

Safe Steps



# Pre-Budget Submission 2025-26

Support for young people  
worried about family, domestic  
and intimate partner violence



# Contents

Contents	3
Preface	4
Alignment with existing policy and current policy context	6
Safe Steps services and role in the ecosystem	7
Young People need more support and different pathways to help	8
The Solution, Impacts and Outcomes	9
Appendix A: Evidence and international insights	13

# Preface

*The unique challenges faced by young people who have experienced family and domestic violence (FDV) or intimate partner violence (IPV) are not being met by the contemporary FDV/IPV service system.*

Australia's systems for help-seeking meet the needs of a decreasing proportion of the population, while "digital natives" have no clear pathways to get help for FDV or IPV, in spite of a strong focus in policy and research on the needs of young people as victim survivors in their own right. Established services are moving towards text and web-chat options, but even these are hard for young people to find and access.

The Safe Steps Support Multiverse is the future of support. It is a system that meets young people where they are. The next generation of help seekers are never going to telephone a helpline. Instead, they need help embedded in the digital places that they frequent. The Support Multiverse provides this and a window of opportunity to build trust and help young people experiencing FDV/IPV to get the help they need.

## The Evolving Landscape of how Young People seek help

The future of help-seeking is undergoing a significant transformation as new generations emerge. Traditional methods, such as 1800 numbers, are becoming less relevant in the face of changing communication preferences and technological advancements.

## Specialised Violence and Emerging Challenges

Evidence suggests young people experience types of violence and harassment that require targeted interventions. New and emerging forms of violence and control are impacting Australian young people, in ways we never could have imagined, for example technology facilitated stalking; non-consensual sharing of images; online bullying, harassment and abuse.

## Response Gaps for Young People are causing harm

Despite significant investment and service responses for adults experiencing family and domestic violence over the last decade, it is recognised there is still a gap in the design and provision of responses for young people, especially those not accompanied by an adult, who seek help and support for FDV and IPV.<sup>1</sup>

Young people can be victims of family violence (from within their family of origin) or IPV from someone they are dating or have a consensual intimate relationship with.

Existing youth services, homelessness services and family violence services have made extraordinary efforts in their respective fields, however there is no single service providing end-to-end pathways, information and referrals for young people needing a trauma informed FDV/IPV response. Young people are being left to navigate multiple and complex services, none of which comprehensively meet their needs as victim survivors in their own right. This is compounded by the increasing prevalence of violence being experienced by young people.

The significant costs to the Australian economy of the ongoing effects on physical and mental health of the experience of violence against women and children – estimated at \$10.4 billion<sup>2</sup> – is difficult to ignore.

## Proposed Response

In Australia, there is no specific response for young people who seek support independently, for either family-of-origin violence or IPV. Safe Steps seeks to resolve this gap, using a multi-pronged, nation-wide approach to ensure help is readily and easily accessible by young people and a comprehensive youth specific FDV and IPV response is provided and available for young people. Specifically, this includes:

- i) A national pilot to co-design, build and test a Support Multiverse that gives young people digital access to FVD and IPV information and referrals, and
- ii) Embedding immediate resourcing of specialist youth FDV and IPV expertise within mainstream, existing helplines (for example Kids Help Line, 1800RESPECT and Safe Steps) so that if young people do reach out for support, they receive an appropriate response. This response will also link into the digital pilot of the Support Multiverse.

### National digital pilot that enhances relevance and increases help-seeking

Our experience and the insights provided by our lived experience and young advocates suggest that this must include:

- Leveraging existing infrastructure;
- Bringing help to young people in their preferred spaces, and
- Developing a national digital service.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Commonwealth of Australia (Department of Social Services) 2022 *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032*; The Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission 2024 *Yearly Report to Parliament*; <sup>1</sup> Rapid Review Expert Panel (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet) 2024 *Unlocking the Prevention Potential: Accelerating action to end domestic, family and sexual violence*.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2024 *Family, domestic and sexual violence: Economic and financial impacts* <https://www.aihw.gov.au/family-domestic-and-sexual-violence/responses-and-outcomes/economic-financial-impacts> (Accessed 30/01/25)

## The Support Multiverse

To address these challenges, Safe Steps proposes piloting a comprehensive national digital service called the Support Multiverse. This service would:

- Utilise cutting-edge technology to reach young people in the places and spaces that they engage.
- Provide specialised support for young people experiencing FDV and IPV.
- Integrate seamlessly with existing support systems.

