decreases the younger a child is, yet 47% of 5-14 year olds are using the worldwide web. (NOEI) Accessibility of the internet is growing dramatically, with most schools integrating information technology and computers with current curricula (in Talyor, QLD department of Education, 2002) Computers with dial-up or broad band access exist in public libraries and other public domains as well as in a majority of Australian homes. The global reach and convenience of being able to log on to the internet at anytime in any one place creates a favourable pathway for contact by young people.

The service scope of the internet and mode of delivery of web counselling is such that young people can potentially access the service from all geographic regions, including those from remote areas (REF rich) A major challenge to this assumption is that there is unequitable resource allocation between metropolitan and rural areas, together with unequal access to the internet for low income families or individuals. Computer literacy and English language proficiency also inhibit many marginalized and disadvantaged people's access to web counselling (REF gov report) Kids Help Line (John Taylor report) note that remote areas of Australia have often lacked in the infrastructure to fully participate in the internet boom but surely information technology will grow to accommodate this lack of resources. In opposition to this is the sentiment that traditional methods such as telephone and transport in rural areas are usually time consuming and expensive, with the potential obstacle of remaining anonymous.

Popular trends that are evolving from high internet use by children include that of web based chat rooms. Chat rooms have been identified as a preferred method of communication for young people as 'face-to-face barriers' can be overcome, creating power and autonomy for the individual (REF). Levels of fear and anxiety can drop dramatically when not placed in a position of face-to-face confrontation. If they choose to do so an individual can remain anonymous online and limit the information they provide to their chat buddy. A situation such as this provides an amazing opportunity for communication between two people, or more strategically, between a counsellor and child. Not only is a child familiar with the forum of a chat room but they are more likely to communicate more comfortably in an even power-levelled discussion (REF <http://www.netalert.net.au/00954-Why-do-children-love-to-Chat-on-the-Internet.asp>).

Suler (in Taylor, 1996) describes the virtual or cyberworld as distinctly different to the human-person based world and describes some distinct differences in cyberspace that affect a person's psychological experience.

These include:

1. Limited sensory experience – people mostly communicate on the internet just through written word.
2. Identity flexibility and anonymity – people can be themselves, be an imaginary figure, or be anonymous.
3. Equalisation of status – participants meet more as equals than in the real world.
4. Transending special boundaries – geographical distance makes little difference with who interact with whom.
5. Time stretching and condensation – using the internet for both asynchronous and synchronous communication allows time to think, plan and compose responses to the other person.
6. Accessibility to numerous relationships – contact with a wider range of individuals than can be established in the real world.
7. Permanent records – most online conversations can be stored as a permanent record.

Psychological reasoning such as this poses many new questions in psychology and establishments that practice counselling. Feedback from KHL clients indicates that web counselling gives young people a greater sense of control allowing them to disclose more severe problems than they would otherwise disclose (REF rich). The reasons for help seeking and the severity of the problems in web counselling are substantially different to that of KHL tele counselling service. Young people are five times more likely to seek help for mental health, suicide and eating behaviour issues and twice as likely to seek help for issues of sexual assault and sexual orientation. (Talor 2001) Consequently, web counselling can be defined as providing new communication technology for KHL that benefits the organisation by being able to tap into its client base at a deeper level and access new information.

Differences can be noted below.

	Web	Phone
Gender	83% female	72% female
Age:		
5-9 years	0.4%	6.9%
10-14	25.7%	54.7%
15-18	73.9%	38.3%
Metropolitan Location	86%	64.5%
Problem types:		
Mental Health	14%	3.1%
Suicide	7.5%	1.7%
Sexual Abuse	6.8%	1.9%
Eating Behaviours	4.5%	0.6%
Peer relationships	18.6%	11.6%
Family relationships	10.9%	16.9%

A question may be asked whether or not web counselling is suitable for these certain types of clients? Can KHL fulfil their objectives of empowering clients through a method of web chat? The change in client's reasons for help seeking directly impacts on the strategies used by KHL counselors to achieve their organisational goals. As communication is an integral component of effective counselling, many concerns

and limitations are presented when assessing the effectiveness of communication exchange between the child and counsellors.

