CHAT COUNSELLING
FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH
– A HANDBOOK
BY TRINE NATASJA SINDAHL

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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is the result of a research and development project at the Danish child helpline, Børns Vilkår. The project ran from 2007 to 2011 and was financed by TrygFonden. The purpose of the book is to share the knowledge and experience that was collected in this period. The book is intended for people who work as chat counsellors or for those who are considering working in this field.

Many have contributed to the "Chat project." I would therefore like to say thank you to TrygFonden who made it possible for Børns Vilkår to be able to study the subject in-depth, theoretically as well as practically. It is rare to have such a good framework for qualifying social work. We would also like to thank both the paid and unpaid counsellors, as well as those service users who have contributed via interviews and questionnaires. Our thanks to all those who have allowed us to observe them, allowed themselves to be experimented with, who have embraced and tried new things, provided feedback and been happy to participate. We wish to offer special gratitude to the following chat counselling organisations for taking part in the project: UngOnline (Red Cross Youth), Cyberhus, AIDS Linjen, Girltalk, Unge & Sorg, De Kindertelefoon (Holland) and later BuddyGuard (Save the Children), Albahus and LMS, who were all participants in a chat network where experience and practice is exchanged on an ongoing basis. A big thank you goes out to Child Helpline International (CHI) for their generous sharing of knowledge, documents, research and experience, all of which have been of great importance in the realisation of this book.

During the writing process I received assistance from the journalist Anne Louise Stevnhøj, who edited the book thoroughly, and from my colleagues at

BørneTelefonen (the Children's Telephone), who assisted with reading and commenting.

I am a trained psychologist and have worked with chat counselling since 2002, when I began training new counsellors at UngOnline (Red Cross Youth) in counselling methodology. My encounters with chat counselling have been fascinating and inspiring and have certainly changed the way I look at anonymous counselling. Chat counselling challenges many of the conventional notions of what it takes for counselling to be fruitful. Many are sceptical, but also curious in their first encounter with chat counselling. I hope that this book will contribute to the developing practice or simply articulate the silent knowledge that many chat counsellors already possess.

Happy reading.
Trine Natasja Sindahl

FOREWORD

Nenita La Rose

As the Executive Director of Child Helpline International I am pleased and proud to have another important source of information available for our members in the network: The "Chat Counselling for Children and Youth" Handbook.

This Handbook is an important and necessary guide for counsellors who are confronted with modern day technology. For over 30 years child helplines used the telephone as their main communication channel to provide services to children and young people. The Internet however has enabled entirely new forms of interaction which has had a huge impact on people's lives. As a result we can see that chat messaging has become one of the preferred methods of communication for many young people.

Children and young people, are quick to adopt new forms of communication and child helplines have to adopt as well. Chat messaging, has changed the way young people expect to communicate and child helplines are challenged to stay in contact with them.

Fortunately in the past ten years, we have seen the development of child helplines also starting to offer their services through new channels of communication. As of 2013, 23 child helplines within the CHI membership have launched chat counselling services in their countries.

CHI Danish member Børns Vilkår is considered one of the pioneers in this field and they have put in great effort into researching this field. The result is a great compilation of expertise, experiences and best practices that holds valuable information for all child helplines who are in the process of planning, launching and expanding chat counselling services for children. CHI welcomes this initiative and with this English translation is happy to make this guidebook available to our wider membership.

INTRODUCTION

Chat counselling is a virtual conversation. It offers unique possibilities for both the child seeking help and for the counsellors and organisations providing the support. The special features of chat communication are that the conversation is both *written* and *synchronous*. While the exchange of text has some of the traits of a conversation being written down, it is often completely different from a verbal conversation.

Social work aimed at children and youth should be developed with a knowledge of the world in which those children live. Help should be available where the children are, and for many of them, life without the internet is unthinkable. It therefore makes sense to use the internet as a platform for helping this group.

The book is intended as a guide, but it can also be used as a reference. If you are interested in practical guidelines on how to improve your chat counselling skills, then Chapters 7 to 9 are recommended. Other chapters of the book explore the theoretical background of chat counselling. At the back of the book you will find an example of a full counselling session.

The concepts of the book

Chat counselling, as examined in this book, is a service where a counsellor converses with a service user via a text-based live chat medium. The purpose of the counselling session is to support the service user in reflecting on his or her own situation, problems or crises.

The focus is on anonymous counselling for prevention and/or problem solving. Chat-based counselling may also include information and guidance in relation to specific areas, to the actual treatment of mental disorders, or in

connection with treatment follow-up or additional health services. Although specific mental disorder information and guidance chat models are not provided in this book, you will be able to find inspiration.

For the purposes of this book, the prime focus has been on children and youth in the ten- to nineteen-year-old age group. For simplicity, the words "children" and "youth" are used interchangeably, as are "he" and "she," although "she" will be more common since children using chat counselling and the counsellors they talk to are predominantly girls and women.

The users of chat helplines will be referred to as "chatters." Children and youth contacting telephone helplines are referred to as "callers".

Throughout the book you will find examples from chat conversations. Some are fictional, but most of them are edited versions of actual conversations that have taken place between counsellors and a child on a chat helpline. The publication of the transcripts has been made with the child's consent, but certain parts of the conversations have been altered to protect the child's anonymity.

THE UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS OF CHAT COUNSELLING
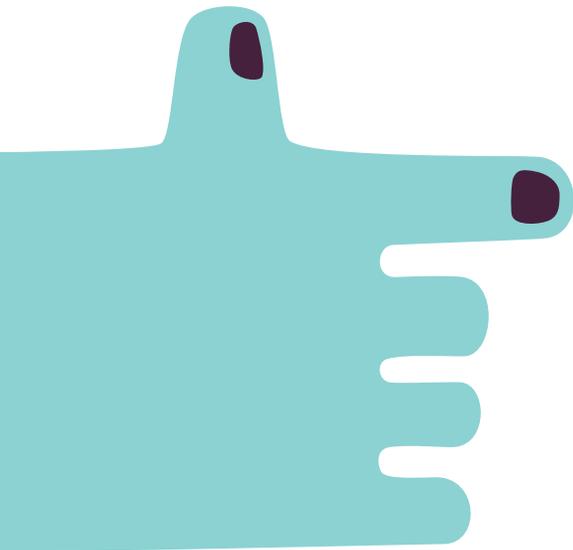
Chat counselling is defined as a service that offers information, advice and support for psychological and social problems using a chat technology system. Child and counsellor interact simultaneously through the use of computers and internet-based chat technology. The interaction is in real time.

Chat counselling has many characteristics in common with other distance-mediated counselling forms, e.g., telephone, letter and email counselling. However chat counselling differs from traditional distance counselling mediums in several ways.

Options

We all have preferences in terms of which media we prefer: phone, face-to-face, email, texting, photos, letters or maybe chat. We know that children and youth are very specific in their choice of media when looking for help and support. "Chat children" rarely use phone counselling and vice versa. If you want to help connect with children and youth, it will be essential to be present on several media. In this context it may also be relevant to offer children and youth counselling via texting. Other children may prefer to receive counselling in their own time by looking at a website without contacting a counsellor directly.

The child is in control

Counselling takes place at a location of the child's choosing. This contributes to a levelling of the traditional power relationship between the service user and the counsellor. Perhaps the child sits in her room in surroundings that provide a feeling of safety. We are not in a psychologist's office where a therapist has chosen the setting and artefacts which support the status of the therapist. When chatting online, the child may end the contact at the touch of a button. The child has control over what information she passes on to the counsellor. While this can sometimes be frustrating for the counsellor, because the contact may be ended prematurely by the chatter, this levelling of power may in fact encourage the contact in the first place.

The child experiences a high degree of anonymity

In both phone and chat counselling the counsellor and child may not see each other, depending on the choice of technology. Non-visual chat is considered an advantage in regards to building rapport and ensuring chatter anonymity. In chat counselling you do not hear the other party either – the communication is placeless, faceless and voiceless (Fukkink & Hermanns, 2007). This phenomenon is also called channel reduction (Glantz et al., 2003). For some children and youth this may mean that the step to establishing contact is easier.

The conversation is written

When conversation is written down, the dialogue is maintained and reflected back to both recipient and sender. This means that the parties are given time and opportunity to formulate and edit their contributions before they are presented to the conversation partner. Compared to oral dialogue, the child spends longer time in his own reflexive process. For the child, this can provide a therapeutic effect in itself.

The conversation can be saved, printed and reread.

Depending on the system configuration, it will be possible for one or both parties to maintain a copy of the conversation either in electronic form or on paper. For the counsellor, conversation transcripts can be used for self-reflection and case supervision. They can also be used as conversation examples for the purposes of teaching (see Use of Transcripts in Chapter 11). For the child, it may mean that she can reread the dialogue at times when she may need it, or she can bring the conversation to somebody else who can then gain insight into the child's situation.

Based on technology

Chat counselling makes use of internet technology (IT), a system which, no matter how simple, will always require more technology than a phone service.

Chat counselling is free
If the child has access to a computer with an internet connection, there is no cost associated with receiving counselling.

Chat counselling is silent
This means that the chatter may be less concerned with whether or not someone else overhears them while they receive counselling, which may not be the case for phone counselling.

Chat counselling is independent of location
Chat counselling may also serve children and youth who are living abroad but who still wish to talk to a counsellor from their home country. These children and youth will typically opt out of phone counselling due to the cost or difficulty of an international call. As a counsellor, it is important to be aware that children who initiate contact from abroad may live under different societal and regulatory conditions.

CASE

A chat helpline had contact with a girl who had been the victim of domestic violence. While still in contact with the helpline, she decided to report the violence to the authorities. For various reasons, the local social services assessed that the girl was in such grave danger that she needed to go "underground". The girl was placed with a family in a neighbouring country. The girl continued to have contact with the chat counselling service. This helped her especially because, for security reasons, she was not allowed to contact friends or family in Denmark.

Counselling of persons with hearing or speech impediment

It is difficult to use the phone to provide counselling to persons with hearing or speech impediments. Although there are technical solutions enabling this group to receive phone counselling, chat counselling provides the opportunity to work with this group of children on an equal basis with their peers. Chat counselling also offers the opportunity for people with hearing or speech impediments to become counsellors.

Accelerated intimacy

One of the characteristics of chat counselling is that, due to the degree of anonymity provided by the technology, the parties are typically less worried about how they appear. This, combined with the more time-consuming nature of the communication form, often means that counsellors will experience a high level of openness and a tendency to self-disclosure very early in the conversation. In this regard, the distance actually contributes to an experience of closeness and intimacy. Because it is impersonal, it becomes personal.

The possibility of combining counselling with other online functionalities

As both the child and the counsellor are on the internet at the same time, chat counselling provides the opportunity to involve other online materials in the conversation. For example, the counsellor may provide the child with a link to a relevant location which the child and counsellor can "visit" together. Perhaps the counsellor refers the child to a relevant website or document where the child can read more about the problem at hand, or where she can enter into a dialogue with other children and youth who have had similar experiences.

1.1 THE LIMITATIONS OF CHAT COUNSELLING

Chat counselling is dependent on synchronicity

Chat counselling requires that the child and the counsellor be present at their computers at the same time, whereas email and letter counselling is independent of place and time. The child can write to the recipient anytime it suits her, and can use as much time working on her email or letter as she needs.

Chat conversations are more time-consuming

A chat conversation takes about five times longer than a corresponding phone conversation. Some counselling organisations compensate for this by allowing a counsellor to have ongoing conversations with several children at the same time.

> We anticipated that we needed more time to train our helpline volunteers in chat and email counselling, but we did not anticipate the additional time each email and chat would take to respond to. This extra time makes them perhaps more rewarding but certainly means we can answer fewer than expected.
>
> The British helpline, Get Connected, talks about establishing their online helpline (Schalken et al. 2008).

Increased risk of misunderstandings and conflict

There is greater risk of conflict in a chat conversation because the amount of information is reduced, so it can take longer to sort out errors and misunderstandings. The counsellor must therefore develop a practice where this is avoided as much as possible.

Flaming

Most sites on the internet that allow chatters to express themselves choose to publish rules for good behaviour, or "netiquette". This is because anonymity also provides the opportunity for people to behave in offensive ways without being held accountable for their behaviour. Although the vast majority of chatters display normal conventions of behaviour, chat counsellors will also find chatters who behave disrespectfully and offensively toward the counsellor. The chat counsellor should always attempt to maintain a respectful tone of "voice" both in the direct dialogue with the child, and when the counsellor talks about the child with colleagues.

Looser form of contact

Many children and youth are accustomed to using different media at the same time. When chatting with friends (often several at a time), they may be watching TV, playing internet games, listening to music or talking on their mobile phones. Chat counsellors will experience this from time to time. Some helplines choose to take advantage of this phenomenon by providing counselling with several children at the same time. Others choose to insist that the counselling conversation is a special form of conversation requiring the focused presence of both counsellor and child. It is important to be aware that the child does not necessarily know the policy of the specific helpline. There is no reason to be offended in cases where the child would like to walk the dog while the counsellor is waiting, or where the child takes a very long time to answer because he is watching a film on TV at the same time.

Playing with virtual identities

Anonymity on the internet means that it is not uncommon for users to pretend to be someone other than who they really are. For example, it is quite common for children and young people to try to impersonate the opposite sex. In their contact with helplines, they may also present problems which are quite different from the ones they are actually dealing with.

CASE

A chat service had been having conversations for a long time with a girl who was being subjected to incest. At one point, one of the girl's friends entered the chat service and reported that the first girl had tried to commit suicide. Later it turned out to be the same girl. She was pretending to be two different people.

Referral can be difficult

For various reasons, chat helplines are rarely locally-based. This means that the chat helpline will be approached by children and youth from all over the country, or even from abroad. It is rarely possible to have a comprehensive overview of the types of assistance that are available locally, and even if it were possible, it would require the child to indicate where she lives. In some cases, the child will not be prepared to reveal this.

Risk assessment and crisis intervention becomes difficult

When the counsellor cannot see the child's face or hear the child's voice, it requires both a systematic approach and some experience to assess the seriousness of the situation. Is the child in danger? If the counsellor assesses that the child is in a situation that requires immediate intervention, there is no guarantee that the child will provide the information that will allow the counsellor to help.

Chat counselling is not for everybody

In order to use chat counselling, the child or young person must have access to the internet. In Denmark this applies to almost all children and youth, although not everyone has access via a private computer. Chat counselling also requires knowledge of the existence of the chat service and an understanding of how to get in touch. The child must also understand how a chat

session works and they must possess communicative competencies, i.e. the ability to spell comprehensively and read.

Chat counselling is associated with technical problems

Everyone involved in chat counselling knows from experience that the system may "freeze," or disconnect in the middle of a conversation, and that the internet connection sometimes disappears altogether. In addition, it is difficult to make an online environment completely secure.

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WHO ARE THE "CHATTERS"?
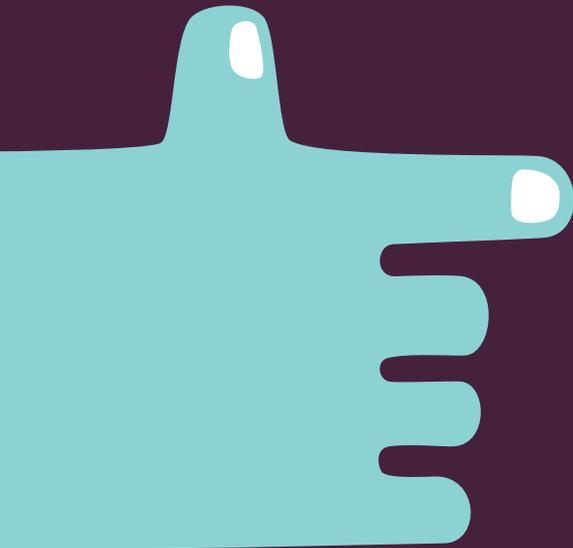
> **The number of children that are on the internet looking for help has been a staggering realisation for us.**
>
> Kids Help Phone, Canada, talks about their experience with the expansion of their online services (Schalken et al., 2008)

On the internet, children cultivate their interests, their friendships, their love and their anger. They develop knowledge and skills. They find entertainment, and they look for help when they have difficulties. The rate of internet expansion is faster than that of any media that has come before it. Among Danish nine- to sixteen-year-olds, nine out of ten uses the web daily, and the average age at which children start to use the internet is seven.

A British study of eleven- to nineteen-year-olds emphasised the fact that for most of them, the internet was their primary source of health information (Gray et al., 2005). Several international studies have suggested that as many as 75 percent of all young people have used the internet to find information on health, which is more than the proportion of young people who have used the internet to download music or play games (Santor et al., 2007).

Help via the internet has a real function for young people who are worried about what others think, who prefer to solve problems themselves, who may despair that there is nothing that can help them, or who do not know where they can find the help that they need.

Young people with psychosocial problems tend to spend more time online, and they have a have higher tendency to use particular chat rooms than other young people (Sun et al., 2005).

Compared with phone helplines, there is a tendency for the users of chat helpline services to be older (at least in *child* helplines) and the problems presented in the chats are often more heavy, complex, psychosocial issues.

