

Respecting the dignity of children: Are we listening?

Celebration of 20th anniversary

United Nations

Convention on the Rights of the Child

Dignity: Children: Rights-holders versus commodity

Introduction

A child helpline is a telecommunication and outreach service for or on behalf of children in need of care and protection. Child helplines around the world provide an invaluable service to children in need of care and protection. Millions of children from around the world contact child helplines each year for a myriad of reasons.

Child Helpline International (CHI) is the leading global member network of child helpline working to protect the rights of children. Child Helpline International is active in more than 160 countries. CHI builds and strengthens new and existing child helplines, develops child-helpline specific trainings to improve quality of services for the children and advocates on behalf of children at all governance levels.

Child helplines commit to observing the rights of children as outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Their rights therein are at the core of the work of the CHI network. As an organisation devoted to securing children's rights, every project and initiative undertaken by CHI and its members reflects the trenchant belief in the Convention. While a child's reason for calling may vary between continents, regions, countries and cities, one factor remains the same: Children contacting a child helpline are exercising their right to be heard and are taking the first important step to ensure that all their rights are met.

Children are not passive receivers of rights. Children are active bearers of rights. As such, they have a right to participate and have their opinion be heard, as enshrined in the Convention. By listening to children; providing counselling and referral services; intervening when needed and advocating on behalf of children, child helplines are a pivotal tool to ensure that the *all* rights of children everywhere are met. Child helplines are *the* mechanism that allows children to be heard and be active holders of rights.

CHI believes that children are best equipped to express their opinion on the problems they are facing each day if they are given the tools to do so. CHI envisions a world where children are listened to one by one and through their voices shape the world and realise their rights.

Child Helpline International

Child helplines are essential to the Right of Children to be heard

Millions of children contact child helplines each year. In 2008, over 14,1 million contacts were made to child helplines. The reasons children contact child helplines vary as shown in table 1. Regardless of the reason for contact, every contact may reveal a deeper problem that a child is dealing with. Child helplines actively listen to children, counsel them and offer intervention services as needed.

Reason for contact	World
Abuse and violence	27%
Family relationships	14%
Psycho-social, mental health	9%
Peer relationships	9%
Homelessness/ runaways/ basic needs	9%
Sexuality	8%
School related	6%
Child substance use and abuse	5%
Legal matters	4%
Commercial exploitation	4%
Discrimination	2%
Physical health	2%
HIV/AIDS infected/ affected children	1%
Differently-abled children	1%
Total	100%

Table 1: This table displays aggregate data for 87 child helplines submitting data for contacts that they had with children in 2008. The information includes all methods of contact. They comprise more than 14.1 million contacts in total.

Only by listening to children themselves, can their full set of rights be respected. As such, child helplines are essential to the right of children to be heard. This has been recognised by the Committee in General Comment no. 12:

"Much of the violence perpetrated against children goes unchallenged both because certain forms of abusive behaviour are understood by children as accepted practices, and due to the lack of child-friendly reporting mechanisms. For example, they have no one to whom they can report in confidence and safety about experienced maltreatment, such as corporal punishment, genital mutilation or early marriage, and no channel to communicate their general observations to those accountable for implementation of their rights. Thus, effective inclusion of children in protective measures requires that children be informed about their right to be heard and to grow up free from all forms of physical and psychological violence. States parties should oblige all

children's institutions to establish easy access to individuals or organizations to which they can report in confidence and safety, including through telephone helplines, and to provide places where children can contribute their experience and views on combating violence against children."

By contacting a child helpline, children are taking matters in to their own hands as bearers of rights. They are expressing their voice, a voice that demands that their rights be fully met. We believe this voice should be heard. We therefore, make the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Governments should allocate appropriate resources to child helplines in their country and work towards the establishment of a child helpline if there is none.

Child helplines listen to the voices of children and link them to the appropriate services and resources in the country. The type of services offered to children by child helplines reflects the diversity of child helplines themselves and, often, the infrastructure of the country. Services run the gamut from counselling the caller through emphatic listening to directly intervening and removing the child from an emergency situation. In some cases the need of the child maybe outside the scope of the helpline, in which case the child helpline may refer the child to the appropriate governmental child protection entity within the country. In such cases, the child helpline recognises its responsibility to follow-up with the appropriate authorities to ensure that the needs of the child are being met. Despite the shared characteristics of child helplines throughout the world, there is no "cookie-cutter" mold that can be applied across the board. Instead, child helplines must adapt their services to the level of commitment expressed by the government through the provision of resources AND to the needs as expressed by children in the community. In all cases, it is most important for the child to know that they are not alone, that someone outside of their immediate surroundings cares about them, that their life can be free from pain and fear.

