



Child help-lines and future technology

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Kids are often more familiar with new technology than their parents, and while that exposes them to certain risks, generally, on balance it is more of a benefit. Parents worry about their children seeing stuff on-line that they shouldn't, or being at risk of being chatted up by paedophiles in chat rooms. But while these risks are real, they are smaller than the benefits of being able to keep in close contact with friends, make new ones, get support from peer groups and generally have a good time indulging their creativity in virtual worlds such as Second Life, being exposed to other cultures, and being exposed to life generally, from the relative physical safety of their bedroom.

It is this familiarity with technology that presents the most obvious opportunity to helplines. Chat rooms, instant messaging, email, text messaging and virtual environments are obvious platforms on which children can be counselled. Children can retain their anonymity if they want because user names don't have to relate to real names, so they are more able to confide in a carer without fear of unwanted identification, while they can keep the same identity between sessions if they wish so that a carer can become familiar with them. In visual social networking environments, children can also use avatars, which they can choose to represent themselves, or to disguise themselves.

Of course, people in chat rooms often choose identities that represent or are based on part of their personality, rather like acting. This allows them to indulge certain aspects of personality or try out different behaviours, or even change apparent age or gender. While this is precisely the area that presents a threat from paedophiles, who can pretend to be kids to groom real children, it does have genuine merit when used properly. The ability to experiment with personality is valuable, and allows children more scope for socialising, playing, learning to influence, lead and empathise with others, and generally growing up, also enabling them to try different ways of presenting themselves in various situations. It obviously offers significant scope for therapists and carers to guide children, or expose them to alternative behaviours or approaches. Of course it also allows carers to present themselves to different groups in ways that may be more acceptable to the children than reality. Carers need to be very careful though not to cross the line from minor image tweaking into misrepresentation and deception. So while an older carer might want to harmlessly knock a few years off, or someone might want to look more attractive, it would be wrong to go so far that children end up talking to someone with whom they would otherwise feel uncomfortable. It would certainly be going too far for a carer to change apparent gender, or for an adult to present as a child, if only because it would then be much harder for kids to accept that it is wrong for other people to do so, which then exposes them to greater risk of abuse.

The use of anonymity can of course present dangers from other kids, making it easier to bully, and can lead to emotional abuse, with people forming relationships just to play with other's emotions. So, perhaps another route to helping children is to provide safe and secure chat and social environments where the identity of other children is verified, and where behaviours are monitored to some degree to ensure that abuse is minimised. Many socialisation sites already require children to verify their age before they are allowed accounts, and many also moderate chat rooms. Future technology will make electronic identification much more routine and simple, so this at least will improve.

Children make high use of mobile phones too, and as the internet migrates quickly onto mobiles, all the potential of the internet is added to the already significant potential of the mobile phone. Phones make it possible to track locations of callers. Firstly, this can be used as a basic safety measure for children known to be at risk. Secondly, it can also be used to present location-based services. For example, knowing that one of their friends is close by is useful, because extra socialisation opportunities can be captured. Location can also be used to highlight nearby helpline services that also offer face to face meetings, and provide navigational assistance to get there. Thirdly, it allows ongoing guidance opportunities, allowing carers effectively to be with a child as they go through the day.

Text messaging, instant messaging or email on computers or mobiles gives another platform for interaction that some children prefer.

Many children find it hard to make friends for a variety of reasons. Some future gadgets will help deal with some such problems, but not others. A small piece of jewellery such as an 'ego badge' will soon be able to house a mobile website. A child can put the same sort of data on their badge that they would on a social networking site such as Bebo, and these badges can talk electronically by very short range radio to those worn by other people. When badges agree,

based on profile exchange, that their wearers would probably like to meet each other, they alert the wearers, otherwise strangers would just walk past each other just as today. Profile based networking works very well on-line and should be equally popular on the street. A child who has just moved to a new town could make new friends much more quickly with such devices. And for others who are shy or whose social skills are low, it is a potentially valuable icebreaker. Of course, children who have healthy social networks often have less need for adult child-lines because they go to their friends for such functions. Of course, there will still be a need for child-lines because even good friends are not always suitable confidants for all kinds of problems.

Games are an interesting tool too. In the same way as chat rooms allow carers to chat with callers, games often have multiplayer on-line variants, which present similar opportunities in the context of gaming environments. Again, this allows experimentation and training opportunities. However, games also allow the easy introduction of characters with personalities and interaction capabilities based on artificial intelligence. A child might be willing to confide in a game character even if they won't confide in a real person. This is already used occasionally in medical interviewing, where patients will disclose more symptoms to a computer than to a real doctor. Game characters offer a range of real-world interaction too. The character might be totally transient, disappearing along with any record of the interaction when the child switches the game off. Or conversations might cross over from session to session. There can be input from real people too. A game character might be standalone, or controlled to variable degree by human carers, reporting key information back. Again, care is needed not to destroy the opportunity. A child might no longer confide if they become aware that a real person is aware or even involved in the interaction.

For young children, artificial intelligence can also be added to dolls, so that children can interact with them in much richer ways. A child can talk to their dolls and get sensible responses, which might include very rich and complex expert systems designed to have therapeutic qualities. More sophisticated dolls might even have real-time links to networks, allowing them to act as intuitive interfaces to on-line services and helplines. So a carer could interact with a young child via a cuddly toy or doll.

Finally, very soon, many people will use head up displays to interact with data on the move. This is likely to take the form of video visors, with displays overlaying information into the person's field of view. Initially, such visors will be simple opaque devices that people might use to watch videos or play games on a train or at home. They will develop into truly mobile devices where the computer display is overlaid on the image that the person sees in the real world, rather like Robocop or Terminator. Eventually, all the richness of games and socialisation environments can be blended with the real world to create a dual environment that the person lives in all day, partly real and partly virtual. In such a world, friends can be seen as avatars, and groups of friends can stay together virtually all the time. Games characters can also inhabit the person's field of view, along with others created by local tourist services, marketers and of course, carers and counsellors. The full scope of the net and games is added to that of the real world and then lots more is created as the dual world opens new opportunities.

So, new technology offers increased richness and scope for variability than today's. Virtual worlds will be enhanced by extra identity validation, AI entities, improving graphics and increasing portability and ubiquity. The scope to enable children to try out different behaviours and personality types in a wide range of situations, real and imaginary, will increase, making counselling and therapy easier and better. New interfaces and gadgets will allow children to link together safely in more ways, and to extend their networks of friends. All this capability needs to be treated with care, as the temptation to go too far must be a strong one, and deception is still deception even if the motivation is right, but ultimately the needs and safety of the child must remain paramount.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ian Pearson graduated in 1981 in Applied Mathematics and Theoretical Physics from [Queens University, Belfast](#). After four years in Shorts Missile Systems, he joined BT Laboratories as a performance analyst, and later worked in network design, computer evolution, cybernetics, and mobile systems. From 1991 until 2007, he was BT's Futurologist, tracking and predicting new developments throughout information technology, considering both technological and social implications. He now does the same for Futurizon, a small futures institute.

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