In a study of an American website containing health information that focuses on a wide variety of health issues for young people, a comparison was made between young people (from the same school and in the same age group) who used the website and the ones who did not use it. It was found that the likelihood of a young person using the website was greatest if:

1. The young person was a girl
2. The young person had internet access at home
3. The young person wanted help for an emotional or behavioural problem

(Santor et al., 2007)

2.1 GENDER AND AGE

With the exception of helplines aimed at narrow target groups or issues (such as counselling for venereal diseases or contraception), a picture emerges showing that chat helplines are predominantly used by girls. It is not unusual for a chat helpline to have over 80 percent girl chatters.
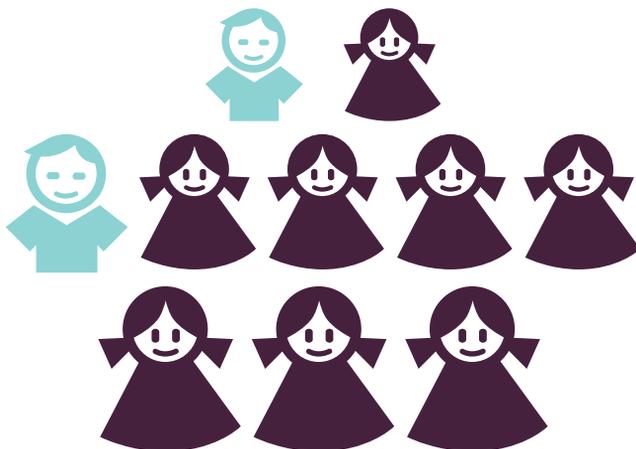
There are several reasons for this. First and foremost, girls are more likely than boys to use the internet as a communication tool, while boys are more likely to use the internet to play games, listen to music or watch movies. For girls, writing about problems is a natural extension of their problem-solving strategies, and some girls see chat helplines much like a "diary that responds."

While chatters start at nine years old, the majorities of chatters are between fourteen and twenty years old. In this age group there are relatively high proportions of girls who feel "down," which can manifest as introversion and depressive symptoms. Many girls in late puberty have, or have experienced, feeling unhappy, depressed, or suicidal. Many have attempted suicide, have eating disorders, or inflicted self-harm. Among boys in late puberty the tendency is to smoke, drink and experiment with drugs. Young boys are also more frequently at risk in a nightlife scene, and they are primarily the ones who come into conflict with the law.

Girls' and boys' problems manifest themselves in different ways, as do the ways they seek help and deal with their problems. Girls have a tendency to look for help in places where they can talk about their problems, while boys

are more reluctant to seek help on their own initiative. Social work aimed at boys is therefore more focused on outreach.

However, it should be noted that studies of "online help" show that internet sites with information about health and mental health are used equally by boys and girls. Even if boys do not contact chat helplines, it is possible that they are still seeking information on the websites where chat helplines are found.

In one American study, men and women were allowed to chat anonymously with each other in pairs. During the experiment the participants were measured for depression, loneliness, self-esteem and perceived social support. The experiment showed that the chat relationship had a positive effect on all parameters, showing no gender differences (Shaw & Gant, 2002).

In 2009, two hundred and fifty user evaluations of the Danish chat helpline Børns Vilkår showed a slight tendency for boys to report that they profited more from the conversations than the girls (Sindahl, 2009).

2.2 WHAT THE CHILDREN BRING TO THE CHAT HELPLINES

Chat counselling may cover all kinds of personal issues, but it is especially used for issues associated with shame and guilt, such as sexuality, neglect, self-harm and abuse.

The internet also provides young people with the opportunity to explore their own sexuality as gays, transsexuals or bisexuals – all while remaining anonymous.

Based on an American survey of seventh-grade students in California, a link was found between psychosocial risk factors, health-damaging behaviour and increased use of the internet. Among the students who used chat rooms and who were on the internet more than one hour per day, the study found a higher number of young people with depression and drug or alcohol abuse. (Sun et al., 2005)

When compared with phone helplines, there is a higher tendency for children and young people with serious psychosocial problems to approach chat helplines. The problems they chat about are generally complex and serious, and there are more cases of neglect, mental illness and suicidal thoughts than with phone helplines. This does not mean that chat counselling may not also be a platform for conversations of a more everyday nature, but among chatters there is a higher concentration of young people who receive or need professional help and treatment for emotional issues. With regards to these types of problems it can be a challenge to counsel a young person in a chat. On one hand, the chat medium enables the counselling services to reach out to more children who are dealing with complex emotional issues. On the other hand, chat counselling can be insufficient help for this target group. The challenge for chat helplines is to support the child in gaining access to -- or making better use of -- the professional help that is available through a qualified system.

There are also service users that use chat helplines less frequently compared to phone helplines. Most significant are the testing calls that many phone helplines for children receive. These are calls from children who may be testing the service: "How does it feel to call, and how will they respond to me?" These could also be children who are just bored and who think it is funny to call. The general picture is that the number of children testing the chat services is lower than those who test phone helplines. It is not unusual

that up to 70 percent of the calls to a phone helpline fall into this category. In chat counselling, this constitutes less than 10 percent of the contacts. Contacts from women or men who use the service to satisfy themselves sexually are also lower in chat counselling than they are in phone counselling. This might be because the written medium is slow and not particularly stimulating. It is just not the same if you cannot hear the counsellor's response.

2.3 WHY DO THEY PREFER CHAT?

Children and young people who use chat helplines have individual reasons for choosing this form of counselling over others. In a survey among chatters of the Australian Kids Helpline, 24 percent of online chatters indicated that they would not seek help elsewhere if there were no possibility for chat and/or email counselling. In online focus groups, chatters told researchers that they chose chat counselling primarily for the following reasons:

- They experienced it as more private because others could not overhear the conversation.
- They experienced less emotional exposure – such as the fact that the counsellor could not hear them if they cried.
- They could edit a response before it was sent off.
- They could not hear or see if the counsellor was sceptical of them, disengaged or downright bored.
- In general, chatters indicated that they felt more confident, more anonymous, more in control of their emotions, and that sensitive, difficult or deeply personal issues were easier to write about than to talk about.

I CHAT BECAUSE...

- I don't have to talk
- I'm always scared I'm going to cry
- I'm less ashamed
- Voice is overpowering -- I express myself better on chat
- My computer is in my room
- Nobody can eavesdrop
- Talking about personal stuff is scary -- I can't find the words
- You've got more time to decide what to say
- Chatting is more fun, and calling is expensive

Statements from Dutch children using De Kindertelefoon's chat helpline
(Fukkink & Hermanns, 2007)

2.4 SUMMARY

The target group of chat helplines can be very different, but the general picture of a chat helpline user is:

- A young girl going through puberty...
- ... who often struggles with serious psychosocial issues...
- ... who does not wish to be exposed to the counsellor...
- ... and who prefers to have peace and quiet to reflect and to formulate what to write.

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COUNSELLING, NOT THERAPY OR SMALL TALK
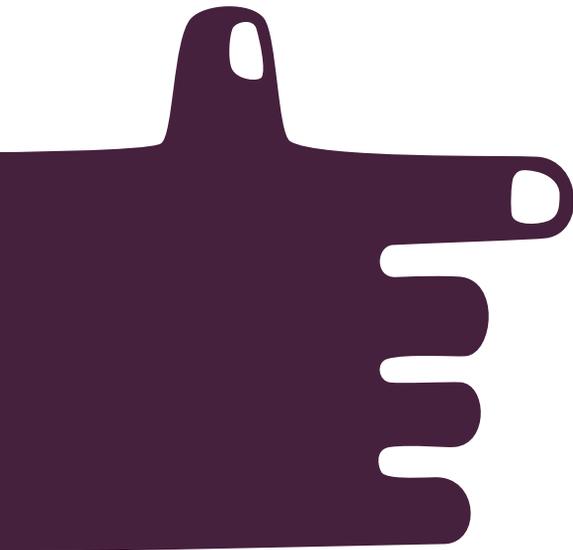
Chat counselling is typically understood to be single session of work. Therefore, as a counsellor you should try to reach a goal within a single conversation. This is not like therapy, where a goal is reached after a series of sessions. While counselling is not therapy, it may still have a therapeutic effect. The overall goal of anonymous counselling is much the same as that of psychotherapy: that the client obtains increased autonomy or empowerment and an extension of his personal opportunities for actions and reactions.

In counselling, the work includes:
- The child's perspective and self-determination
- Uncovering the child's resources (personal preferences, abilities, social relationships, etc...)
- Identifying and expanding the child's possible options

As a counsellor, you are a catalyst for the transformation process which the child has initiated herself. It is the child who contacts the helpline; it is the child who has started the process, and this is where you as a counsellor must connect.

As a counsellor you should be careful not to cross the line into therapy or treatment. The same goes for crossing the line into excessive small talk. Here the counsellor becomes like a "friend" perhaps the counsellor and chatter know each other from earlier conversations, and the roles have become unclear. Small talk seems to reduce anxiety, and is used to build a good rapport with the child. The risk is that the child's anxiety level is reduced to such an extent that she does not engage in working on the problem that made her contact the helpline in the first place. It may feel comfortable to engage in small talk, but it may not help. It's exactly this "not personal" aspect of the relationship which enables the counselling conversation to become something different than the conversations the child has in her everyday life with people around her.

EXAMPLE

The Australian Kids Helpline describes their counselling method this way:

EMPOWERMENT:
- We assist the child in clarifying their concerns.
- We assist the child in formulating their options.
- We assist the child in developing strategies for a positive change.
- We assist the child in identifying and understanding the consequences of their options and choices.
- We encourage the child to believe in herself and see her own personal strengths.

CHILD CENTERED APPROACH:
- We see the situation from the child's point of view.
- We make it explicit to the child on which ideological and ethical background professional decisions are made.
- We believe the interest and welfare of the child is paramount.
- We record the conversations, and the knowledge developed is used to develop the service.

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HOW THE MEDIA INFLUENCE THE COUNSELLING RELATIONSHIP
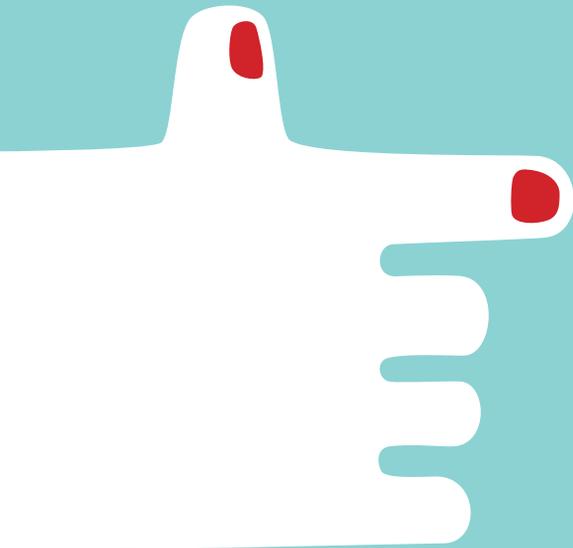
> 99 **I think it's a good chat. I can cry I can laugh. It even saves my life sometimes!!!!!!**
> Chatter

Chat counselling consists of text and pauses. Together they form a rhythm which can float along easily, suffer blunt interruption and change according to its own needs. The child chooses what the subject of conversation should be -- and what to exclude.

There is nothing but text and pauses. There is no voice, no background noise. At least in the beginning, the chatter will not know the mood, gender or age of the person she is talking to. This is called *channel reduction or reduced cues*. In the early research into online communication, channel reduction was considered a drawback because it increased the risk of misunderstanding. However, in this context it can be helpful to have reduced external stimuli.

In traditional psychoanalysis Freud chose to let the client lie on the couch with the therapist out of sight. The idea was that the client -- in the absence of information – *projected* his own expectations, desires and fears onto the relationship. The client filled in the gaps -- either with what he needed or what he feared. Whatever it was, those things could be used in the therapy.

Chat counselling is not therapy, and while it is generally not desirable that the child or young person projects a negative expectation into the contact with the counsellor, it can happen.

Chat counselling should not be seen as a return to the psychoanalysis of 1800s Vienna. In fact, the tendency is for chatters to project a positive -- perhaps idealised -- picture of the counsellor. As one chatter expressed it: "It's a little bit like talking to God." As a counsellor you should not, however, adopt a godlike position toward the child, but rather approach the work with a high degree of humility. There is so much you do not know as a chat counsellor because your information is so limited. You may as well give up "reading between the lines" and instead focus on what is on the lines.

4.1 ONLINE PRESENCE

> **THANK YOU VERY MUCH! It was such a big help! I want you who helped to know that this was something of the best I have ever done! And I will also help others in the way You do when I grow up!**
> Chatter

"Online presence" is a concept used by many who work in therapy and counselling via internet-based media. Online presence means that the counsellor and the chatter experience each other as present and attentive in the chat dialogue. This is important in understanding how a conversation about personal issues can work in an online environment. Online presence implies an *intimacy* (close confidentiality) and *immediacy* (interacting in such a way that the media itself moves into the background).

When you visit a chat helpline, you encounter a very special and intense space. The counsellor and the child work intensively on writing contributions to a shared text that is created on the screen. Each waits with curiosity and anticipation for the other party's response -- what is coming next? The feeling of presence is physical and is created by the text, which then provides a testimony to the joint efforts made. It is very unique.

The experience of presence is partly about experiencing the contact as non-mediated, but it is also about the experience of *being* together. It is within this connection that the chat turns into a chat *room*. A common place where we can meet and talk. When technology reproduces the experience of "space", it can support the experience of presence while also slipping into the background so that it is the conversation that emerges. This understanding differs from other types of online experiences, where presence is achieved by creating a hyper-reality in cyberspace -- e.g., the participants create an avatar (an electronic representation of themselves in the form of a figure) and move into a world that resembles the offline one (as in the vir-

tual game Second Life). Most chat helplines prefer a clean layout where the text is the primary or only focus.

Presence is the presence of "somebody". As a chat counsellor it means that you have to be willing to give a little of yourself in order to give the chatter the experience of the presence of another person. It does not mean that you have to reveal who you are. It means that, through your writing style, you disclose some of your personality. You can show who you are. This is of course completely individual. For example, one counsellor said that she liked to use "body language" in the chat. She would write: `"I am sitting here scratching my hair"` or `"I got so surprised I almost fell off my chair"`.

It is possible to facilitate presence via the chat media, and for many this presence is experienced almost more strongly than if it were face-to-face.

It is "presence by means of distance," as Finn Skårderud, a Norwegian psychiatrist, expressed it (2002).

4.2 EXPERIENCED CONTROL

> The step between writing and sending gave a possibility for censorship, but also actively choosing to leave the spontaneous statements. The period to regret gave increased control.
>
> Quotation from a client in online therapy (Rimehaug, 2002).

Anonymity and the experience of being in control are probably the biggest reasons why so many children and young people prefer chat counselling. Here the child is in control in many areas:

- The child chooses when to establish the contact and when to end it (obviously depending on the working hours of the helpline).
- The child chooses where he or she will be while the counselling takes place.

- The child chooses what she wishes to tell the counsellor and what she will leave out. She may also choose to tell the counsellor something that isn't true.
- The child chooses if she wishes to involve the counsellor in her emotional state – i.e. if she is crying.
- The child chooses if she will follow the advice or suggestions that have emerged during the counselling. (On the Dutch Kindertelefoon a follow-up study showed that 71 percent of the children who, during the chat conversation, had been advised to talk to somebody outside the chat helpline had in fact followed that advice.)
- The child has time to express herself and delete and edit contributions before they are sent to the counsellor.

However, as a chat counsellor you should be aware that the relationship between the one looking for help and the one helping will never be equal. If you are the one asking for help, you will tend to answer the questions asked by the counsellor even if it hurts. Even in chat it can be difficult for the child to set boundaries and to take care of herself.

4.3 ONLINE SELF-DISCLOSURE

" Nobody is shy in Cyberspace.
(Evans, 2008)

The reported experience is that chatters in online counselling are less inhibited and restrained when they talk about their problems, feelings or questions. The faceless, voiceless media creates an increased tendency to "disclose" what the chatter has on her mind. You also see this trend among online users in the form of *flaming* -- when participants in an online discussion feel free to write very aggressive or nasty messages to one other because they cannot be held accountable for their statements. The American psychologist

John Suler distinguishes between non-vicious and vicious uninhibited behaviour (2004).

Using the freedom of invisibility can liberate the chatter in her self-depiction and self-expression. The child may sit at home at her own computer, feeling relatively anonymous, distant and physically safe while experiencing the counsellor's presence. This promotes confidentiality, integrity and intimacy, helping the child to open up and disclose more about herself. Basically, this is considered a fruitful aspect of chat counselling. But it also means that chatters are going to share information about themselves that they may subsequently regret. Therefore, as a counsellor you must be aware of a crucial distinction: whether the chatter needs support to talk about her situation, or whether she actually needs support to withhold information so she does not later feel that she has revealed too much about herself.

> When two strangers meet each other, they will necessarily collect and share information about each other in order to better predict the other's behaviour and thereby reduce anxiety. Researchers evaluated how this interaction was achieved in online chatting compared with face-to-face interaction by pairing 158 people aged seventeen to twenty-four, who did not know each other.
>
> They found that those who communicated via computers asked more questions and disclosed more about themselves, than those who communicated face-to-face. It was found that in online chats it was possible to ask questions that would be considered rude when asked in person. It was also observed that there were more frequent, intimate exchanges in chat interactions compared with face-to-face interactions.
>
> However, those communicating face-to-face got to know one another faster, although this gap was balanced over time (Tidwell & Walther, 2002).

The concept of *accelerated intimacy* is used to describe the phenomenon where conversation partners very quickly experience confidentiality -- and maybe even a false intimacy -- via online media. This means that they become more accommodating, more willing to open up, less guarded with their feelings and more inclined to discuss them.

American researcher John Suler outlines six factors that create this "online dis-inhibition effect" (2004). Of these, five are relevant to chat counselling:

1. "You don't know me." Anonymity makes the chatter feel safe and enables her to talk about things that she might otherwise be embarrassed about. Anonymity also enables the chatter to say things that would be perceived negatively and aggressively in other contexts.

2. "You can't see me." Invisibility means that the chatter can present herself exactly as she wants -- and perhaps not always in accordance with the truth. Invisibility means that we cannot read expressions which would otherwise give us an indication of whether we can trust what the other person says.

3. "It's all in my head." Since we lack specific knowledge, we attach traits to the dialogue partner which may or may not be real, but which reflect our own desires, hopes or needs.

4. "It's just a game." The feeling that what is happening in the conversation does not happen in reality -- and is therefore of no consequence -- liberates the chatter from her story.