By implementing these strategies and leveraging digital platforms, we will create a more effective and accessible support system for the next generation, ensuring help-seeking remains relevant and impactful in the face of evolving challenges.

This innovative approach will fill a critical gap in youth-centred FDV/IPV support, aligning with the National Plan's goals of prevention, early intervention, response, and recovery. By leveraging existing infrastructure and creating a specialised service, we will significantly improve outcomes for young people affected by FDV and IPV across Australia.

## Embedding specialist expertise within existing services

Recognising there may be some young people approaching traditional or mainstream services for help, improved responses are needed. Integrating and embedding specialist youth and FDV/IPV expertise within existing services is an immediate response that will build the capacity of organisations to better respond to this group.

### Safe Steps recommends:

1. Resourcing a national pilot to co-design, build and test the Support Multiverse to provide young people with digital access to FDV and IPV information and referral.
2. The immediate resourcing of specialist FDV and IPV expertise within mainstream helplines.

# Alignment with existing policy and current policy context

Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre has been a key family violence service provider in Victoria for 45 years. Like most family and domestic violence services in Australia, historically the focus of our services has been women who have experienced family violence, who were sometimes accompanied by children. Funding and policy responses have held the focus squarely on the needs of the woman seeking support with little or no focus on the needs of other members of the family. Indeed, up until very recently in Victoria, if a family member was a boy aged 14 or older, he was not provided access to refuge, even when the rest of his family could access safety. Refuges across Victoria are now welcoming of diversity and the old approach has thankfully changed.

At the same time, other systems were established and grew to respond to young people. This included the out-of-home care system and the youth homelessness sector. While many of the young people in these systems had experienced family violence, that experience was rarely the focus of the services they received.

Change in this space has been incremental. Children and young people who have experienced FDV now feature squarely in most policy frameworks and action plans. There is an increasing research focus on the needs of children and young people, and many services are implementing plans and piloting programs to better meet the needs of the children and young people we serve. National plans and reviews acknowledge this:

- The *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children*<sup>3</sup> and the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children*<sup>4</sup> both acknowledge the importance of recognising children and young people as victim-survivors *in their own right* and the critical need to listen to the voices and seek the views of children and young people.
- The National Plan's focus on recognising children and young people as victims of gender-based violence acknowledges the lifelong negative consequences of experiencing family violence alongside the importance of early intervention when children experience violence.

- The National Framework is underpinned by the need to listen and respond to the voices and views of children and young people as key principles.
- Victoria's *Strong Foundations: Building on Victoria's work to end family violence*<sup>5</sup> acknowledges young people aged 15 to 19 can get lost in the gap between child and adult services, and that it is critical to understand the unique journeys of young people through the system, from their first point of contact.
- The Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission's *Yearly Report to Parliament*<sup>6</sup> pointed out the various systems – domestic and family violence, sexual assault, child protection and children and families' sectors – continue to work in largely unconnected ways. The Report goes on to ask governments to consider how to strengthen integrated early intervention, response and recovery for children and young people.
- The Prime Minister's Rapid Review Expert Panel, in their report *Unlocking the Prevention Potential: Accelerating action to end domestic, family and sexual violence*<sup>7</sup> calls on all Australian governments to develop youth-specific, tailored and developmentally appropriate service responses for young people who have experienced domestic, family and sexual violence.

In Safe Steps' case, **almost half the people we provide services to (43%) are children or young people accompanying an adult.** Like most services providing a response to family and domestic violence, our focus has historically been on the adult, with children and young people receiving what little support we can provide within funding and policy constraints. To better meet their needs, Safe Steps has implemented child safe standards which are compliant with national and Victorian child safe standards.