Limitations include the obvious reduction in information that is available for the counsellor and client (Taylor 2001). The lack of many tangible human indicators makes it difficult for counselors to disseminate problems where they are usually aided by verbal exchange. The National review of tele counselling and web counselling services (2003) has indicated several key disadvantages of web counselling as:

1. Lack of visual-based cues
2. Jurisdictional problems and issues
3. Potential dangers relating to privacy, legal and other difficulties posed by counselling over the internet.
4. Lack of evidence based practice

KHL has identified that pitch, tone and pace of speech is absent in web chat communication, making it difficult to express emotions (Taylor 2001). The project responds to the problem of limited emotional expressiveness by introducing activities whereby the child selects pictures and tools to visual their feelings, offering a new dimension to the counselling relationship (REF khl rich) Evidently, as an organisation KHL is adapting methods to fulfil its objectives of helping young persons.

Taking into consideration the pros and cons, new information and insight into problems that are facing youth is invaluable for KHL as an organisation. Unique data is collected from counselling sessions which contributes to research and development within the field. The data base or Knowledge Management System (KMS) analyses and disseminates information which can then effectively identify issues and problems of KHL clients (REF KHL info sheet)

As an organisation, KHL benefits tremendously from the knowledge it generates from counselling. Interpretation of data provides a platform for policy development in both government and non-government sectors. It also highlights the possible gaps in service delivery. Most importantly, the KMS provides intellectual capital that helps obtain funding and grants for service development. (Turban) (REF KHL info sheet1)

Further business efficiencies gained from web counselling highlight the ease of counsellor supervision, which is imperative in quality control. As web counselling is a new strategy for help seeking, training techniques are extremely important. Continual development within KHL management of web counselling has enabled them to meet professional standards (REF gov report)

CONCLUSION

Web counselling as a service of KHL face significant challenges in ensuring their technology keeps pace with consumer demand. Continual maintenance and upgrading is particularly critical to ensure high standards are maintained in web counselling. (lots more to come on this!)

Web counselling addresses many issues that prevent young people from seeking help from traditional providers such as GP and school and tele counsellors including confidentiality, power and accessibility (REF richard).

The benefits for client and counsellor alike include the convenience of logging in at any time between operating hours, global reach and accessibility of young people in remote areas, a self determination of clients to seek help in the first place, leveling the power balance between client and KHL counsellor, and the reduction of inhibitors (REF report).

With new boundaries being broken that usually inhibit a child from disclosing Little evaluation has been given to the benefits of web counselling through web chat.

Web chat rooms occur in real time likening interaction to that of conversation. When a child contacts KHL they may just want initial contact to help identify their problem or perhaps ask for a referral to seek other treatment or support groups. However, web counselling is predominantly used by young people for crisis intervention when an immediate response is required. Web chat is still acceptable as real time response confronts this issue.

Web counselling is reacting to the growing environmental trends and market pressures that demand communication over the internet (REF). If young people are communicating through chat rooms, why not counsel through one? Web chat in web counselling opens up further avenues in quality counselling for children. As a strategic system, web counselling offers improved customer service by broadening its appeal to young people by promoting innovation and creativity and a move towards empowering of clients through effective counselling. (REF TURBAN). However, there are many issues to consider that accompany this market demand and will effectively impact on KHL strategic goals.

Another perceived benefit of web counselling is that of being in an environment where the child feels comfortable to communicate.

The ethical issues that challenge web counsellors principally relate to confidentiality, privacy and cyber stalking. According to Hackerman and Greer (in Taylor 2001) "counselors are likely to encounter certain types of people who are attracted to the internet due to the ability to remain anonymous, such as paedophiles, sexual monochists, and those with pathological personality types."