5. "We're equals." There is an equalisation of power in the relationship. In some online relationships the parties do not know each others' statuses. This will not be the case in a chat counselling session where the chatter will have some knowledge of the counsellor's status (for example, knowing that she is chatting with an adult who has special expertise). Nevertheless, the absence of status symbols will affect the chatter's experience of the power relationship.

An experienced chat counsellor once said that she experienced accelerated care. When meeting a boy who had been called names in the schoolyard, she could truly write: `"What they are saying to you and the way they are treating you is really not okay!"`. In the physical meeting with the same boy her response could have been affected by preconceived notions. Maybe she would think that he looked like he was a bit of a troublemaker, or maybe she would know about past events where the boy himself had been offensive to others of the same age.

4.4 THE CONTACT IS FRAGILE

The child chooses to use chat counselling partly because she experiences having more control. This includes the power to interrupt the conversation at any time. Most chat counsellors frequently experience interrupted conversations – those that end before the counsellor feels that they are finished. The counsellor is naturally left with questions about what contributed to the conversation being ended – "Was it something I did?" The counsellor will also be left with doubts about whether the child received the help she needed.

There may be several reasons why conversations are interrupted prematurely. Maybe the child is pleased with the conversation and does not want to spend time rounding off. Perhaps the child is dissatisfied and wants to try something else. However, the child may also have been emotionally overwhelmed and may have simply needed a break. Maybe the child was disturbed where he or she was sitting, or maybe technical problems arose.

Irrespective of what caused the interruption, the fragile or porous nature of the contact means that the conversation should be kept at a level where the conversation can be discontinued without it creating a huge problem. Therefore many counsellors will be hesitant using more confrontational forms of counselling in chat. Potentially, these could open up traumas that would not be rounded off if a conversation were to be abruptly discontinued.

4.5 SUMMARY

The chat medium will affect contact between the counsellor and the chatter because:

- There are fewer cues (facts and knowledge about each other) at the disposal of the parties.
- In spite of the mediated character of the conversation, the other party is experienced as being present.
- The chatter is in control.
- The chatter feels less inhibited.
- The contact is fragile and can easily be broken.

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CHAPTER 5

HOW IS THE COUNSELLING RELATIONSHIP ESTABLISHED?
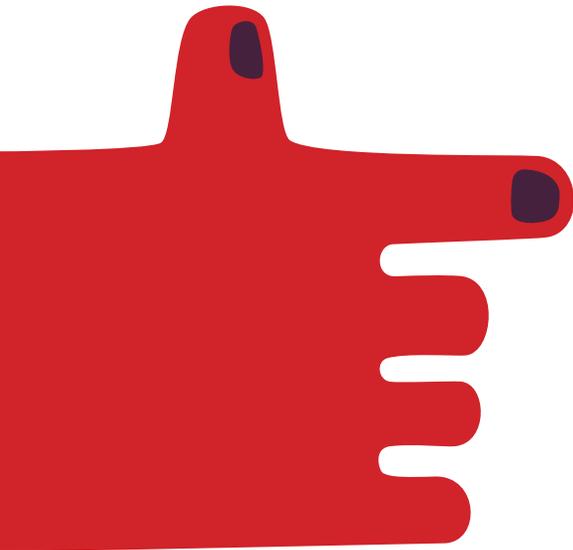
Confidentiality and *availability* are the key elements that must be present in order to build rapport with a child or young person via chat.

Online counselling often appeals to youth who lack trust in adults. In chat counselling they are in full control and can break contact at any time. Maybe they have previously been let down by trusted adults. Maybe their expectations are that a counsellor cannot be relied upon either. It is the counsellor's task to form a trusting relationship with the chatter. Trust is established when the chatter feels supported, understood and appreciated by the counsellor.

In order to establish and maintain good rapport with the child, it is important to show that you can listen continuously. When there is silence in a chat, the other party does not know whether you are there. The conversation partner can neither see nor hear the counsellor, and it can make the child feel uncertain. In a face-to-face contact you would make use of eye contact, nods, sounds and possibly touch to show the conversation partner that you are listening. The same can be done in a chat conversation by providing supportive comments like `"That sounds difficult,"` or `"It must have been great for you."` At the same time it is important to acknowledge that the positive qualities of a chat conversation are also found in moments of peace and quiet, in the space to articulate and reflect. If the counsellor continuously breaks into the conversation, it may disrupt the chatter's process. It is about finding a rhythm with the chatter where you, as a counsellor, are neither too insistent nor too passive.

Online relations are based on trust. There is always the possibility of someone appearing different than they are, but we have to believe that the other party is genuine and authentic. Trust is created between counsellor and child by the counsellor showing a non-judgmental attitude and acknowledging the problems or concerns that the child wants to chat about. "`I can hear that it must be difficult`" shows genuine interest. "`I would very much like to hear more about it`" shows concern for what happens to the child and demonstrates a wish to support and work with the child. Com-

ments like: `"Let's get a clearer picture of what is happening..."` and `"Then let us see if we together can find some options"` show that the counsellor is taking responsibility for the progression of the conversation. Comments like these also provide structure.

Confidentiality of the conversation is of great importance to the establishment of a trusting and open relationship between counsellor and child. Confidentiality provides the child with an experience of security and "privacy". Limiting confidentiality can constitute a threat to the relationship.

Trust is also about trusting the technology, trusting that others cannot access the conversation and that the conversation will not be published without the consent of the child. It is about trusting that the technology is secure and that technical problems will not end the conversation prematurely. Technical problems can never be fully avoided, but it is important to channel considerable resources into this area. That way, both the counsellor and the child will have confidence that the chat system can be relied on.

Establishing trust is a prerequisite for a chat counselling session running smoothly, but it is rarely sufficient for the conversation to be helpful for the child. In most cases, problem-solving techniques should also be used. This will be addressed later in the book.

Availability is considered to be one of the great strengths of online chatting. The child has to have access to an internet connection. However, queues may easily arise in chat helplines. Because there are periods of inactivity in a chat conversation, the chat service provider has the opportunity to allow a single counsellor to concurrently service multiple chatters. The conversation medium is slow so a counsellor should be able to handle quite a large capacity in order to serve many children at the same time.

Both Danish and international user studies have shown that it is very frustrating for chatters if they have to wait too long to get through to the helpline. Also, chatters point at working hours being too short. However, it is preferable to have a lot of counsellors working fewer hours than to have too

few counsellors spread over longer working hours. The latter will result in a long queue and too much waiting time for children looking for help.

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DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS
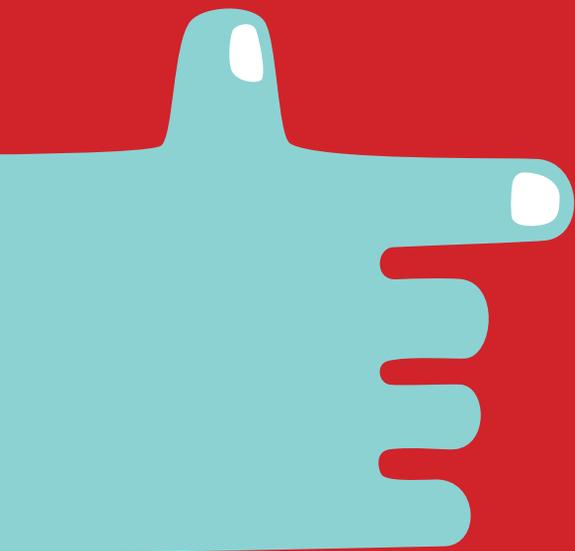
There are many reasons a conversation can be difficult. It may be that the chatter presents a painful topic (the thematic aspect). More often, the difficulty lies in the dynamics of the conversation, in how well the collaboration between counsellor and child is working. Conversations that are difficult in other media are also difficult in chat. You may encounter conversations with chatters who are taciturn, who respond with monosyllables such as `"yes"`, `"no"` or `"I don't know"`. You may also encounter chatters who are locked in a position, who have tunnel vision and who cannot see any new possibilities: `"There is NOBODY who wants to help me,"` or `"I have already tried that...."`

6.1 FALSE IDENTITY

The internet is an identity laboratory for children and young people, and it is quite common for them to use the internet to experiment with their identities. There are a number of factors contributing to this:

- The access is easy, and the internet is easy to use. It is quick and uncomplicated to gain access to most internet sites that the chatter may wish to experiment with.
- The chatter has a high degree of control over how she will present herself.
- The chatter may have a large degree of control over who can access information about her identity (although many young people are not so attentive to these opportunities).
- You cannot see the child or hear her voice, and thus your ability to identify lies is very limited.

The irony is that the ability to hide or distort information creates an experience of distance, anonymity and control that most often leads to greater honesty and self-disclosure.

During a chat, it is difficult to verify whether a person is representing themselves honestly. However, as with anonymous telephone helplines "... it

is a misconception to think that what we are dealing with...is necessarily true or real or for that matter personal. The issues advised on are scenarios, situations or events that individuals (service users) present to the counsellor - and this applies whether the presented issues are fabrications, 'thought' or actually occurring scenarios" (Jensen, 2005:17). As a counsellor it may be useful to remind yourself that that the child's honesty is not crucial for the value of the conversation. You should instead focus on how you respond.

Chatters may withhold or distort information. This is also an option for the counsellor, although not advisable in most cases. The counsellor should give the child the impression that she does not share information about the conversation with colleagues. Maybe the child asks directly: "Will you tell anybody?". If the counsellor answers truthfully, the child may log off because she does not consider the chat confidential anymore. It can be helpful in such a situation to remember that the child is not approaching the counsellor personally. She is approaching the helpline and should be able to use the service in the future without being dependent on a specific counsellor. There may be a point in a conversation when it is permissible to inform the child that information about the conversations will be shared among colleagues in the helpline in order to support the child the best way possible.

The fact that it is so easy to hide your identity in a chat may mean that the parties may find that they cannot quite trust each other. It is important that the child feels utterly confident that the counsellor is who she pretends to be. The counsellor must always be seen as trustworthy.

There is a group of users in anonymous chat counselling who, although they are few in number, may take up quite a lot of time. They are chatters who use the counselling in a way that could be characterised as pathological. Psychiatrist Marc Feldman (2007) did a study of this type of online user. He explains that they build their stories using internet posts and books about abuse. They develop violent stories about their lives and at times narrate very dramatic events. They sometimes approach several counselling services, but the counsellor will often recognise them from elements of their be-

haviour or writing styles. For the counsellor it can be very stressful to work with this type of chatter. Counsellors will get a feeling that there is something "off." This makes it difficult to maintain the style and attitude that is commonly used in the counselling. Feldman recommends that you select individual employees who carefully, empathetically and confidentially challenge the chatter, even being open about your suspicions. The typical response will be denial, but the result will often be that the chatter discontinues the contact. The hope is of course that this strategy can contribute to the chatter being referred for relevant professional help. Strategies in relation to these chatters will depend on the guidelines of the specific helpline.

Developing and maintaining a false identity online requires work. Therefore, there is a good reason to believe that the vast majority of chatters are predominantly truthful about what they are saying, or at least that there is "something about the case".

Playing with different identities in cyberspace can even be used constructively in counselling. For example, the counsellor and the child can role-play scenarios that the child is facing. This can take the form of a conversation. Say the child needs to confront a teacher. Here the counsellor and child can playact the conversation and thereby practice concrete behaviours. The counsellor can take the role of the teacher, but even of the child, if it is helpful.

6.2 LIMITED LINGUISTIC AND/OR SOCIAL CAPABILITIES

A chat counselling session can be carried out fruitfully even with children who have trouble writing and reading due to age, dyslexia or other reasons. As long as the exchange is phonetic, it can be understood, and so the counselling can be effective. The counsellor must be careful not to jump to any conclusions about the child's age or intelligence based on their inability to spell, as there can be many reasons for it.

A chat conversation may be more difficult if the chatter (or counsellor) have linguistic and grammar difficulties -- for example, if they are writing in a second language. Children who find it very difficult to write may actually benefit more from phone or face-to-face counselling, not for the sake of efficiency, but for the sake of the emotional dynamic of counselling.

Having a conversation with a stranger about something that is difficult and personal is not easy for anyone. For children and young people who may have lived socially isolated for years, possibly because of bullying, neglect or abuse in the home, it is certainly not easy. Even in chat counselling, it's hard to help those who have the most difficulties. But chat is not necessarily an inappropriate tool for this group of children and youth. On the contrary, many of these chatters will find that being able to express themselves in a chat is a distinct advantage. Many of them feel that the lack of external stimuli increases concentration and focus. Chat may actually be particularly effective for people with concentration difficulties.

The counsellor can support these chatters by being patient and by providing them with enough time to express themselves. If necessary, a counsellor can help the dialogue forward (but without shaping it). For example, you can give the child choices: `"Did you then become sad or did you not care or maybe get angry or...?"`

6.3 REPEATED CONTACTS

Many anonymous helplines base their services on the contact being a single session, meaning that the chatter should be helped by means of a single conversation. However, there will often be children who want to talk to the helpline about the same issue several times.

In one study, the Australian Kids Helpline found that chatters, compared to callers, had an increased tendency to use the service several times. It was found that 84 percent of their chatters used the service more than three times, and 47 percent used the service more than ten times.

(Kids Helpline, 2002)

It is not a problem when a child uses a helpline repeatedly, as long as the sessions contribute to an improvement in the child's situation. But there are chatters for whom contacting the helpline again and again is not about the improvement of their life situation, but a desire for immediate contact, attention or other things. These chatters often need professional help in an offline environment. Many of them are already in treatment and/or in contact with the social services system. For helplines, they can become burdensome. There are chat helplines where the majority of their contacts come from a relatively small group of "chronic chatters."

First, the helpline's purpose should be to contribute to the positive development of a child's situation. If that is not possible, it must take on the task of helping the child to a more relevant and useful source of help. Just rejecting the chatter or placing restrictions on the contact will generally be contrary to the principles of the helpline. However, it is not useful to repeat coping strategies that have proven ineffective, or to listen to repeat stories about the chatter as a victim or a person without resources or options.

If you choose to support chatters who are only seeking attention, it is crucial that the framework for the contact is clear and unchangeable. Experience has shown that this group of chatters is overwhelmingly made up of young people who have experienced early childhood neglect. They have great difficulties dealing with relationships in constructive ways, and they are often unable to help themselves move away from the situations they are in. Therefore, the helpline must take responsibility for the contact and un-

derstand that this group of chatters belongs to a different target group, and that they may be unable to benefit from the methods used for the primary target group. Accessibility is one of the major strengths of chat counselling, and for some this may involve excessive use.

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CHAPTER 7
THE DYNAMICS AND STRUCTURE OF THE CONVERSATION
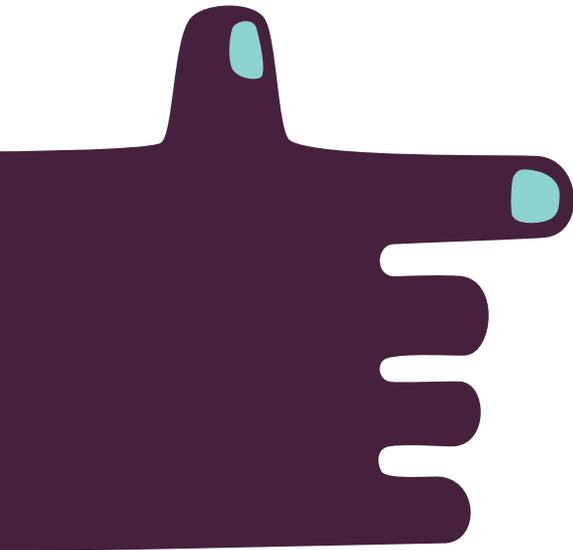
Since chats take much longer than oral conversations, the need for structure becomes even more important. To ensure that the child leaves assisted by the conversation, the counsellor must have a clear methodology that supports the path of dialogue from A to Z. There are a number of counselling models that can be used. The following is a brief outline of the Five Phase Model developed by the Dutch children's helpline De Kindertelefoon which was subsequently tested, adapted and implemented by Børns Vilkår, a Danish children's helpline.

> In 2009, the Danish chat helpline Børns Vilkår conducted a project to investigate whether the counselling sessions would benefit from a systematic counselling model rather than the more intuitive approach based on general counselling skills, in particular *active listening*. The project was carried out by selecting a group of counsellors and introducing them to the Five Phase Model. The results included both user evaluations as well as quantitative and qualitative evaluations from the counsellors in the project and from the two psychologists who conducted the study.
> (Sindahl, 2009)

The use of a structured counselling model provides the counsellor with a tool that supports the dynamics and purpose of the conversation while also ensuring that the counsellor does not lose track of the session. Particularly in chats, where the pace can be relatively slow, focus and perspective can easily be lost. It can take a long time to restore an understanding that was lost, compared to face-to-face conversations.

When using a systematic counselling model, the counsellor strikes a balance between controlling the conversation on the one hand, and ensuring

that the conversation is child-centred and supporting the child's further development on the other.

The counsellor should take control when:
- A professional assessment is imminent.
- There is a need for bringing the conversation forward.
- There is a need to broaden the conversation or to narrow it down.
- Ensuring that the goals for the session are fulfilled.

The counsellor builds rapport with the child by:
- Listening, reflecting, summarising, showing understanding, support and empathy, etc.
- Examining the child's story by clarifying questions.
- Stimulating the child's own capacity to solve problems.

7.1 THE FIVE PHASE MODEL

The objective of the Five Phase Model is to ensure that the counsellor clarifies one or several problems that form the basis of the child's story. This way, the counsellor and the child set a realistic goal for the session. The counsellor helps to empower the child and to support her in dealing with her problems. The counsellor also ensures that the conversation progresses in a way that is clear and transparent to the child. The Five Phase Model is like a mental roadmap for the counsellor; it provides an overview of the conversation.

1. BUILDING RAPPORT

OBJECTIVE: Create a welcoming atmosphere and build trust.
METHOD: Empathy, respect, sincere interest, active listening.