***In spite of our best efforts and those of other organisations providing services to children, young people and families critical service gaps remain.***

<sup>3</sup> Commonwealth of Australia (Department of Social Services) 2022 *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032* <https://www.dss.gov.au/system/files/resources/national-plan-end-violence-against-women-and-children-2022-2032.pdf> (Accessed 29/01/25)

<sup>4</sup> Commonwealth of Australia (Department of Social Services) 2021 *Safe and Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031* <https://www.dss.gov.au/system/files/documents/2024-10/dess5016-national-framework-protecting-childrenaccessible.pdf> (Accessed 29/01/25)

<sup>5</sup> State of Victoria (Department of Families, Fairness and Housing) 2023 *Strong Foundations: Building on Victoria's work to end family violence* <https://www.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-12/2303438-Strong-foundations-FA4-Web.pdf> (Accessed 29/01/25)

<sup>6</sup> The Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission 2024 *Yearly Report to Parliament* [https://www.dfsvc.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-10/DFSVCO011%20YearlyReport2024%28A4%29\\_FA6.pdf](https://www.dfsvc.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-10/DFSVCO011%20YearlyReport2024%28A4%29_FA6.pdf) (Accessed on 29/01/25)

<sup>7</sup> Rapid Review Expert Panel (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet) 2024 *Unlocking the Prevention Potential: Accelerating action to end domestic, family and sexual violence* <https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/unlocking-the-prevention-potential-4.pdf> (Accessed 29/01/25)

# Safe Steps: services and role in the ecosystem

**Safe Steps' purpose is to increase help-seeking and provide effective, evidenced based interventions for people seeking help and support for FDV and IPV. We have operated Victoria's 24/7 family and domestic violence crisis response for 45 years and provide phone-based family violence services nationally through 1800RESPECT.**

As Victoria's Statewide 24/7 family and domestic violence service, Safe Steps is a crucial first point of contact for people afraid of, experiencing and escaping FDV. We manage frontline telephone, webchat and email services as well as crisis accommodation facilities, clinical supervision and expertise and the statewide family violence accommodation register (FVAR). As a comprehensive FDV service, we support victim-survivors from the moment they make contact through to safe housing transitions. This includes linking in secondary FDV services and resources to help victim-survivors leave a person using violence and exit into a future that remains violence-free.

Safe Steps provides Victoria's Disability and Family Violence Crisis Response Initiative, and we are an integral part of the Family Advocacy and Support Services provided in the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia. We provide a breadth of family and domestic violence services demonstrate deep knowledge and experience of the family and domestic violence landscape – including the service gaps we work to address every day.

In FY23/24 we handled approximately 130,000 contacts relating to FDV, and in addition to our specialised court and disability services, we provided around 33,000 nights of emergency accommodation, offering safety to approximately 90 victim-survivors each night.

One of the key gaps we have identified is in service provision for young people. As an organisation we have undertaken a number of projects to understand these gaps and identify sound and sustainable responses. These projects include:

- Research projects specifically focusing on the experiences of children and young people in emergency accommodation (see Appendix A). Preliminary findings inform this budget proposal.
- Safe Step's CEO undertook a Churchill Fellowship to explore international approaches to better serving young people who have experienced FDV/IPV. These insights are in line with international best practice and inform our recommendations (see Appendix A).

Given the evidence and gaps we see and hear every day in our delivery of statewide and national services, Safe Steps seeks to ensure our service is relevant and responsive to all people experiencing FDV and IVP.

# Young People need more support and different pathways to help

## Prevalence of FDV

Prevalence data shows the number of young people who have experienced FDV is increasing and that untreated harms lead to life long and intergenerational trauma. For example:

Group	Data Point	%
Of the 38,300 young people presenting alone to a specialist homelessness service (Specialist homelessness services annual report 2023-24)	Had experienced family and domestic violence	34%
	Experienced more than one form of abuse (16-24 year-old cohort only)	40%
Respondents to the Australian Child Maltreatment Study	Physical abuse	32%
	Sexual abuse	28.5%
	Emotional abuse	30.9%
	Exposure to domestic violence	39.6%
Adolescents using violence in the home (Australian Institute of Family Studies)	Previous experiences of child abuse	89%

## Lack of support entrenches harm

- Adult services are not able to respond to the distinct presentations of young people who have experienced FDV or IPV.
- Youth homelessness often stems from difficult home lives and challenging family relationships.
- Young people's behaviours are overlooked/not understood as resulting from their experience of FDV.
- Seeking safety from FDV is often viewed as "running away"/teenage misbehaviour rather than desperation to find safety.<sup>8</sup>
- Lack of support that addresses the unique harms of family violence means that when a young person reaches out for help, the system entrenches harm, disconnects them from supports (for example, education) and discourages further help-seeking.<sup>9</sup>

## Costs of FDV

- Impacts on children and young people from exposure to violence results in serious and long-lasting effects on health, wellbeing, education, relationships and housing, poor employment opportunities and potentially life-long lack of economic security.