In recognising the value of child helplines, governments should not duplicate existing efforts. Many states parties to the Convention, in observation of the Convention itself and through the concluding observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, start a child helpline.

While this is a laudable effort in countries where no child helpline exists, it is a wasteful one in countries where there is already a fully operational child helpline. Government monies that go into the training, recruitment and development of a new child helpline would be better spent in working closely with already existing child helplines, which often have not only the expertise in the child protection sector, but also the brand recognition amongst the community.

Recommendation 2: Governments should look towards children as active bearers of rights, whose input should be respected and appreciated.

Meaningful child participation is a good way to appreciate the opinion of children, respect their right to be heard and view them as active rights-holders. Child helplines themselves do this in several ways. By listening to children, child helplines know what issues children are facing on a day to day basis. Child helplines base their actions, policies and strategy on the information that they get from the children directly. Additionally, endless examples can be given about the added benefit of meaningful child participation. Below are just a few.

In May 2006, at the Children and Young People's Consultation, UN Study on Violence Against Children in New York, children had the following things to say about children's participation:

- Children should be informed of where they should go if they are hit at home. There should be ways of reporting and counselling which are confidential. There should also be effective and confidential reporting and monitoring mechanisms.
- Create a children's helpline (phone line) or a post box (mail box) or email service that is easily accessible to children if they encounter any violence in their community. The helpline should be open for other communication needs as well.

These comments show that children know very well that their rights should be respected, and that they need tools to express this. Child helplines are essential to this.

Child helplines include children at every stage of their development and governance. For example, some child helplines have contests or encourage children's participation to choose the helpline's name or logo during the planning stage. This entails widespread mention in the media, and is focused at locations frequented by children, such as bus stops, schools and

churches even before the child helpline is officially launched. The logo's of the child helplines in Lesotho and Kenya were designed in this way.

Some child helplines include children and young adults into the highest level of decision making. For example, the child helpline in Swaziland has five children on its board. Youth involvement has always been the cornerstone of the Muslim-Youth Helpline in the United Kingdom, as it was founded by a group of young people between 17 to 19 years of age. The helpline is youth-led and managed, and was created to be a peer support service to overcome restrictions of adult-run services and achieve greater empathy with the marginalised target-client group. All volunteers and Board members are between 18 - 28 years of age because it is essential that volunteers reflect the age of the clients.

Other initiatives are focused on awareness raising and outreach. Madadgaar in Pakistan has created a Children's Ambassador Programme to establish a network of children's advocates and guide them in becoming children's rights advocates. By working with schools and allowing students to get community service credit at school, the helpline developed a training program. After being trained, students go to schools, seminars or conferences and give presentations about the helpline and related services. Canada's Kids Help Phone developed a Youth Ambassador Programme allowing children to train and inform other children about children's rights and helpline services. The programme itself was initiated by a 16-year old helpline user who met with the executive director to stress the need for children's participation at the helpline. The Executive Director and Board agreed, and researched the effectiveness of peer outreach. A corporate sponsor agreed to fund project, and young people were recruited through word of mouth. The helpline developed a training manual with the youngsters' input, and peer advising sessions began.

Children are also involved in peer-to-peer counselling. In Japan, children were not only involved in the launching of the youth helpline, but continue to be involved in many other phases of the helpline's operation – peer-to-peer counselling. In the Netherlands, Kindertelefoon has launched a website dedicated to peer-to-peer counselling in 2008. The site is highly successful as children feel that they can talk more easily and openly to their peers. Children prove they can provide meaningful and successful counselling to their peers if trained and guided properly.

These examples demonstrate the ability of children to provide sound judgments, opinions and counselling based upon their own life experiences. They may (or not) be unable to articulate the exact contours of a plan or project, but working in real meaningful partnership with young (adults) can provide significant benefits to both, by creating concrete positive results and dignity and respect for all.

Child helplines everywhere have direct contact with children every day. They know that the voices of children should be respected and listened to, because children themselves know best what is happening in their lives. Therefore, governments should recognise children and child helplines as a valuable source of information and knowledge to base their policies and decisions on. By cooperating in a meaningful way with children and child helplines the perspective of children can be incorporated into policies. This will strengthen their credibility and practicality.

Conclusion

Listening to children may seem like an easy thing to do. As the case studies collected by our network show, however, children often contact child helplines because they do not know where else to turn to. By providing a listening ear, a solution or needed services, child helplines build a child's self-confidence and sense of self, thus restoring the child with the dignity that comes with being heard and respecting them as holders not receivers of rights.