2. CLARIFY THE CHILD'S STORY

OBJECTIVE: Get a clear view of the child's story, perspective, personality, network and competencies.
METHOD: Ask detailed questions about the child's story, its subtleties, its depth and concrete manifestations.

3. SETTING A GOAL FOR THE SESSION

OBJECTIVE: That both parties are aware of what the child may use the conversation for.
METHOD: Clarification..

4. WORKING TOWARD THE SESSION GOAL

OBJECTIVE: To ensure, to the widest possible extent, that the child may benefit from the conversation.
METHOD: Stimulating the child's own problem solving skills.

5. ROUNDING OFF THE CONVERSATION

OBJECTIVE: That the child is left with as few questions as possible.
METHOD: Summing up and clarifying.

The Five Phase Model does not differ significantly from other conversation models encountered in the literature. An example is found in David Lester's book about telephone counselling, *Crises Intervention and Counseling by Telephone* (2002), where he describes a *Basic Helping Model*, which also comprises five phases. By studying which elements are effective in counselling, he ascertains, among other things, that:

- Small talk is not effective beyond the minimum necessary to establish contact with the service user (see Chapter 3, "Counselling, Not Therapy or Small Talk").
- The chatter's issues must be examined in the first two-thirds of the session - and not in the last third.
- Emotional reflections (the counsellor putting words to feelings that the service user expresses more or less directly) are most effective in the middle of the session, not at the end.

- Problem solving can be used during the entire session, but is most effective when it comes at the end and focuses on what the service user can do immediately after the conversation is finished.

Conversations related to acute problems require the counsellor to apply a more active and directive approach than those outlined here (see Section 9.7 on crisis intervention).

Phase 1: Building rapport

It is characteristic of chat counselling that the parties quickly achieve confidentiality. The child will typically introduce the problem early on in the conversation, often in the very first sentences.

```
Counsellor: Hi and welcome to the chat.
Child/young person: Hi. I am a boy and 15 years old. I am wery sory
    and confussed. I am afraid that I am a gay! ...
```

The tone is set very quickly. It is important that the counsellor is aware that although "social talk" and other common tools to establish trust do not take up much time, there may be a need for further methods to make the chatter feel comfortable and safe. This could be showing appreciation of the child or acknowledging that the situation the chatter describes sounds severe. Showing the chatter that you are dedicating your full attention to the conversation can also support the establishment of trust. This can be achieved by responding quickly and by repeating key aspects of what the child says. In some cases it may be necessary to emphasise anonymity and to assure the child that nothing will happen against the child's will as a result of the conversation. Some children may need to hear what other children have on their mind when approaching the service or how a typical conversation proceeds. Al-

though children may be used to chatting, they may not be accustomed to counselling.

Transparency is an important principle of the Five Phase Model, especially when used in a chat counselling session, where so much is invisible. This can be achieved by continually informing the child where you are in the conversation and what will happen next, such as: `"I think it would be helpful if I could establish a picture of your situation. Afterwards we can talk about how I can best help you. Therefore I will ask you quite a lot of questions right now. Is that ok?"`

Some chat systems allow the chatter to provide some information about themselves before contacting the counsellor. Maybe the chatter has indicated their gender and age, and perhaps also what he or she wants to talk to the counsellor about. It is appropriate to show the chatter that you have read and understood what the chatter wrote.

Part of building rapport with the chatter involves the child and the counsellor finding a chat rhythm. Most commonly, the child and counsellor are sending texts to one other at a consistent pace. Even though this is not always possible with a child who writes too slowly or too quickly, establishing a good rhythm is important. The pace can also be influenced by how short or long the contributions are.

Building rapport is not just something that happens in the beginning of the conversation, it is an ongoing process. The counsellor must convey empathy and continue to show that they are listening to what the child is saying throughout the conversation.

···

`Child: It's a bit dyfficult to tell coz I start feeling sad.`

`Counsellor: OK. Would you then prefer that we do not talk about that specifically? Or should we try to talk about it slowly and peacefully?`

`Child: Just slow and piceful.`

```
Counsellor: Ok … it is quite ok if you start to feel sad. Or if you
    think that you don't want to talk about it anymore, or if there is
    a question you don't like to answer, you should just tell me...
```

In chat counselling it is not uncommon that conversations are interrupted prematurely. This may be due to factors outside of your control, e.g., technical problems, or a sudden disturbance in the child's situation. But it may also happen because the rapport between the child and the counsellor is lost. As a counsellor you may feel that the child is resistant. In this case, it can be helpful to ask the child if they are happy with the conversation: `"It seems that I don't tackle the conversation the way you would like — is that true?"` or `"Would you like for us to talk about this in another way?"` Maybe you feel that the conversation has lost focus -- either because you've become distracted (in which case it would be appropriate to apologise to the chatter) or because the child has become too tired and needs a break.

When the conversation is interrupted or ends prematurely it is important to remind yourself that for a lot of children the option to terminate the conversation whenever they want is an essential reason for them to choose to make contact via chat in the first place.

EXAMPLES OF QUESTIONS AND PHRASES IN PHASE 1:

```
"Hi and welcome."

"What would you like for us to talk about?"

"What is on your mind?"

"It sounds hard."

"It must be difficult."

"It was great that you contacted us."
```

Phase 2: Clarifying the child's story

> There is a significant correlation between children reporting that they have gained a better overview of their problems, and children saying that they feel much better after receiving counselling.
>
> From a user evaluation of the Danish chat helpline, Børns Vilkår (Sindahl, 2003)

Typically, the chatter has set the tone early in the conversation. Phase 2 is about forming a picture of the child's perspective on the situation that has brought them to counselling. In this phase, you want to examine what "the child has going on" so that you can connect and help them in the best way possible. Here the focus is on how a problem issue is defined. (`"Who is the one seeing mostly that there is a problem?"`, `"When did you find out that there was a problem?"`) It may also be relevant to ask questions about things outside the "problem story", as you might discover valuable information about the child's personal network and their resources and preferences.

Counsellor: Ok:) How come you are confused if you can wear a g-string or not?

Child: I am allowed to do many things such as drink, I have five holes in the ears and so on, but my modder finds that a g-string is not such a god idear, But wy am i then allowed to do the ohter things?

Counsellor: I can see how that can be confusing. There are various things you are allowed to do. How you got an idea yourself why your mother does not like you to wear a g-string?

Child: She thinks it is daring, but she has not said no so we do not agree if I am allowed to nevertheless.

Counsellor: So your mother finds it daring, but what do you think about it yourself?

Child: I dont think it is daring because that was in the old days. But now its quite normal.

Counsellor: Ok. What about your girlfriends – what do they think of g-strings?

Child: Some wear it and others dont. almost all my friends who are not class mates do it. But there is nobody in my class who do it though some of them are allowed to do it.

Counsellor: Those who wear g-string, how old are they? ... And do you know why those in the class don't do it?

Child: Those who do it are from my age up to 15 years. I think that it is because that there are not other in our class who do it.

In Phase 2 the following issues are examined:

- Facts: What has happened, when and with whom? What has been done? What came out of it?
- Understanding: Why is it important for the child?
- Wishes: What would the child wish to be different?
- Resources: Who is around the child (privately, in a school/institution, in a circle of friends, or in a professional setting)? What does the child like? What is he good at?

The counsellor's task at this stage is largely to structure the child's story. In 2009, we learned from about 800 user evaluations of the Danish chat helpline Børns Vilkår that it is very effective and beneficial for the child when the counsellor actively helps them to get a better overview of their problems during the conversation. It is also helpful for the chatter if the counsellor assists with:

- Separating big and small problems.
- Separating problems and prioritising them.
- Creating a timeline: In which sequence did things happen?
- Separating facts and perception – what happened and how was it experienced by whom?
- Listing causes and effects.
- Helping the child to see their potential network.
- Summarising the child's story.

Although this phase is about getting a broad picture, it is also important to stay on track and ensure that what is being talked about is also what is most important for the child. Therefore it may be appropriate to continuously confirm this with the child: `"Is what we talk about now what we should be talking about?"`

Phase 2 is finalised when the theme has been clarified and a reasonable picture of the chatter's total situation has been achieved. This phase is typi-

cally completed with a summary by the counsellor, who signals that the conversation is now moving to another level while also ensuring that the counsellor has understood the problem or issue correctly.

EXAMPLES OF QUESTIONS AND PHRASES IN PHASE 2:

"Can you tell me a little more about it?"

"Is it ok with you if I ask you some questions about your life and your situation?"

"Try to describe your situation right now."

"What exactly made you contact us today?"

"How was it before the situation developed into this?"

"If it continues, how will it be for you in one year?"

"Who is affected by this situation - apart from you?"

"Who knows that you feel like this?"

"What have you done so far?"

"What would you like (most) to be different?"

Phase 3: Setting a goal for the session

Counsellor: What made you contact us?

Child: To find a solution to it

Counsellor: What specifically do you wish a solution to?

Child: Make bullying end

```
Counsellor: Yes, that would be nice! I understand why you would like
    that to be the case...
Counsellor: I don't have a ready-made solution for you, but we may
    consider several possibilities together — would you like that?
```

The word "goal" is typically not used in the conversation with the chatter. However, Phase 3 focuses on collaborating with the chatter to determine where the chatter should be at the end of the conversation. How can the conversation help the chatter? What did the chatter hope for when she decided to contact the helpline?

Anxious, overwhelmed and/or very angry people are not good at problem solving. The emotional storm must first abate -- for example, by letting the chatter release their emotions. Venting one's feelings is rarely enough in itself, but it can be a step in the right direction.

Phase 3 may be the most difficult phase as it contains elements that are most distant from ordinary conversation, and it tends to emphasise the counselling aspect of the conversation. We know from testing the counselling model that this phase is of great importance in determining to what extent the conversation becomes useful for the child. When the test counsellors indicated that Phase 3 had progressed successfully, the child reported in a subsequent evaluation that she indeed felt better. When the test counsellors indicated that Phase 3 had not progressed successfully, the child reported that she felt worse after the session. We do not know the causality, but we can determine that the two things occur simultaneously. Such a clear connection was not observed in any of the other phases.

```
Counsellor: Ok, it doesn't sound nice, and I do understand that you
    love him and would like to see him though he has let you down many
    times... Can you tell me a little about what you hope to get out of
```

our conversation so I can have it in my thoughts while we write to-
gether ...
Child: OK. I think of him every single day, and though I dont know him
   as the person he is, I still see him as my dad.. I hope to find a
   solution, but at the same time I am also think that I just need to
   talk to somebody about it. It is very difficult for me to keep inside
   as I am not particularly old and so on.
Counsellor: Ok, so you just want to be allowed to talk about it, but
   at the same time hope that together we can find some kind of solu-
   tion … is that correctly understood?
Child: Yes that is understood totally correct

During the period where the Five Phase Model was tested, the counsellors were surprised to find that a large number of children could describe precisely what they hoped to get out of the conversation. Nevertheless, you may encounter chatters who have difficulties in formulating a goal. Ideally, the chatter herself formulates the conversation's goal, but it may be necessary for the counsellor to help the child articulate it. For example: "We have talked about you being afraid of how your parents will react when finding out that you are homosexual. You said that you did not know what to do if they found out. Would it be helpful to you if we talk about the different options and what you can do in relation to them? Or is there something else that is important to you?"

Maybe the child needs two to three options to choose from: "Now you have told me a little about your situation. Maybe it is enough for you just to tell me about it to begin with? Or maybe you need us to talk about which options you have to change the situation? What do you think about that?"

There may be situations where the chatter's expectations surpass the counsellor's abilities. In such cases the counsellor should inform the child of

this, but at the same time suggest what the child can do instead. For example: "I neither will nor may provide you with counselling on how to commit suicide, but I would very much like to talk about how you can get help handling the problems you wish to get away from."

Although the chatter has an idea of what he or she wishes to get out of the conversation, it may sometimes be good to mention other options that the chatter herself has not yet considered. For example, the counsellor knows of a relevant mental health service whose contact information they can share with the chatter. However, that sort of information will generally not be appropriate until the next phase. Phase 3 is concluded with a clear formulation of the goal for the session and with the chatter agreeing to that goal.

EXAMPLES OF QUESTIONS AND PHRASES IN PHASE 3:

"What made you log into the chat right now?"

"How can the two of us talk about this in a way that would be helpful to you?"

"What would you like to be different that would improve your situation?"

"What would you like to take with you from this conversation?"

"So if you were to say what you would like to use our chat conversation for – what would that be?"

"So what we need to find out in our conversation is ...?"

"So let us see if we can think of something which would make it easier for you."

"What could be helpful to you right now?"

Phase 4: Working toward the session goal

Phase 4 depends upon the results of Phase 3. Many children want to engage in problem solving, but it may be destructive to the relationship if the chatter just wants to be listened to while the counsellor continuously talks about solutions. Therefore it is important that the counsellor sticks to the "agreement" which concluded Phase 3. If it is not possible to do this, then go back to Phase 3 and make a new agreement with the child.

> **It would be really nice when writing to you that you just take the time to be there and listen and help me get started without thinking all the time about you having to solve a lot of problems....**
> Chatter

> **The counsellor only asked questions, and therefore the problem was not solved!**
> Chatter

It is not uncommon for the counsellor to move too rapidly to problem solving. It is natural that you want to help. However, you cannot solve a problem until a good rapport has been established with the child, or before the goal of the session is defined. During the previous phases, the counsellor should have achieved an understanding of the child's situation, problems and wishes. The counsellor should both understand and wish to help. Just wishing to help is insufficient.

The goal for the session can take many forms, and it is not always clear that the conversation concerns a problem. However, when the child wishes to work with a problem, the work is consciously conducted with the Five Phase Model to ensure that the child is empowered to understand and use her own resources. This is achieved by examining what the child has already done or what others in the child's network have tried. This examination will provide important knowledge for the counsellor; in particular an under-

standing of the child's various coping strategies. It also strengthens the empowerment the child may have but doesn't realise she possesses.

After this, the counsellor will talk with the child about her own reflections and solutions. Not until then do counsellor and child work together to think about possible options. This can be done by brainstorming hypothetical questions (`"If you were in charge ..."`) or by examining what others might suggest. There is also room for the counsellor's suggestions. It is best if the process takes place with child and counsellor collaborating. In some cases it will be too demanding for the child to work creatively with the problem. Here the counsellor can choose to introduce the child to a number of alternatives which she can choose from. In this way the child is empowered to actively take part in their own problem solving, as opposed to the counsellor dictating one "correct" solution.

Do not forget to ask what help has already been provided for the child or her family. You might assume that, because the child has approached the service, no other help is available to them. This should already have been clarified in Phase 2. If help has already been provided for the child or her family, it will be useful to examine how the child may better utilise that help. Of course, this is not relevant if the situation is threatening to the child.

> In a systematic survey of the Dutch Kindertelefoon it was discovered that one out of four chatters using the helpline already received professional help.
> (Fukkink & Hermanns, 2007)

When one or more proposals for a solution have been identified, the work seeks to enable the child to carry out the solutions. What action steps does it consist of? Which steps will be the easiest/most difficult? What if it is unsuccessful? Which reactions are expected?

A useable solution is one:

a. Which can be carried out (by either the child or the counsellor)
b. Which is consistent with the values of both child and counsellor
c. Which both the counsellor and child think will lead to success.

The solution should be sufficiently concrete so that the chatter knows precisely what they will do or how it will be implemented after the conversation is over.

The solution may even be carried out during the conversation. It could be that the child must contact somebody or fetch someone who will read through the chat conversation on the screen. Here the counsellor may stay online and await the first reactions.

There are conversations where the child only wishes to be listened to. Here it may be useful to check in frequently by asking how the child is feeling: `"How are you feeling right now?"`. This enables you to assess if it has been helpful

CASE

A counsellor is talking to a child located in an institution. After a long conversation with the counsellor, the child reports that her uncle sexually abused her. It is a difficult conversation. The child finds it hard to express herself clearly, and the subject is sensitive. Together with the counsellor, the child decides to reveal her story to the child's contact person, who is close by. The child gets the contact person to read the conversation on the screen. After this, the contact person and the counsellor communicate about the best way to tackle the situation.

for the chatter to tell her story. Before the conversation is finished, it may be good for the counsellor to ask the chatter if she found it helpful to tell her story. If it was, then the counsellor could ask if there are other people the child can talk to about the issue. If it was not helpful, the conversation does

not have to start over, but it could be useful for the chatter to reflect on this, in the event that she needs to contact the helpline at another time.

Also in Phase 4, a counsellor will typically make a health referral if it is necessary. Referral is discussed in a later chapter.

Phase 4 will end with a summary by the counsellor: "We have talked about you being really sad because you and your friend have fallen out, and that you would like to get hold of her in school tomorrow and apologise. You still find that it is really difficult if she does not apologise to you as well. Do you think that this would be a good place to finish the conversation, or is there something you are uncertain of?" This provides a natural closing to the conversation.

EXAMPLES OF QUESTIONS AND PHRASES IN PHASE 4:

"We often talk to children who feel the same way."

"What you are telling is very disturbing – what do you think about it?"

"It was courageous/a good idea."

"Can you think of some things you can do yourself?"

"What have you done so far?"

"What prevents you from doing that?"

"Which solution would you like to go on with?"

"When would you say that a solution is good?"

"When will you do it?"

"What could be the first step?"

"If you did this, what would happen?"

"In order to make it a bit clearer, I think that we can divide it into
    small steps – what do you say to that?"

```
"Who could help you with that?"

"I can hear that somebody should help mum and dad. You can't - adults
   are required to help."

"What would you like me to do for you?"

"Do you want to hear what I think?"

"What do you think I think of what you tell me?"
```

Phase 5: Rounding off the conversation

> " It can be a bit frustrating if you end the conversation and you are suddenly
> alone with all the feelings and an enormous emptiness.
> Chatter

It is the counsellor's job to bring the conversation to a close. It can some-
times be difficult for the chatter to suggest ending a chat. As the counsellor
is primarily responsible for the progress of the conversation, it is the coun-
sellor's task to end the conversation in good time and in a satisfactory way.