- 43% of women and 31% of men who were abused as children receive a government pension, benefit or allowance – illustrating the ongoing impact on earning capacity and economic security experienced by people who experienced childhood abuse.
- The cost of abuse extends to the costs of out of home care, and the known poor outcomes for children and young people from the care system.
- In 2015-2016 the estimated cost to the economy of the ongoing effects on physical and mental health of the experience of violence against women and children was around \$10.4 billion.
- Child maltreatment is associated with higher usage of health services, including increased incidence of hospital admission and interactions with mental health professionals.
- Children from families with parental conflict have worse health, social and educational outcomes than children from families without parental conflict.
- Child maltreatment is widespread among Australians, with ongoing impacts including mental health disorders and substance abuse.
- The adverse health impact of IPV translates to increased lifetime health costs, regardless of whether the IPV occurs early or late in life.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Corrie and Moore 2021 *Amplify: Turning up the Volume on Young People and Family Violence: Research Report Melbourne City Mission* [https://www.mcm.org.au/-/media/mcm/content-repository-files/amplify\\_turning-up-the-volume-on-young-people-and-family-violence.pdf](https://www.mcm.org.au/-/media/mcm/content-repository-files/amplify_turning-up-the-volume-on-young-people-and-family-violence.pdf) (Accessed 29/01/25)

<sup>9</sup> Rapid Review Expert Panel (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet) 2024 *Unlocking the Prevention Potential: Accelerating action to end domestic, family and sexual violence* <https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/unlocking-the-prevention-potential-4.pdf> (Accessed 29/01/25)

<sup>10</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2024 *Family, domestic and sexual violence: Economic and financial impacts* <https://www.aihw.gov.au/family-domestic-and-sexual-violence/responses-and-outcomes/economic-financial-impacts> (Accessed 29/01/25)



# The Solution, Impacts and Outcomes

## Recommendation 1:

**A national pilot to co-design, build and test the Support Multiverse that provides young people with digital access to family, domestic and intimate partner violence information and referrals.**

Safe Steps proposes the development of a comprehensive, youth specific FDV & IPV information and referral service called the Support Multiverse. The proposed outreach model brings FDV and IPV information and support to young people engaging directly with individuals who require support or service in places they are already frequenting.

This innovative model, will be co-designed with young people. Digital outreach with accessible support services will:

- Be where young people are, for example, social media (per age limits), online games and forums and messaging applications.
- Provide proactive outreach and reactive support, allowing young people to be reached through digital

channels and to seek help on their own terms, and find already existing resources.

- Provide inclusive support to any young person worried about FDV or IPV, regardless of age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, ability, or faith.

This project is made up of the following phases:

1. Engagement with young people to support co-design and testing of proposed model (to explore what would have helped in their situation and where they would like to help seek if they needed it).
2. Development of a digital platform and digital assets/ content that focus on young people's experiences of family and intimate partner violence (clinical development and curation of existing content, tools and support material).
3. Service pilot and advertising and placement campaign across digital spaces used by young people in a defined pilot area.

### Phase 1:

#### Engagement with young people to support co-design and testing of proposed model

The pilot will establish a youth-led advisory group and incorporate workshops with young people (both from the advisory group and wider). Engagement with young people will be central to the design, testing and implementation of this pilot. Lived experience is central to the work we do. It informs design, service development and quality improvement at Safe Steps. Continuing this is important.

#### Deliverables:

- Engage young people in a participatory design model.
- Establish an advisory group to oversee pilot build.
- Engage national and international experts in youth participation to facilitate the design, implementation of frameworks and models.
- Implement design process with young people.
- Facilitate workshops and systems testing processes with multiple groups of young people (including young people with and without lived experience of FDV or IPV).
- Create a best practice service response for young people at risk.
- Provide opportunities for development and capability uplift for young people involved.
- Provide a knowledge transfer and exchange remit so that young people, and the broader family violence and youth sectors can benefit.
- Increase awareness of available services for young people while we also developing and testing a youth-centred response.

