

# NSPCC

## Youth participation in action

Members of our young people's advisory group prepared this presentation to explain the research project they took part in during late 2020

**October 2021**

**EVERY CHILDHOOD IS WORTH FIGHTING FOR**

# The Childline Message Board Project

A study conducted by the NSPCC and members of the NeuroOX (NEUROSEC Group in the Department of Psychiatry, University of Oxford) young people's advisory group (YPAG) to understand how young people seek help online through Childline's moderated peer-to-peer message boards

# Introduction

The Childline Message Board Project aimed to enable accessible help seeking for young people experiencing emotional abuse or neglect. This short, collaborative cross-sector research project demonstrated the salient role that young researchers can play.



## Aims

- Explore what young people can offer as co-researchers, giving their perspectives on the value of peer-to-peer interactions in support and following the principles of co-production
- Inform further research and the development of the Childline message boards
- Understand how peer-to-peer interactions on the message boards support the help-seeking journeys of users
- Consider how research methodology can be applied to understand the journeys and interactions of young people engaging with the message boards

# Summary

Young researchers  
spent a total of

**130**  
**HOURS**  
on this project

The research involved co-production between the lead researcher, the NSPCC and ten members of the NeurOX YPAG (aged 14-18). A 'blended' virtual approach was used to conduct the research during the pandemic.

The young researchers were consulted on the focus of the research and were involved in selecting message threads, qualitative analyses, interpretation and presentation, and discussion with senior representatives of Childline and the NSPCC.

Thematic analysis was used to examine and categorise extracts from individual help seeker and peer supporter posts while conversation analysis was used to look at the interactions between individuals posting.

Both were explored in the context of a theoretical help-seeking model and previously identified barriers and facilitators to help seeking in mental health in adolescents.



# The format



Ten members of the NeurOX YPAG were invited to apply to the Childline Message Board Project and two agreed to be co-facilitators (one male, one female).

The young researchers participated in four workshops delivered through Zoom and offline research. Training and development to engage with the research was provided through brief presentations, scaffolding activities and guided working.

- Workshop 1: Data sampling and message thread selection
- Workshop 2: Data analysis
- Workshop 3: Interpretation
- Final workshop with Childline/NSPCC: YPAG presentation, discussion and recommendations

# Analysing

## A total of 20 threads were analysed in detail using two research approaches:

**1. Thematic analysis** – examining and categorising extracts from the message posts to understand young people’s situations and identify barriers and facilitators to help seeking

- Initially, the researcher analysed five long threads, to include a description of context, psychological features, conversational elements, and interactions for each help seeker and peer supporter in the thread. Working in pairs, the young researchers provided comments and tracked changes on this analysis.
- The young researchers were asked questions relating to the content of the posts from help seekers and peer supporters to identify potential barriers and facilitators for these young people.
- A summary of the whole sample was made and themes were assigned to key factors thought to prevent or facilitate mental health help seeking.

**2. Conversation analysis** – exploring interactions and understanding their effect on barriers and facilitators

- Following the initial thematic analysis, the young researchers asked specific questions in relation to conversations and interactions in the threads (this included those with no ‘conversation’).
- The researcher coded and themed responses of the young researchers according to features of the conversation facilitating or inhibiting help seeking.
- In the final workshop the young researchers were asked to rank which barriers and facilitators were likely to have the greatest or least impact on help seeking and feeling supported. These were discussed in a final online session with colleagues from the NSPCC and Childline.

# Detailed findings

This research highlights the challenges in offering effective online support on a diverse range of topics, but there were many positives to take away.

- The findings showed evidence of a positive change in the emotional state of some young people using the message boards.
- The peer support provided appeared to counteract some of the identified barriers to help seeking.
- Researchers identified some qualities of peer responses that may encourage supportive interactions. For example, non-judgmental validation of problems; compassionate responding from peers; feeling connected with peers and being part of a 'safe' community; and supportive sharing of experience and knowledge. Connection and community were strongly identified as essential ingredients of helpful peer support.
- The way in which the support was offered through the quality of the conversation was found to be important, and highlighted the different contributions and roles of young people on the message boards.

# Recommendations

## DESIGN

Including young people in the co-design of functionality and usability testing of the message boards is likely to improve accessibility and greater appeal for young people.

- Greater interaction within message board threads was associated with changes in state and/or help-seeking intentions.
- The boards can be made more appealing by enhancing the design and by organising and refining the themes.
- It would also be good to filter and prioritise messages that have not been responded to.

## RESPONDING

Consistent and compassionate responses to peers seeking help for emotional abuse and neglect could focus on:

- non-judgmental validation of problems
- compassionate responding from peers
- encouraging connection and being part of a 'safe' community
- supportive sharing of experience and knowledge

## COMMUNITY

In order for the message boards to be most successful in enabling help seeking, a sense of community should be created.

- 'Supporting the supporters': it was acknowledged that the peer supporters also need support themselves.
- Evidence from other online peer support training suggests that connection with others and being trained to offer support and compassion can enhance self-care and wellbeing of the peer supporter.

Thank you to the NeurOX young people's advisory group for preparing this presentation for our closest supporters.

You can read the full report about this project on our [NSPCC Learning site](#).