In spite of this, many conversations are ended by the child, and sometimes
without the child saying goodbye. In chat conversations between people of
the same age it is not uncommon to finish a session without formal goodbyes.
If you have experienced how lengthy and troublesome it can be to end a chat
conversation formally, then you will understand why. Ending an exchange
abruptly may not be an expression of dissatisfaction on the child's part. It
should be emphasised, however, that the counsellor should always strive to
say goodbye to the child.

```
••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••
Counsellor: So in relation to what it was you wanted to talk about,
    have we talked enough this time about what is important to you?
Child: Yes, thank you very much for the help
Counsellor: You are welcome, and you are welcome at any time
Child: OK, thank you : )
Counsellor: You are welcome, bye bye :-)
••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••••
```

The summary should complete the circle of the conversation. A good way to
do this is to refer back to the agreement that the chatter and counsellor cre-
ated in Phase 3. Here you should clarify whether or not the child feels sup-
ported and is now better able to manage her problem on her own. It may also
be appropriate to review how the counsellor will carry on with the case and
what will happen afterwards, if anything. It's often good to appreciate the
chatter's efforts in the conversation or simply to thank them for making con-
tact. The child might experience relief at having talked about the problem, at
having achieved a better overview of the situation and her options.

It is not uncommon that fear and uncertainty return when the conversa-
tion is over, particularly if the child has to implement any plans. It might be
necessary to spend some time preparing the child to do this. It is not neces-
sarily an indication that the conversation was not helpful or that the plan
was not suitable.

In some cases it may also be helpful to create a link back to the chatter's
offline life. A counselling conversation may be long and intense, and when
the contact is broken, the silence and the feeling of loneliness can be massive.
A good solution is to talk about what the child is going to do after she has
logged off. Is there something on TV? Will dinner be served soon, and is it
something the child likes to eat?

In some cases the child may wish to read through the conversation or
print it out before the conversation disappears from the screen. There may

be different technical solutions to this, but the counsellor should be attentive to the child's needs, especially if the conversation disappears for the child when the chat finishes.

EXAMPLES OF QUESTIONS AND PHRASES IN PHASE 4:

"Now I think we have covered what you told me very well. Do you think so too?" – (if yes): "Super - then you know what to do now?"

"Now we have talked about what is difficult for you and what you would like to change and what can be done – how do you feel now after we have talked about it?"

"Do you think that you have received answers to your questions – anything you are uncertain about?"

"What do you think you will do after our conversation is finished?". "Is there anything on TV you would like to see?" "Do you have a pet that would like to go for a walk?"

"You're welcome. Goodbye and thank you for the conversation."

7.2 LENGTH OF THE CONVERSATION

Chat counselling takes time. The individual conversations can take from five minutes to several hours. On many helplines, the average length of a chat session is 45 minutes.

> The exchange of information takes five times longer when comparing chat with face-to-face communication.
> (Tidwell & Walther, 2002)

Although the Five Phase Model seems comprehensive, it does not necessarily mean that the conversations will be longer than alternative techniques. In some cases it will be possible to complete the five phases in just a few minutes. If the chatter contacts the helpline with a concrete question, the counsellor should not hold back the answer. The counsellor can answer the question and ask if there is anything else they want to talk about. Sometimes a concrete question will just be the beginning to a conversation that contains far more complicated themes. A chatter may, for example, ask how to determine if you are infected with Chlamydia, but behind the question lays a conversation about sexual abuse. It may also be that the chatter simply needs a concrete answer.

Summarising is a natural way to end a conversation without saying directly: "Well, now we have to get off...."

7.3 TIME LIMITS

Some helplines have stipulated a time limit for conversations. It may be a rule or a rule of thumb. The time limit may be set in consideration of a particular chatter, of other chatters who are waiting in a queue, or in consideration of the counsellor's working environment. These are all legitimate rea-

sons. If working within a time limit, the Five Phase Model can assist in setting "part-time goals." For example, if the time limit for a conversation is one hour, then a good rule of thumb may be to have reached Phase 3 within the first 30 minutes – if not earlier.

It is not appropriate to use a time limit to end a counselling session. The chatter will experience this as cold and bureaucratic. It is the counsellor's job to reach a natural end to the chat within the time limit. If you follow a conversation model and ensure that there is progress in the conversation, then in most cases it will be possible to come to a natural close within the time limits. Nevertheless, there will still be situations where it becomes necessary to inform a chatter about the time limit. If the counsellor feels early in the conversation that it may be difficult to complete the talk within the time frame, it may be a good idea to bring up the time limit with the chatter early on: `"It is not certain that we will have time for all of it..."` or `"If this is to be helpful to you, where should we be with the conversation within one hour?"` It should be emphasised that it is not the chatter's responsibility to observe time limits even if it is discussed and agreed upon.

There will also be chatters who at the closing phase will bring up a totally new problem which may be more serious than the one discussed during the conversation. This may be because they had to build up the courage to broach the subject, and they now feel that time is running out. If this is the case, the counsellor must decide if the problem can be discussed within the framework of the current session or if it would be more beneficial for the chatter to talk about it when there is more time to address the problem. It would also be beneficial to talk about how it might be better for the chatter to bring up the problem earlier in the next conversation.

The chatter may also be using the new problem to maintain contact with the counsellor. If this is true, you may consider establishing a connection between the counselling conversation and the chatter's offline life, as described in Phase 5.

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LANGUAGE AND BEHAVIOUR IN CHAT COUNSELLING
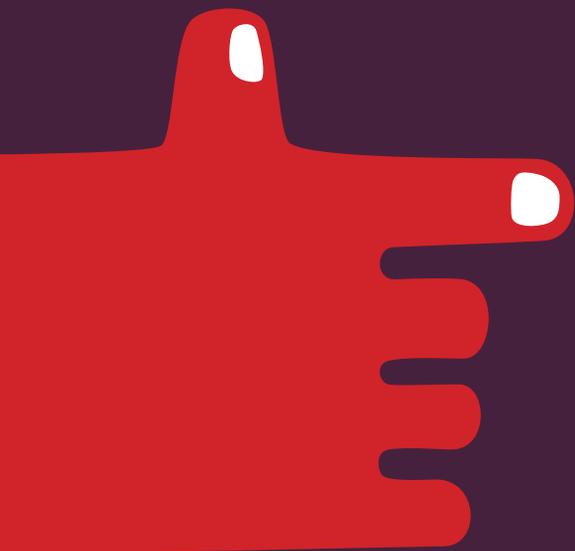
Most of the children contacting a chat helpline already have experience chatting. However, this experience will often be from contexts outside of counselling. As a counsellor, you should be aware of the need to define the special context of chat counselling. The conversation should not become an everyday conversation (although everyday elements can be used to build rapport).

8.1 CHAT SPEAK, EMOTICONS AND ABBREVIATIONS

Many helplines that launch chat counselling have spent a lot of time and energy training counsellors in the use of emoticons (smiley faces), "emotes," (e.g., acronyms like "LOL" = Laughing Out Loud), social verbs (e.g., "smiiro" – smiling ironically) and "text language." However, research and experience tell us that this is not where we should focus our energies. Using this type of language is often an attempt to compensate for the lack of body language cues in text-based communication. Research indicates that use of smiley faces has no significance for the interpretation of the text submitted, but should rather be seen as a form of social slang used among children and young people. Most chat counsellors and young people find that it is relatively easy to communicate feelings using a text-based media. Some even find that the online environment promotes emotional expressions because it reduces inhibitions.

Children do not talk to their teachers in the same way that they talk to their friends. The same differentiation is present in chat counselling. As a counsellor you should strive to use language that signals you are an adult paying regards to the child's level of understanding. It does not further the relationship by trying to be "down with the kids".

When a chatter uses this type of language it may be necessary for the counsellor to ask about the exact meaning or make sure that they have interpreted it correctly: `"Do you feel sad now?"` The happy emoticon is an exception. It is often used as a gesture of politeness in connection to "Hi" and

"Goodbye." The best advice here is to wait and see if the chatter uses emoticons, and to follow her example.

> In an experimental study conducted in America, a number of test persons were asked to read identical emails with and without the use of emoticons. The test persons were asked to evaluate the sender on a number of parameters including the sender's mood, seriousness and honesty. The experiment showed that the use of emoticons has little effect on the interpretation of a text.
> (Walther & D'Addario, 2001)

However, it is a good idea to know the most widely-used emoticons, such as :-) ;-) :'(and :-(

8.2 THE SPOKEN LANGUAGE

The language of a chat counselling session is different than the language used in emails, which are of a more formal nature, even though emails are less formal than actual letters. Speech bubbles in comic strips are a good illustration of the form of dialogue used in a chat conversation. For most, the conversation will be understood without a special introduction.

In order to ensure a certain pace to the conversation, spelling, writing and grammatical errors are normally only corrected if they distort the message. As a professional adult counsellor it is, however, essential to communicate in a way that signals you are an adult and a professional without creating a distance from the child. As a chat counsellor you should have good typing, spelling and writing skills so that the text can be created quickly without too many errors.

The counsellor should write in a direct style in order to reduce misunderstanding and to ensure the flow of the conversation. The chatter does the

same, and the child's contribution should be read with that in mind. This means that "chat language" is less refined and less varied than spoken language. This has advantages and disadvantages, but it is important to keep in mind when communicating and interpreting the chatter's contributions.

The messages in the counselling conversation should be short, but at the same time sensitive to the tone of the conversation. There should be a balance between efficient and empathetic elements.

The typical process is for the counsellor and child to take turns sending pieces of text to each other. The child has time to consider the text contribution, and when she submits her text it should be considered as an invitation to respond.

8.3 PUNCTUATION

The fact that in a chat conversation you don't have a lot of available information about the other party means that you make use of compensating strategies.

The dialogue is conducted in "spoken" language and typical grammatical rules are not applied, such as the use of capital letters or accurate punctuation. On the other hand, punctuation is used far more communicatively. Use of ellipses (...) may illustrate a shift, where before the ellipsis a reply is made to the child's thoughts, and after the ellipsis a new question is introduced. For example: `"It sounds difficult ... have you told anybody about it before?"` Alternately, an ellipsis can be used to illustrate a break in the topic, or, if placed at the end of a reply, to signal `"I intend to write more…."`

Brackets are used to introduce internal reflection and/or feelings. `"I feel guilt (I am aware that in reality it is not my fault, but I am just thinking in that way, unfortunately)."`

Exclamation points can be used to reinforce a message. The same applies to the use of CAPITAL LETTERS, but here you should be aware that it can

be interpreted as "shouting" and may seem aggressive. The same happens when using several exclamation marks together!!!

Basically, the use of punctuation and other symbols to develop communication is very dependent on context and personal style. The tendency is for the counsellor to try to adapt to the child's style, although in a way that illustrates that the counsellor is not a child but an adult with a professional role in the conversation.

8.4 SPELLING ERRORS, GRAMMAR AND WRITING SPEED

In order to increase the pace of the conversation, it's best to write short, simple sentences. Spelling mistakes are often not corrected until the sentence has been submitted. This is predominantly done by chatters who then subsequently correct their mistakes by writing the correct spelling and adding an asterisk (*). However, the counsellor may also use this method, especially if they have sent a sentence which could be misunderstood because of spelling or grammatical errors.

```
Child: I am very sory
Child: *sorry
```

If you find it difficult to achieve a good balance between *pace* of writing and *quality* of writing, you might consider whether chat counselling is the best way to use your skills.

8.5 ASK, ASK, ASK

Normal responses in oral communication -- such as nodding, mimicking or other facial expressions -- are all lacking in chat conversations. Thus it can

be more difficult for the counsellor to know if she and the chatter are truly building rapport. To ensure that you are on the right track it is important to continuously ask questions, both clarifying the child's story and determining how the child is feeling when talking about it: `"What do you think about this?"`

It's important to remember:

- That you don't know anything until it has been said.
- That you cannot know if you have understood correctly what the child is communicating before it has been confirmed.
- That you cannot know if what you say has been understood as you intended before you have confirmed it with the child.

As a chat counsellor you develop a special sensibility in relation to the unsaid but implicit elements of a conversation. You get a feeling, based on the chatter's way of formulating herself or based on other cues in the conversation, that there are underlying issues which have not yet been fully verbalised. In such circumstances it is the counsellor's role to support the child in exploring these issues while being sensitive to the fact that there may be good reasons for leaving some things unsaid.

In phone counselling you may follow a question with a pause that solicits an answer from the caller. In a chat conversation you will often experience that the chatter quite simply ignores a question. The chatter may be somewhere else in her train of thought. She may not have seen the question, or she does not feel like answering it. As a counsellor you will begin to find it natural to ask the same question several times, maybe by varying your use of language.

8.6 CONVERSATIONS ABOUT THE CONVERSATION

In a chat session, the counsellor should strive to make the counselling process visible to the chatter. This is called meta-communication and involves

the counsellor having an ongoing dialogue with the child about the development of the conversation. This way the counsellor engages the child in the flow of the conversation and in the counsellor's thought processes. The child should be continually informed about the counsellor's choices and the reasons for those choices. It may be necessary to examine on an ongoing basis if the conversation is proving beneficial to the child. Meta-communication contributes to transparency. The process becomes transparent for both the child and the counsellor, and this facilitates the collaboration considerably.

EXAMPLES OF CONVERSATIONS ABOUT THE CONVERSATION:

"Should we look at what we have talked about up until now?"

"You have told me about several things, should we take them one by one?"

"We could start with clarifying the situation. Let me think of what we need more. What do you think?"

"I think we have clarified the situation very well now. Should we try to talk a little bit about what you would like to get out of our conversation?"

"I will now ask a difficult question — and you don't have to answer it..."

8.7 ONGOING SUMMARISING

Ongoing summarising is essential to ensure and demonstrate that you, as a counsellor, have understood the child correctly. Summarising also provides the conversation with structure. It shows what the child and the counsellor

have talked about and in which direction the conversation is going. The slow pace of chat counselling may create loss of structure, but applying a conversation model and ongoing summaries help maintain the structure. With a longer summary, the text might be best broken up so that the child does not have to wait a long time only to be presented with a very condensed and overwhelming amount of text.

```
Counsellor: I will just summarise...
Counsellor: You have told me that your teacher touches you in places
    where you don't want him to touch you...
Counsellor: ... and it makes you scared and you decided to do something,
    and write to us (very clever of you)...
Counsellor: ... and you would like to find out if something can be done
    to make it stop. Is it understood correctly?
```

(Note: [...] signals that you will write more)

It is also a good idea to continuously reflect back what the child has told you, but to write it in your own words, which shows your understanding of the child's situation. This provides the child with the option to correct you, or to see her situation in a new perspective and/or experience herself as understood, which is beneficial to the conversation.

8.8 BEING SUPPORTIVE

Chat communication enables a counsellor to show empathy and appreciation for the child. Unlike other types of counselling, chat sessions provide an accelerated intimacy (see Chapter 1). However, it is important to continue showing support throughout the conversation. One way to do this is by re-

flecting back the child's feelings: "You sound disappointed, is that true?" You can also support the chatter's self-esteem by expressing appreciation: "How good for you!" or "That really sounds rather tough!" (Here punctuation is used to emphasise the words).

Praise can support the child's empowerment but should be used with a great deal of tact. When you praise someone you evaluate the other person, and it is not always nice to be evaluated, even when it is positive. Praise emphasises an unequal relationship between the one being praised and the one doing the praising, the one evaluating and the one being evaluated. One of the strengths of chat counselling is that power inequality is reduced and the relationship is experienced as more equal. But praise, selected with care, can strengthen the chatter's feeling of empowerment: "It was really good that you contacted us", "It sounds as if you have tried a lot of different things – that is really good", "Good question ..." or "You sound like a very caring friend."

Normalising the child's reactions can have a supportive effect and can be a relief to the child: "We receive many questions about that ..." or "There are many who chat about this problem."

Empathetic listening, which means listening with a view to understanding the chatter's feelings, is important in chat as in all forms of counselling. Empathetic statements should be precise; otherwise they may have the opposite effect on the child. You can only provide precise, empathetic feedback if you ask, ask and ask, because the chat conversation is not supported by facial expressions, body language or any other physical cues that provide information on how the child is feeling. Instead you have to ask and listen and show that you have heard and understood what the child has said. If you are unsure, then you should ask again.

A user evaluation carried out from 2008-2009 at the Danish chat helpline Børns Vilkår showed that 77 percent of the 800 children who answered the evaluation expressed that they had experienced being taken seriously and had been able to talk to the counsellor about the topics that they wanted to discuss. This indicates that the counsellors predominantly succeeded in building a good rapport with the children and that they listened empathically to the children's needs and wishes. (Sindahl, 2009)

A similar study from the Dutch Kindertelefoon showed that a great number of children in chat counselling saw themselves supported and taken seriously, in comparison to corresponding phone counselling. This suggests that the lack of auditory cues does not limit the counsellor's ability to support and respect the child. (Fukkink & Hermanns, 2007)

8.9 PAUSES

In most chat conversations, the parties take turns sending a piece of writing in response to a previous sentence. The desire to accelerate the pace of the conversation may sometimes mean that the parties send writing simultaneously. This can increase the pace of the conversation. However it also creates the risk that the conversations cross, i.e. that you do not respond to the sentence which just arrived, but to something the conversation partner said several sentences ago. The typical scenario is that the counsellor and child take turns writing and waiting for the other person to answer.

Thus a conversation's flow consists of both written contributions and pauses between texts. Pauses can be an important help in the counsellor's interpretation and understanding of the chatter's situation. The chat system can support the counsellor in their interpretation of the silences. For exam-

ple, several chat systems show the counsellor and chatter if their conversation partner is in the process of writing. This is typically indicated by a text like "visitor is typing." In systems without this feature, a long pause where the chatter is working on writing her contribution may be interpreted as the chatter being busy with other activities. If the system shows when the conversation partner is writing or not, it is possible to distinguish between a pause where the child is writing and a pause of silence.

While the chatter types, the counsellor will typically wait for the child's contribution to make sure that the answers and questions do not cross. It's best not to disturb the chatter with new questions, but to give them time to formulate their answer. Long writing pauses will typically be interpreted as the chatter being in the process of formulating something that is essential to the content of the conversation.

Pauses of silence can be interpreted in different ways. A counsellor will often ask about the chatter's emotional state, such as `How are you feeling right now?` or simply `Are you there?` If a pause of silence occurs immediately after a difficult question has been posed, it will usually be interpreted as the counsellor having "hit a nerve" and the chatter being emotionally upset.

When a counsellor uses pauses -- for example, because she is considering something, looking into something or asking a colleague -- it may be a good idea to tell the child: `I am thinking right now....`

Being able to interpret the pauses in the conversation requires that a shared flow and rhythm are achieved, so breaks of the rhythm or the flow become apparent. It is more difficult to interpret the pauses if the counsellor is dealing with several counselling conversations at the same time and is therefore unable to observe and support the rhythm.

8.10 HOW TECHNOLOGY CAN SUPPORT THE COUNSELLING RELATIONSHIP

The technological systems used in chat counselling can support the conversation in numerous ways. Some of the more common features are:

a. The system indicates when the conversation partner is writing.

b. The system asks the chatter questions before the start of the conversation, and the answers are provided to the counsellor before she initiates the conversation (these include items such as the chatter's gender, age, intended topic of conversation, "chat" name or user ID).

c. The helpline, or individual counsellor, has an electronic "bank" of standard answers for frequently asked questions, which can quickly be copied into the conversation.

d. It is possible to scroll up and down, copy and paste.

e. The counsellor gains access to information about previous conversations with the chatter.

f. Visual tools are available for the chatter to express her emotional state or to provide feedback during the conversation.

g. The ability to arrange the "chat room" so that it supports the strengths of chat counselling.

(b) Questions before the conversation

Some helplines prompt the chatter to supply a username for login. Sometimes the chatter will use a random name or a combination of letters and numbers. Sometimes the chatter will use a recognisable alias, which she may be using elsewhere on the internet and which constitutes her internet identity. The chatter may also use a name that indicates something about her situation (e.g. Sad15).

Use of a username is supportive in that:

• The chatter can be recognised more easily when she contacts the helpline several times.

- The chatter can, through his or her username, tell you something about who she is or what the conversation will be about.
- It helps in building rapport when the conversation partners each have a name.

When using usernames, you should be aware of the following:
- The chatter can choose to use her own names without being aware that in serious child protection cases, the counsellor may be required by law to disclose information about the chatter to the authorities.
- If the chatter uses the same username in various places on the internet, she may be recognised from elsewhere. The counsellor can be left with information about the chatter that the chatter has not given directly to the counsellor. This may compromise the chatter's anonymity if she is not anonymous in other places where that username is used.
- The chatter's name may also become a restraint for the chatter. It may not be fitting to be called "Sad15" if she does not feel sad anymore or if there is something else she wants to talk about.
- If the child feels that she has to find a descriptive username, it might be a barrier that prevents her from using the helpline.
- It might not always be helpful that the counsellor is able to recognise the chatter from previous conversations. You have probably been in situations where you would have loved to be able to start over again and create a new story about yourself. Conversely, the chatter might find it frustrating if the counsellor does not recognise her, despite using the same username.
- As a counsellor you have to be careful not to make too many assumptions based on the child's username. Maybe "Sad15" is not fifteen years old at all, but she lives at number 15 or....

It is important to know the chatter's gender and age when speaking with children and young people. If a chatter wants to discuss whether she should

have sex with her boyfriend, it makes a difference to know whether the chatter is eleven or twenty-one years old. The counsellor should therefore clarify the chatter's gender and age very early in the conversation in order to establish a good rapport and to facilitate useful counselling.

Questions about gender and age will almost always break up the natural dialogue that is established when talking about a difficult topic. It will disturb the flow of the conversation and even extend it. Therefore some helplines choose to have the chatter fill in this information before the start of the conversation.

Some helplines choose to ask what the chatter would like to talk about with the counsellor and if the chatter has contacted the helpline before. Some helplines ask which city the chatter lives in or other information that will be used for statistical purposes.

As a counsellor you should be aware that the child has answered these questions *before* a relationship is established between you and the child. There will be a number of chatters who do not respond truthfully to the questions, perhaps to protect their anonymity. If, during the conversation, you start to doubt whether the child answered truthfully it would be relevant to ask the child again. The counsellor must be empathic and understand that this might be something that the child does not want to disclose until later.

(c) Use of standard answers

Every conversation is unique, and it may seem very provocative to suggest using standard answers in counselling. But the fact is that, over time, most counsellors develop a variety of standard answers that work for them in different phases of a conversation. It increases the conversation's pace and flow when the counsellor can draw on experience and when she does not need a long time to formulate a reply.

A "library" with standard answers can be integrated into the system and be activated by a single click -- or simply be accessible in a text document

from which the answers can be copied and inserted into the conversation. This could be a personal document for the individual counsellor or a shared document that all counsellors use. If a conversation model, such as the Five Phase Model, is used, the standard answers can be attached to the individual phases to provide a better overview.

(d) Scrolling, copying and pasting

In most chat systems the entire conversation will be available on the screen during the counselling session. It provides the counsellor and child with the opportunity to scroll up and down the conversation to review or create an overview of their progress. This is considered a great advantage in chat counselling, as the counsellor will be able to reflect what the child has expressed earlier in accordance with the chatter's choice of words. It can also be useful to copy earlier parts of the conversation and insert them into the current exchange. For example: `"You said earlier that [... text piece from earlier in the conversation ...] – do you think differently about your situation now that we have talked about it?"`

Many counsellors find it helpful to take notes during the conversation even though the whole conversation is available on the screen. It is easy to lose track of the conversation, and taking notes can make the conversation easier to manage.

(e) Access to information about previous conversations with the chatter

Some systems provide access to information about how many times the chatter has used the helpline, and in some cases the previous chats are logged and available. It is important to inform the chatters that their conversations are recorded. It is unethical – and sometimes illegal – to log information without consent, or at least without giving clear notice to the child about the procedure.

(f) Visual tools

In order to compensate for lack of emotional feedback from the chatter on how they feel about the chat, several helplines have tried to develop tools for chatters to use in the conversation -- for example, mood charts. In face-to-face communication we will often be able to take note of what the child feels by reading facial expressions or body language. The Dutch Kindertelefoon developed a tool where, during the conversation, the child could indicate to the counsellor how well she felt the counsellor understood her by the use of symbols such as thumbs up, sideways or down. However, experience indicated that this feature was rarely used. If it was, it was usually when the child was ending the conversation, when the counsellor was unable to adapt to the child's feedback.

At the Australian Kids Helpline a similar tool was developed to support the child in expressing how they were feeling. By means of visual symbols, the child could choose feelings that represented their current situation and could grade those feelings according to how strong or weak they were. The tool was not made available to the child until the counsellor found it relevant to introduce it. It turned out not to be used very often. In the majority of cases, the counsellor found the written language to be sufficient.

Most counselling systems seem to use very few visual tools. The conversation is cleaned of "visual noise" so only the words that are exchanged between the counsellor and child remain.

(g) Developing the chat room

If you set up a counselling service that provides face-to-face contact, you would consider how to arrange and decorate the counselling room. You would want the room to be inviting, comforting and professional. Maybe you would also consider how the waiting room should be arranged. In the same way, a chat helpline should consider how the chat environment will look. Here the screen represents the counselling room, and it is important to con-

sider how the screen can contribute to feelings of safety, intimacy and professionalism, and how it can assist in establishing peace around the conversation. Similarly, you should consider how the screen looks when the chatters log in or queue to get to the chat. For example, what would chatters like to do, read, or look at while waiting?

8.11 FINDING YOUR OWN PERSONAL STYLE

As a chat counsellor you will gradually develop your own style and way of expressing yourself efficiently. You will use language in a way that makes it possible to express yourself creatively while also making it understandable for the other party.

8.12 SUMMARY

- Ask questions to avoid misunderstandings. Avoid interpretations. You only know what the child has written.
- Avoid irony.
- Only use specialised chat language or emoticons to a very limited extent.
- Write short sentences.
- Write fast.
- Write to the point.
- Avoid spending too much time correcting spelling and punctuation mistakes.
- Talk about the progress of the conversation with the child.
- Summarise in an ongoing fashion (in particular during transitions in the conversation).
- Make use of the technology.
- Develop your own style.

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THE EFFECTS OF CHAT COUNSELLING
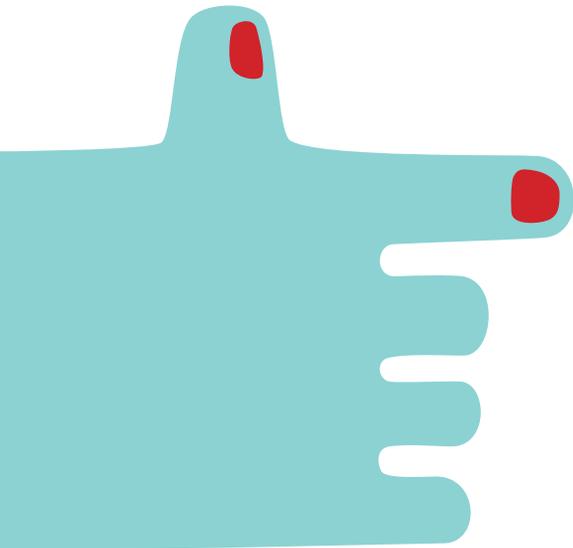
Children have limited power over their own life circumstances. In that respect, it may seem absurd to develop a plan that is based on the child's initiative and action. How can it be useful for a child to anonymously call an adult who can't intervene or change their circumstances, but who can only talk to them? It only makes sense if you realise that children have options and can act on those options, and if you do not consider the child to be helpless or powerless simply because they are a child. We have to believe that the child has resources that can be stimulated and supported and that she can seek appropriate help if she knows where to look. Establishment of a chat helpline for children requires a child's perspective.

Research on how chat counselling works for children and young people is limited. We can draw on research done on phone counselling, but that research is even more limited. Results from research in online therapy are mostly positive (Mallen et al., 2005), but there are significant differences between online therapy and the form of counselling discussed in this book.

The Australian Kids Helpline examined the impact of their counselling service by asking 86 chatters to complete a series of questionnaires before and after the counselling session. One of their findings was that the counselling had a positive impact by increasing the chatters' well-being. The researchers' hypothesis that the effect of the counselling depended on the relationship between the client and the counsellor was however not confirmed in this study (King et al., 2006). We know from therapy research that this factor is of great importance, but maybe the relationship is of secondary importance when talking about anonymous, one-session counselling?

In a study of telephone counselling published in 1989, callers were asked to list helpful behaviours shown by their counsellors. Callers mentioned listening and feedback, understanding and caring, non-judgmental support and directive counselling. The more direct counselling method resulted in the most changes in the caller's behaviour. (Young, 1989)

When a chatter contacts a chat helpline, there is a wish attached to it. The child hopes to get something out of the contact. It is very individual how articulated that hope is, and a counsellor sometimes has to spend more time working with the child to help her express her intention. The Five Phase Model recommends different methods for this type of dialogue. Using this method to develop and carry out the dialog may feel unnatural at first and can be difficult for both counsellor and chatter, but it is nevertheless very important. Over time you will find that it becomes more natural.

Ideally, the chatter should leave the conversation with an experience of having been helped. The chatter does not necessarily need to have a clear solution to her problem but she must feel helped and able to move forward in dealing with the problem that was the initial reason for the inquiry.

Chatters can contact a helpline in order:

- To manage a crisis situation (e.g. suicide attempts).
- To be reassured, to vent, to find out that they are not the only ones, to find out that they are normal, and to gain perspective.
- To develop strategies to gain control of the situation, to clear the mind and get focus.
- To get advice, answers or directions.
- To get information or to be referred.
- Simply to be in contact with another person.

- To have a conversation with someone who supports, cares, motivates, understands, is genuine, sympathetic, accepting, confidential, independent and non-judgmental.

According to Danish chatters at the Børns Vilkårs chat helpline, the following contributes to a positive experience:
- To get advice on what to do, to get relevant information or be referred to a relevant offer when it was needed.
- To get time and space to tell my story and get it off my chest, when it was needed.
- To gain new perspectives on my situation.
- To be taken seriously, get attention and feel understood.
- To be anonymous and talk to an outsider.
- To have the opportunity to write.
- To be supported and possibly pushed a little in the right direction.

According to the Danish chatters at Børns Vilkårs, the following contributes to a negative experience:
- To look for advice or a solution and not find it.
- To be pressured into a solution or a referral.
- To feel not understood or taken seriously.
- If the counsellor writes very slowly.
- If the counsellor becomes "hopeless" or runs out of ideas.

(Sindahl, 2009)

As a method, chat counselling is based on the child's own strength and independence. At the Danish chat helpline Børns Vilkår, two out of three children contacting the helpline indicated that they felt better after the session. The Danish result is consistent with similar international studies.

In 2007 the Dutch Kindertelefoon conducted a comprehensive comparative study of their telephone and chat counselling services. The conclusion was that while both phone and chat counselling helped children to get better, chat counselling was more effective than phone counselling, even when adjusted for the child's age, gender and the nature and severity of the problem.

Legend:
- The child's well-being before the session
- The child's well-being after the session
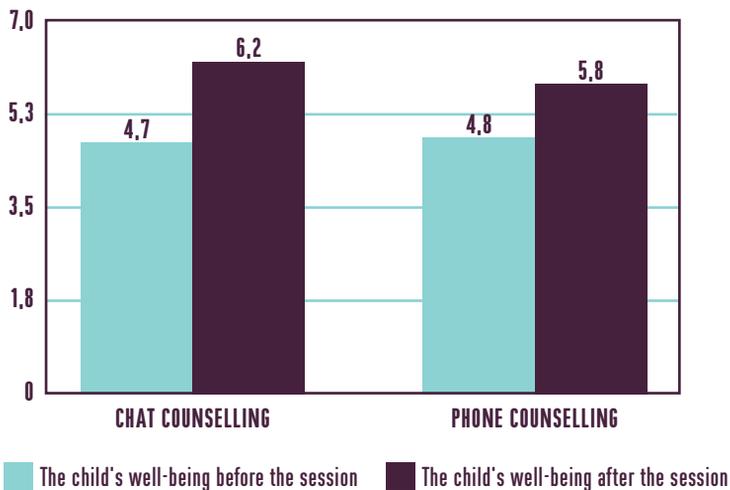
In the study it was found that two factors had a significant impact on whether the children saw themselves as being helped by conversation:
1. A solution to the problem was offered.
2. The child was taken seriously.

(Fukkink & Hermanns, 2007)

The communication form in a chat counselling service means that the child or young person has maximum control and that the power balance between child and counsellor is experienced as being more equal. The absence of background and social indications contributes to the levelling of the power balance. The child will not be left with an impression of a class or authority difference between herself and counsellor (based on, for example, the counsellor's clothing or the objects in the counselling room). This can support the child's empowerment and prevent the child from becoming dependent on the counsellor or helpline.

9.1 THE FIRST STEP

It is not wise to assume that chat counselling is the child's first step in solving their problem. The majority of children who are turning to an anonymous chat helpline have already done many things to deal with their situation. Either they have tried to change their situation or to survive it. It is the counsellor's role to bring out and develop this potential further.

However, many chatters say it is the first time they have talked to someone about their situation. It might be that this shows a need to establish trust and a relationship with the counsellor, but conversely it makes sense that the chatter chooses to test out their story, to tell someone in a place where there are no consequences. The counsellor's response can give the chatter the courage to talk about her situation outside the anonymous environment. It is essential for the counsellor to show that she can cope with hearing the child's story. It may also be that the chatter will print out the conversation and give it to someone in her personal network who will then become aware of the child's situation and thoughts without the child having to talk about it directly. In those transcripts, the child's narrative will be further strengthened by the fact that the counsellor's contributions and reactions are present.

9.2 EMPOWERMENT

Chat counselling has natural limitations in terms of what the counsellor can do for the child. If the child gives up her anonymity, a number of options for intervention and more active help open up. But as long as anonymity is maintained -- which it is in the majority of cases (and is often the very reason that children use a chat helpline) -- the counsellor can only help by supporting and motivating the child's own problem solving skills. The counsellor can of course tell the child what she thinks the child should do, but such an approach does not support the child's autonomy. In fact, it increases the likelihood of the child not being able or willing to follow the advice. It also increases the likelihood that the child will be become dependent on the counselling service when having to solve problems in the future. If the counsellor positions herself as an advisor or guide it will affect the dynamic between counsellor and child from an equal, collaborative relationship to a relationship where the child is dependent on the counsellor's guidance and knowledge. However, if the counsellor has unique knowledge that can benefit the child, this knowledge should not be withheld. The fact is, the knowledge the counsellor gains about the child's situation and options will always be limited due to the format, so collaboration is necessary. This is a limitation, but it can also be an opportunity for the child to grow and to have the experience of taking the initiative in problem solving and self-help.

Supporting another person in solving their own problems is both easier and more difficult in chat counselling. On the one hand, we cannot act on behalf of the child, because the child is anonymous and not in physical contact with us. This forces us as counsellors to work with the chatter's own preparedness to act. On the other hand, the process becomes more complex due to time pressure and lack of body language or gestures, which may indicate that we share responsibility for exploring how to solve the problem.

The time pressure that is inevitably associated with chat counselling may mean that we, as counsellors, are impatient on the chatter's behalf and be-

come uncertain if the chatter will be able to benefit from the conversation. This conflict may mean that some counsellors revert to more directive counselling, even though the context emphasises that it is the chatter's own problem-solving skills that should be stimulated. Sometimes it can be helpful to reduce your expectations of the conversation. The child does not have to choose a specific solution during the session. It may be sufficient that you discuss different solutions together that she can subsequently consider. Perhaps it is enough that the child considers her options, thereby providing a better understanding of her own situation.

9.3 THE IMPACT OF WRITING

The fact that the conversation is conducted in writing and not orally (e.g. via a telephone) means several things:

- The pace is reduced significantly. It is resource-intensive but this can be helpful in itself. In the chat we listen slowly. There is time for decoding, re-reading, articulating and reflecting while the conversation takes place.
- The conversation is visual. Chatter and counsellor see the conversation as a joint work between them. The chatter can see her situation from a distance, which can open up the possibility for talking about it in new ways.
- The conversation is maintained. It can be saved, printed out or given to someone else to read. There are several examples of transcripts from chat counselling being used as evidence in legal proceedings with the child's consent.

CASE

A young boy turned to chat counselling several times and reported that he had experienced physical abuse at home. The boy wanted to report the abuse to the police but did not feel he had the strength to talk about it in a face-to-face situation. In agreement with the police, a counsellor interviewed the boy via chat and the boy subsequently submitted the transcript as a statement to the police.

Research about writing therapy tells us that writing as a therapeutic tool can be very helpful for people who have difficulty in expressing themselves orally due to feelings of shame or other inhibiting emotions. It may be that people with "inner chaos" need to get a better view of their situation by externalising and organising their thoughts and feelings. This may also be true for people who feel the need to hide stressful or traumatic events or who are going through stages in life associated with strong emotions, such as puberty. (Mallen et al., 2005)

> Writing empties you and your mind onto the paper.... And when you are looking down on it (the writing), it doesn't look as big as when you were just thinking about it ....

> (Writing) is a way of looking inside yourself.

> I write to myself first because I can then see if I really have a problem and how big it really is.

> To write and to think goes hand in hand.

Quotations from international students in England using writing as a resource (Lago, 2004)

9.4 DEVELOPING THE CHILD'S STORY

Within a narrative conceptual framework we talk about supporting the children by helping them develop a constructive story about themselves. In this conceptual framework you are working to support young people telling their stories in a way that contributes to a feeling of "agency" -- an experience of being able to actively change one's own life. In chat counselling it means that the conversation, and thus the child's story, is written in a way that shows the child as an authority in their own life rather than as a marginalised victim. In a narrative perspective, chat counselling can support the child in "rewriting" the story of herself in a more constructive way. Part of this work will usually involve typical narrative elements such as:

- Separating the child from the problem (the process of *externalization*). This means helping the child rewrite the story by going from "I am worthless" to "There are things in my life that are not working," and to designate these things so they can be subject to examination and change. The chat conversation itself can be seen as such a separation of "me" and "the problem". The child's story is projected onto the screen as words that can be edited and rewritten. The counsellor is co-author in the process. The narrative is reflected back as a story outside of the child on the screen.

- Bringing order and clarity in space and time. The story has a structure and a process. For the child, it can be helpful to separate their story from the past to the future. A structured chat conversation, where the counsellor continuously summarises, provides favourable conditions. There is a continuous opportunity to scroll up in the conversation and ensure that important and constructive elements are maintained.

Researchers divided 86 young couples newly in love into two groups. They were all asked to write for one hour a day for five days. Group 1 was asked to write about their love; Group 2 had to write objectively about what they had done during the day.

Three months later, 77 percent of Group 1 one was still together, whereas it was only 52 percent in Group 2.

(Slatcher & Pennebaker, 2006)

What we talk about grows.

9.5 NEW PERSPECTIVES AND PROBLEM SOLVING

Having an increased overview of their situation as well as the opportunity to reflect on questions that they have not previously considered opens up the possibility of change for the child.

It may be that the counsellor has ideas for problem solving that the child has not considered, or the counsellor can give the child the support and encouragement to continue a positive change. Both may lead to new possibilities for the child.

9.6 REFERRAL

In some cases, the chatter's network or the social circles the child belongs to do not offer sufficient help. For children with psychosocial problems, navigating through the professional help system may be difficult. Making a referral here could be relevant.

The slow pace of chat counselling can help to qualify the referral. The counsellor has good opportunities to obtain and read relevant material and consult colleagues before recommending a specific place of referral. The fact that most institutions and organisations have their own website makes it

possible to "pay a visit" to the places of referral during the conversation. A strategy for making a referral, adapted from the Dutch Kindertelefoon's guidelines, could be to:

1. Explain why you think that a referral is relevant and ask if it is ok for the chatter to discuss this option.
2. Give the name of the place you will refer the child to.
3. Explain what the place of referral can offer that is beyond your counselling.
4. Ask what the child thinks and whether she understands it.
5. Provide contact information and web address.
6. Visit the website together and talk about the place. Ask the chatter's thoughts about making contact. Ask the child if they find the place relevant?
7. Discuss consequences and develop strategies to deal with them.

It can be difficult to establish an overview of places to refer to, as sites start up and close down on a regular basis. For that reason it is appropriate to make use of the referral organisations' own updated websites to ensure that the information is as accurate and up-to-date as possible.

A conversation with the child about a referral may, depending on the chatter's maturity and resources, also focus on how the chatter can look up and find a relevant organisation or project herself. It can stimulate her own problem solving capacity. It does not always have to be the counsellor who suggests a specific place of referral.

At times it will be relevant to keep the chat open while the chatter contacts the place of referral so that the counsellor does not leave the chatter until a new contact has been established. Waiting together with the chatter and supporting her through the process may help the child feel less nervous about the referral.

Chat helplines are to a large extent frequented by young people with complex and severe psychosocial problems. Some of these children already get

professional help, and it is therefore important that the counsellor explores this prior to making a referral. It is important that the counsellor does not contribute to widening the gap between the child and the professional help they are already receiving, even if the child does not experience the professional as helpful. In some cases the child will benefit more from discussing how the relationship with the professional can be improved rather than being sent to a number of new places of referral.

9.7 RISK ASSESSMENT AND CRISIS INTERVENTION

Chat counselling is not a very useful tool when immediate crisis situations arise. In the literature this will be emphasised again and again, even though it has not actually been the subject of much research (and although the few existing studies have shown positive results). It has been found that the chat takes too long and it can be difficult for the counsellor to assess, or even discover, how acute and immediate the situation is.

However, the chatters *are* contacting chat helplines when they are confronted with acute and immediate problems. In these situations it is the counsellor's responsibility to be *active* and *directive*. We know that the more immediate and acute the crisis, the less need to focus on emotions and the greater the need to focus on rational thinking about the problem and the options available. While some chatters may benefit from support and empathetic listening, the goal of crisis intervention is solving the immediate problem by developing an action plan.

If the situation is *critical*, the counsellor changes role from being child-centred to taking control of the conversation.

If the counsellor becomes directive in relation to the chatter -- for example, by dictating exactly what the chatter should do -- it should be based on an assessment of *the child or young person being in immediate danger that requires specific action*. Often in these situations the child is not able to make good decisions or to assess the consequences of her own decisions. The abil-

ity to make good decisions will always be difficult and stressful when the child is in a threatening situation or when the child has serious emotional problems.

Acute and immediate situations can be:

- The child or young person has specific plans for suicide or are in the process of a suicide attempt.
- The child or young person is subject to violence or will be subject to violence or other kinds of abuse if no help is provided for the child.
- The child or young person is severely mentally ill -- such as being psychotic or experiencing a severe anxiety attack.
- Serious physical harm has been inflicted on the child or young person – perhaps due to the child being exposed to violence, sexual abuse or self harm.

It may be important to emphasise that not all conversations about suicidal thoughts, violence, abuse or self-harm are immediate. To have thoughts about wanting to die is not uncommon as existential considerations during puberty, and often these conversations are difficult to have with someone you know. Children who are abused need help, but sometimes it is more helpful to "hurry slowly," especially when the contact with the child is as fragile as in a chat session.

It can be difficult in chat counselling to identify when a situation is immediate, and therefore it is important that the counsellor is aware that it might be. If a child says that she has suicidal thoughts, the counsellor should make an assessment of how specific these thoughts are, whether the chatter has specific suicide plans, and how far the child is in these considerations. If a child says that she harms herself, the counsellor should assess whether the child has done this at the time of the chat and what is the extent of the injury.

Such an assessment must be made before the conversation can take a more exploratory form.

```
Counsellor: Ok. I have to ask if you have considered harming yourself
    - earlier today or just now?
Child: Lately, all the time. I am so tired of feeling the way I do
Counsellor: Have you considered how you will harm yourself?
Child: My parents have never been satisfied with me. Every time I think
    of it, I think about pills
Counsellor: Have you got pills now?
Child: None which I think will be able to harm me
Counsellor: Ok. It is important that you understand that if you are
    thinking of harming yourself, then you need to get in contact with
    someone, who can help ... more than I can on a chat.
Child: But I dont know who I should ask for help.
Counsellor: Ok - that's important - let's look at that together - ok?
```

Acute counselling conversations where help is needed immediately will typically begin with an assessment of what the issue is, what the chatter's exact situation is, what the risk is, and who is involved, etc. This should be followed by support: "It is good that you contacted us," clear feedback on what is going to happen, "You need help right now. We are going to do this and this..." and "When it takes place, what will happen is that ...." After that, help is called for the chatter. Typically, the child or counsellor will contact someone who can come to where the chatter is, or to whom the chatter can go. When help is secured, focus can be shifted to supporting the chatter and talking to her about making specific plans for the future while waiting for help to arrive. In this situation it is rarely useful to talk about the problem in more detail, so simply continue the emotional support of the child while waiting. Probing questions about why the child wants to commit suicide will only contribute to further risk.

In chat counselling it is possible that the child can call for help themselves while still being in contact with the counsellor. Both the child and the counsellor have the option to call an ambulance, a relative or social services without having to end the chat. The counsellor will be able to get support and help from colleagues while the conversation takes place, which is often a great help.

If the situation requires that the child has to give up her anonymity in order to get the necessary help, it is important to inform the child of this and to let her know what the consequences will be, as the child might have chosen to approach the chat helpline because she could remain anonymous. Therefore, it can make the contact very vulnerable if the counsellor insists that anonymity must be broken. It is important that the counsellor clearly informs the child so the child only breaks her anonymity with *informed* consent. This ensures that the child can continue to experience a certain degree of control over the situation. A lack of sensitivity to this could result in the child disconnecting the contact or giving false information.

As a counsellor you must be aware that in most countries, when you know the child's identity and you assess that the child is in immediate danger, you are obliged to inform the local authorities ("duty of care").

There may be situations where the child's need for help is immediate, but the child does not want to get help, e.g., calling an ambulance, or being willing to provide the counsellor with the necessary information for the counsellor to get help. In such cases the counsellor must determine if there are other options for getting help that do not involve breaching the child's confidentiality. The counsellor will continue to work with the child to ensure that the chatter accepts that this will be the outcome of the conversation. In some situations the counsellor has to accept that it will not be possible for them to provide the help the child needs. In these cases the counsellor should consider if the contact with the child should end so that the counselling conversation is not locked in a negative situation.

In such cases it is important that the counsellor obtain maximum support from colleagues and management, as she can feel powerless. As therapist Gary Stofle expressed it: "What to do when there is nothing you can do?" (2002).

Summary:

For conversations with children and young people that need immediate help:

1. Assess the situation's seriousness. Is there a need for immediate intervention? Ask for facts rather than feelings.
2. Provide support.
3. Tell the chatter what is going to happen.
4. Provide help for the child or young person.
5. Wait together with the child until sufficient help has been established.

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CHAPTER 10
ARE THERE RISKS?
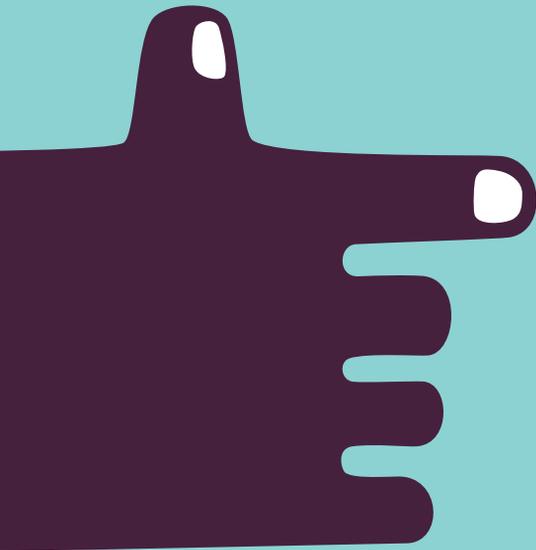
As a helpline you are ethically obliged to ensure that your service does not compromise a client's well-being, rights, trust and confidentiality. The counselling services offered must not reduce well-being for the chatter or stand in the way of the chatter getting more effective help.

Can chat counselling have negative side effects? Yes, it can -- both from an individual perspective and a societal one. Here it is essential to emphasise that chat counselling can also be damaging to the counsellor. She can become burned out or worried about the children who are not able to get feedback about their situations. Counsellors can also become disillusioned when learning about the absolutely dark sides of some children's lives, or when they feel that their time and efforts are abused by children (or adults) who use the service for other purposes than those intended.

10.1 CAN IT REPLACE NECESSARY HELP TO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE?

Some chatters of anonymous chat counselling are in situations where non-anonymous and professional help is needed. It is a real risk that children and young people use chat counselling *instead of* making use of local professional services available in the social and health care system. Some chatters may fool themselves into believing that they are doing something about their situation solely by confiding in an anonymous chat counsellor. Maybe they use chat counselling to criticise and reinforce the negative experiences of the help they get locally. This is a real risk. As a counsellor you have a responsibility not to compromise the professional help the child is already getting or may need. That said, research predominantly shows that online counselling can connect a child to professional and local help.

10.2 CAN USE OF CHAT COUNSELLING BECOME AN ADDICTION?

There are ongoing discussions about whether young people's increasing use of the internet is harmful to their physical and social development. Studies show that it is only a small group of children and young people for whom the internet becomes an interference in other activities. Here the focus is especially on online games. At the same time, many studies show that children can maintain and develop new friendships by using the internet.

Studies among adults have shown a correlation between time spent on the internet and depression and/or social isolation. It has not yet been possible to demonstrate the same correlation with children. Other studies about children and their internet use have been able to show a correlation between the time spent on the internet and a lower sense of cohesion with family.

We see that young people with psychosocial problems such as loneliness or depression have a preference for online relationships instead of face-to-face ones. Children and young people who inflict self-harm use chat rooms and text messaging to a higher degree than other children. Thus researchers have pointed out that precisely these media can be used to help this group of children. However, among lonely people there can be a tendency to develop obsessive or excessive use of chat-based applications, such that it affects their life in a negative way and aggravates their psychosocial situation. By decreasing their need to seek out people face-to-face in a local "reality", anonymous chat counselling can potentially support these young people in maintaining a reserved and socially-isolated lifestyle. It is important that counsellors are aware of these types of chatters and take responsibility by helping them have a social life in the offline world.

10.3 LACK OF QUALITY CONTROL

Another concern may be that through the internet children and young people make contact with websites where their problems are treated in unproductive ways. These may be websites where people share ways to maintain an eating disorder, inflict self-harming, or develop suicide pacts. Such websites are hardly the norm, but they do exist and they are troubling. They emphasise the necessity for online alternatives which offer more positive assistance to these groups of children and youth.

Children's use of the internet is often uncritical. Many organisations and projects work on teaching young people a critical approach to the internet's many options (see www.saferinternet.org). Still, on many websites it can be difficult for children to assess the quality of the information and services provided.

10.4 A HIDING PLACE FOR SERIOUS PSYCHOSOCIAL PROBLEMS?

Anonymity in counselling will mean that the content of most conversations will remain unknown to the outside world. If the organisation does not prioritise resources for keeping the data and disseminating the knowledge they have generated over time about children's situations and living conditions, then it is difficult for the system to develop. Based on their knowledge of their vulnerable chatters, anonymous helplines should raise awareness and advocate on children's behalf. Data registration, data collection and raising awareness are important tasks for chat counsellors.

The overall objectives of chat helplines are:

• To offer a free, confidential counselling service of a high standard to children and young people.

- To collect, analyse and interpret anonymised information that reflects the issues or themes that form the basis of the chatters' contact with the helpline.
- To advocate on behalf of the children and young people using the helpline in places where their interests are ignored, minimised or underrepresented.
- To assist children and young people in having a direct voice in situations that is of importance to them.

The focus is on ensuring that the knowledge and experience of the specific counselling services are used to improve the work with young people and their situations on a larger scale.

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WORKING AS A CHAT COUNSELLOR
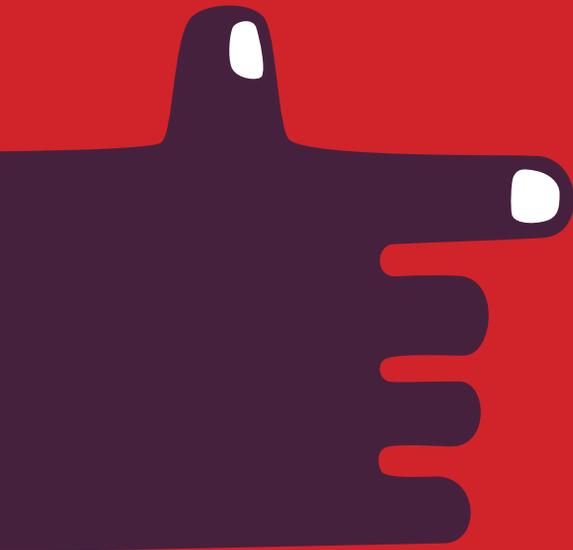
11.1 THE COUNSELLOR'S KNOWLEDGE, QUALIFICATIONS AND COMPETENCIES

The counsellor's need for knowledge, qualifications and competencies depends on the job that the counsellor has to do. Is the objective of the helpline to provide emotional support, information, referrals, prevention or treatment? Does the counselling have a wide scope (e.g. all children and young people) or a narrow focus (e.g. advice on venereal diseases and contraception)?

Anonymous counselling calls for the use of a range of skills that will not be discussed here since they are not specific to chat counselling but rather to counselling in general. Any counsellor must be able to ask questions which are precise and effective, be able to reflect and summarise. They need to have knowledge of, and be able to apply, different intervention strategies in their counselling practice, as well as be able to make risk assessments and manage service users whose behaviour is trying. The counsellor should be self-reflective and must have the knowledge necessary to carry out counselling in the area covered by the helpline. The same applies to a chat counsellor.

Most chat counselling qualifications can be learned in connection with the job. The counsellor should, however, possess the following competencies as a minimum:
- Good writing skills.
- A writing pace ranging from average to high.
- Experience with computers and the internet.

It is not necessarily an advantage to have extensive experience in chat communication. If these experiences do not come from professional contexts, the experienced chatter has to unlearn as many habits as the inexperienced counsellor has to learn. The counsellor should, however, be familiar with the internet so she can incorporate this into counselling conversations in situations where the counsellor and child visit websites of referral places togeth-

er or where she needs to guide the chatter to self-help material on the helpline's or another organisation's website.

11.2 THE PSYCHOLOGICAL WORKING ENVIRONMENT OF CHAT COUNSELLING

The ability to remain anonymous is one of the main reasons that children and young people contact chat counselling services. But anonymity can contribute to counsellors feeling powerless after a long conversation with a child that has been abused sexually or who has expressed suicidal thoughts and is left without options. In many cases chat counselling should be considered a small step in the child's process toward getting appropriate help to deal with her situation. This perspective is difficult to work with, as the child has chosen the chat because she *did* not want to make use of help from other services. The result is that at some point in their career many chat counsellors will have to tackle problems that they neither have the competence for, nor means to solve. It is stressful and can fill the counsellor with a feeling of powerlessness.

We recommended that chat counselling not be a full-time job. The contact is too demanding and intense, and it is important that the counsellor has other challenges if the work is to remain professionally stimulating. In a guide to online counselling drafted by Child Helpline International, it is recommended that a counsellor never counsel for more than two to three hours at a time. Several helplines have chosen to establish a maximum length of conversations of about an hour, out of consideration for both the counsellor and chatter. It is also recommended that a counsellor take a short break between each session -- for example, to write case notes or to discuss the conversation with a colleague.

In chat counselling text contributions are exchanged between the parties. If the child chooses to write something that is offensive or harmful to the counsellor, she will be unable to interrupt the child. Once the text has been

sent it is visible on the screen of both conversation partners. As described earlier, you may, in online communication, experience a harsher tone because the chatter does not need to be accountable for the written message in the same way they would with face-to-face communication. As a counsellor it is obvious that you don't have to accept everything. It's okay to say that there is something you will not accept or which you find destructive to the conversation. You should also remember that not all young people communicate constructively about the difficulties they have, and that destructive behaviour may be characteristic for children who are not thriving. Here support from colleagues is very important.

A stress factor described by most chat counsellors is the amount of disrupted conversations. Both technology and the contact form contribute to this. If the connection is cut in the middle of an emotional conversation it will be difficult to deal with for both the child and the counsellor, -- especially if, for whatever reason, it is not possible to re-establish contact. Technological solutions may reduce the problem to some extent, partly by providing a stable system and a strong and reliable internet connection, partly by making it technically possible to re-establish the connection in the case of a disrupted conversation. Having a system that is able to report that the connection was lost because the child actively logged off, or because a technical problem occurred, can also help to reduce the stress experienced by the counsellor.

Technology can be a burden and it is therefore important that chat helplines provide both hardware and software of high quality, that there is support available and that the necessary systems are user-friendly.

In anonymous counselling one of the biggest stress factors is that you do not *know* if the help you have given was sufficient. You do not know what will happen next to the child. You do not know if other practices might have been more helpful. Last but not least, it is stressful not to know whether a child is telling the truth.

All that you do not know becomes even more stressful as a larger proportion of the stories you hear are about problems and life situations that are difficult, complicated and substantial. You hear about children being exposed to abuse but not being ready to act to stop it, children who inflict self-harm or who have suicidal thoughts, children who explain how they have requested help from adults without getting it. Most counsellors deal with this situation by getting support from colleagues and supervisors.

Another factor that contributes to making this work stressful is the proportion of regular chatters who use the service several times a day without their conversation contributing to a positive development. The size of this group varies from helpline to helpline. In some, they are quite few in number, whereas in other services they may be the majority of users. It is best for the counsellors that the helpline has guidelines in place that explain how they should deal with these types of chatters, in order to give the best service to the chatters as well as to take care of themselves.

11.3 PHYSICAL WORKING ENVIRONMENT

Chat counselling entails a counsellor working at a computer with all of the stress that this involves. The organisations should ensure a good physical working environment by providing comfortable workstations, a healthy indoor climate, the required materials that are needed for the job, and up-to-date computers that are fast and that have the necessary programs installed. The organisation should ensure a quiet working environment as well as the opportunity for knowledge-sharing and dialogue with colleagues.

The layout of the counselling room may influence how counsellors work. Visits to a number of different chat helplines showed examples of counsellors working in individual offices and in open-space offices. The different arrangements could either stimulate dialogue between counsellors or provide an individual with peace and quiet to work, no doubt making a difference to how people work. In one chat helpline, counsellors were placed

along the wall back to back, which did not stimulate counsellors contacting one other. In another helpline there was a sofa arrangement where counsellors were sitting with laptops, drinking tea and eating candy. In the latter case, there was an ongoing dialogue about what happened on the individual screens.

Regardless of the arrangement of the counselling room and the differences of practice, it is to be expected that many chat counsellors need to talk after sitting for a long time in an intense but silent conversation with a child.

The conversation's silent nature may mean that colleagues are less aware of the fact that you are actually counselling a child or a young person and therefore should not be disturbed. As a counsellor you may also have a greater inclination to "disturb yourself" with music or reading because the chatter cannot detect it. But chat counselling requires a high degree of concentration and it may be appropriate to have guidelines for acceptable distractions – or, as a counsellor, to have an increased awareness of the need for peace and quiet around the counselling work.

11.4 PREPARATION BEFORE A COUNSELLING SESSION

When counselling face-to-face, the counsellor will typically ensure that the conversation can take place undisturbed. A lot of counsellors have routines in which they clear their minds before the conversation begins. It's the same for chat counselling, even though it appears less formal and more relaxed. If you want to offer a service of high professional quality, the same conditions are necessary. Conversations should be conducted undisturbed and with the counsellor's full focus. This means that a counsellor should avoid going to bathroom, fetching coffee, checking email, etc., while a counselling conversation is in progress.

The chatter can also think that conversation with a chat counsellor requires less attention and presence than face-to-face contact. Many children and young people are used to "multi-tasking" communications with several

people simultaneously. This may be disruptive to the contact or to the perceived flow of conversation. It can be distracting and even frustrating for the counsellor. Thus, it may be necessary to talk to the chatter about it, if it seems that the chatter has lost focus in the conversation. It is often due to lack of knowledge of the social rules attached to receiving counselling.

11.5 PEER-TO-PEER TRAINING AND LIVE SUPERVISION

As the conversation is silent, and chatter and counsellor cannot see each other, it is easily possible for less experienced counsellors to observe more experienced counsellors while they perform counselling. This observation can be supported with ongoing dialogue about the conversation as long as it does not interfere with the counsellor's work with the child. Likewise, the more experienced counsellor can guide the less experienced counsellor while the latter communicates with the chatters. Supervision can therefore be live without major difficulty. It is also common for counsellors to seek support, reflection and guidance from colleagues while conversations take place. This practice can be very different from helpline to helpline, depending on how many counsellors are in the room, how they are located physically in relation to each other and the organisation's culture for maintaining a dialogue with colleagues while chatters are being assisted. The possibility of dialogue with colleagues or supervisors during the conversation is regarded primarily as a resource in relation to the individual counselling sessions, although it can also be disturbing to have to deal with other people's conversations while taking care of your own.

Some might question the ethics of involving others in conversations without the chatter's consent. You must emphasise that it is the organisation rather than the counsellor that serves the chatter. It is therefore entirely legitimate to make use of colleagues' resources during the counselling session as long as it is with the objective of ensuring the best possible help for the chatter. If the chatter asks about whether you share information with others

you should be honest but at the same time listen to the child's anxiety and calm her: "The conversations here are confidential. We don't know who you are and we do not share information about you with people outside, unless you want us to".

If as a counsellor you are discussing something with a colleague during a conversation, it is relevant to inform the chatter: "I will just ask one of the other counsellors what she thinks about this...". This signals to the chatter that at the helpline there are more people who can help, and it makes it easier for the child to seek counselling again and perhaps talk to a different counsellor.

11.6 USE OF TRANSCRIPTS

The written nature of chat conversations provides good opportunities for training and supervision. Counselling transcripts are very valuable when the counsellor expects to reflect or receive feedback on her work, and they can also be used as examples in teaching. It should be noted that saving transcripts or electronic copies of the conversations should take place with the consent of the chatter (and the counsellor) and with the approval of the local Data Protection Agency.

Options depend on which application you have, as some systems log conversations automatically while others may only offer it as a choice. In other cases it may be necessary to copy the conversation and transfer it into a word processing program (such as Microsoft Word) to save or print.

If a counsellor is working on developing specific competencies -- perhaps she would like to be better at asking open questions or formulating emotional feedback -- it can be useful to work with one or more colleagues and review selected counselling transcripts from the counsellor's own practice.

Counselling transcripts can also be used for quality control in consideration of the counsellor's work environment.

EXAMPLE OF ETHICAL GUIDELINES FOR USE OF COUNSELLING TRANSCRIPTS

- Printouts are never made of counselling sessions where the child has provided information that can lead to her being recognised. This is in order to protect the child's anonymity.
- Trusted employees should read counselling transcripts and remove any information the child provided that could lead to her being identified.
- The censored conversation transcript is filed so that it is only accessible to permanent employees and in-house researchers. (Counsellors cannot take a copy home).
- In case extracts of counselling transcripts are to be included in publicly available reports, training materials or other materials, such extracts must be approved by a trusted employee. The text should be edited to ensure full anonymity.
- Data made available to external researchers must be treated according to these guidelines.
- Data sent by post shall be sent as registered mail. In principle, data is not sent electronically unless by electronically-secured means using encryption.
- The transcripts are to be shredded six months after publication of analyses.
- External referral partners must not use transcripts for other purposes, unless separate permission has been granted by the agency.
- The transcripts must only be processed by the person receiving permission.
- Permission may be granted by [name or title of that person].
- During the periods when printouts of the counselling sessions are made, clear information must be available on the website with the following text:
  "As we would like to improve our work, we have asked some professionals to look at anonymised transcripts of counselling sessions on chat. But we make sure that nobody can recognise who you are, and the counselling transcripts will not be shown to others. You always have the option to print out the counselling session yourself if you would like to show it to somebody." The text is placed where the chatters log in.

11.7 ROLE PLAY

If you have the option to use a test version of the software that your chat counselling service is based on, it can provide unique opportunities to create very realistic training sessions. Here counsellors can train in conversation with each other or with more experienced instructors. Many feel that they have benefited greatly from trying out the role of chatter.

If the system is used live in training sessions, it is a good idea to have access to technical support. You can't expect counsellors to trust a system that breaks down during training.

11.8 INSTRUCTION

Although chat counselling is based on a technological platform, it should not be necessary to spend much time on this aspect of the service. The focus of the training should be on the conversation methodology and on the counsellor's self-reflection. If instruction and training are set up to provide plenty of opportunities to gain practical experience with the system, then it should be possible to master chat with a minimum of work. If the system requires lengthy instruction, it's too complicated.

METHOD

SELF-REFLECTION

TECHNOLOGY
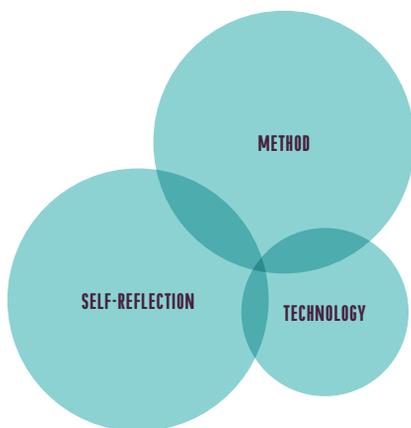
However, as a teacher you should be prepared to answer questions about security and the considerations made in connection with the chosen system.

Overall, chat counselling provides unique opportunities for training and education which are not available in other forms of counselling. In this regard, establishing chat counselling as an addition to other forms of counselling can contribute to developing an organisation's services as a whole.

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CHAT COUNSELLING - A TRANSCRIPT
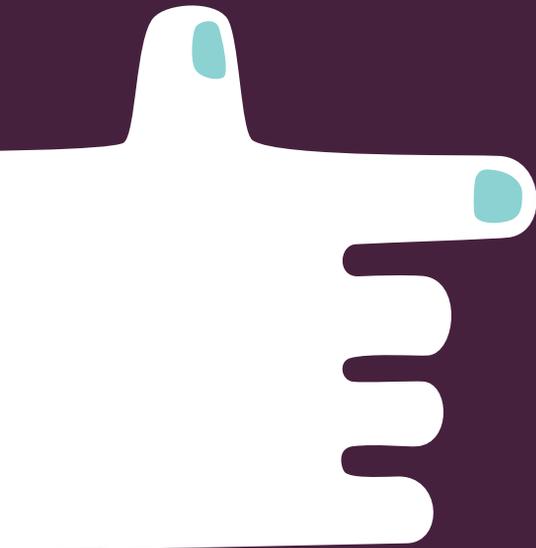
The following conversation is an edited version of an actual conversation that took place between a counsellor and a child in a chat helpline. The publication of the transcript was made with the child's consent, and essential parts of the conversation have been changed so that the child remains anonymous. The same applies to the other conversation sequences used in the book.

The conversation lasted a bit less than an hour.

··

COUNSELLOR: Hi. Welcome to the chat

CHILD: Hi there

COUNSELLOR: Before we start please tell me how old you are and if you are a boy or a girl?

CHILD: Girl 13 years old

COUNSELLOR: Thanks — then I can better adapt to what you tell. What would you like to talk about?

CHILD: I have the small problem that i cut myself

COUNSELLOR: Ok. Have you cut yourself today?

CHILD: yes

COUNSELLOR: Do you need help here and now, or should we talk a little about your situation?

CHILD: Let us talk

COUNSELLOR: ok. Do you live at home with your parent, and have you got sisters and brothers?

CHILD: I dont live at home with my parents, and I have a sister and a brother

COUNSELLOR: Can you tell me a little about where you live?

CHILD: I live in a children's home, and I have done that for about two months

COUNSELLOR: Where do your sister and brother live?

CHILD: my sister lives at home, and my brother moved away from home

COUNSELLOR: Do you go to school?

CHILD: Right now I dont go to school

COUNSELLOR: Can you tell me why you have moved to a children's home and do not go to school at the moment?

CHILD: I have ocd

COUNSELLOR: Are there others in your family who have ocd?

CHILD: yes, my father and my sister

COUNSELLOR: okay. Do your parents live together?

CHILD: yes

COUNSELLOR: okay. So you have now told me that you have a problem with cutting yourself. And that you have moved to a children's home about 2 months ago, because you have ocd. And your father and sister also have ocd. And that you don't go to school at the moment. What would you like us to talk about on the chat right now?

CHILD: I would like to get some advice how I stop this thing about me cutting myself,

COUNSELLOR: I think that it is great that you would like to do something to stop cutting yourself. I would like to try and help you stop. Let us see what we can do together?

CHILD: yes

COUNSELLOR: What have you tried to do so far to make it stop?

CHILD: I have told it to the staff here at the home

COUNSELLOR: It was great that you did that - what happened next?

CHILD: They have tried to find the thing that it use for it, but they did not find them

COUNSELLOR: when was that?

CHILD: last week

COUNSELLOR: have you talked about it since then?

CHILD: no

COUNSELLOR: Are there other things you have tried?

CHILD: i have talked to my friends who also cut themselves. some of them have gone to therapy, but it does not help.

COUNSELLOR: is there anything you have considered doing which might help?

CHILD: no not really

COUNSELLOR: ok. Then let us look at it together. If I asked you to find a solution, what would be the first thing you think about?

CHILD: Spik to the staff again - maybe

COUNSELLOR: Yes. I think this sound as a good idea. Is there one of them you trust?

CHILD: yes I think so. Thanks bye bye

COUNSELLOR: We can stop now if you like, but we can also talk a bit about how you can talk to the staff member?

CHILD: I would like that – I dont really know what to say

COUNSELLOR: how could you get to talk to the staff member you trust alone?

CHILD: I could ask her if I could just talk to her

COUNSELLOR: Yes that sounds good. When can you ask her about that?

CHILD: in a moment

COUNSELLOR: yes good. What could you say to her then?

CHILD: that I am still cutting myself

COUNSELLOR: yes I think it would be good to say that. Could you also tell her that you would like help to stop it?

CHILD: Yes. But I have tried that already

COUNSELLOR: yes and it did not really help so she should find another and better way to help you. Could you say that to her?

CHILD: what?

COUNSELLOR: For example something like "I still cut myself and would like some help to stop it. But I dont think it is enough that you just take the things I use for cutting myself. I dont know what could help me, but I need help" – how does that sound?

CHILD: that I think is ok.

COUNSELLOR: how do you think she will react if you say it in this way?

CHILD: I think she will try to help me

COUNSELLOR: Yes, that would be nice.

COUNSELLOR: So now we have talked about what you have already done to stop cutting yourself and we have talked about you asking a staff member you trust for help. And that you can do already after we have finished our talk. Would it be ok for you to finish our conversation here?

CHILD: yes thanks

COUNSELLOR: You are welcome. It was nice talking to you. It is great that you do something about it, and you are always welcome to write to us again - also if you need to find other solutions

CHILD: thanks bye bye

COUNSELLOR: bye bye

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