#### Outcomes:

- Engagement of 200–500 young people across Australia in digital collaboration for design and development of the Support Multiverse.
- Increased help-seeking amongst young people, as a result of incidental awareness raising during Phase 1.
- Support Multiverse model developed based on local and international best practice around youth engagement.

## Phase 2:

### Development of a digital platform and digital assets/content that focus on young people's experiences of family and intimate partner violence

Based on advice from young people in Phase 1, the next phase of the pilot will involve establishing a digital platform with a strong focus on FDV/IPV. Although youth-focused platforms already exist, they do not provide specialised FDV/IPV support. Complementing but not duplicating existing content and resources, Phase 2 of the pilot will also involve the development of targeted content for young people, in formats young people engage with. Concepts to be explored include social media influencer partnerships, gamification of content and quizzes that provide a soft entry to explore questions and issues in relationships.

#### Deliverables:

- Collate and curate local, but currently disparate, content and materials.
- Develop new targeted content for young people such as long form video animations that describe "red flags" for intimate partner violence which are. This asset would be housed on the Support Multiverse and can be re-sliced for TikTok or reels.
- Identify and develop partnerships with technology sector experts and academia with technology, AI and startup and innovation and commercialisation expertise.
- Technical build of the Support Multiverse model that draws on international best practice, for example Sweden's Unger Relationer and Canada's Kids Help Phone (for more information about international models, please refer to Appendix A).
- Technical development of tailored messaging for young Australians, using relevant local examples, scenarios and context. This development work will precede Phase 3, to build trust, recognition and relevance for young people, and allows for a more personalised experience for a young person when seeking help and information when they are worried about FDV or IPV.

#### Outcomes:

- Production of minimum viable product, the Support Multiverse, that will be socialised and tested among select cohort of young people.
- Collaboration established across FDV and technology sector.
- Increased connectivity and awareness of existing services and materials as a result of reviewing and collating inputs for the digital hub.
- % increase in youth participation across design and development of FDV services and responses.

### Phase 3:

#### Service Pilot and advertising/placement campaigns across digital spaces, that push young people to explore the Support Multiverse

An essential component of the pilot is “digital outreach” – paid promotions will push out content housed in the Support Multiverse to the digital platforms used by young people.

#### Deliverables:

- Promote content to invite engagement with young people worried about FDV and IPV.
- Collaborate with existing and new digital platforms which support engagement with young people worried about FDV and IPV (for example SnapChat, TikTok, Instagram, Roblox, YouTube, Spotify, Twitch).
- Risk management plan based on engagement with the e-Safety Commissioner focusing on the safety of the platforms we engage with as part of Phase 3.

#### Outcomes:

- Production of minimum viable product, the Support Multiverse, that will be socialised and tested among select cohort of young people.
- Collaboration established across FDV and technology sector.
- Increased connectivity and awareness of existing services and materials as a result of reviewing and collating inputs for the digital hub.
- % increase in youth participation across design and development of FDV services and responses.
- Engagement of youth advocates and digital ambassadors in communities.

## Proposed Investment: \$3,000,000

Support Multiverse phase	Phase 1: Detailed co-design	Phase 2: Technological platform and operating model, service pilot	Phase 3: Service pilot, advertising and placement in digital environments
<b>Timeline</b>	July 2025 – June 2026	July 2026 – December 2026	January 2027 – June 2027
<b>Indicative funding required</b>	\$500,000	\$1,500,000	\$1,000,000

## Recommendation 2:

### Embedding specialised youth FDV and IPV expertise in existing services through the immediate resourcing of mainstream helplines (specifically Kids Helpline, 1800RESPECT and Safe Steps) to provide specialised support to young people worried about FDV or IPV.

Safe Steps proposes a two-year pilot to integrate and embed specialised FDV/IPV expertise in “mainstream” helplines where young people are seeking support (for example 1800RESPECT, Kids Helpline and Safe Steps).

#### Deliverables:

- Provide front-line staff at three critical services with real-time support when they take a call from a young person seeking help for FDV and IPV.
- Provide improved and enhanced risk assessment and safety planning for young people, based on their unique needs.
- Enhance workforce skills and knowledge to support the unique experiences of young people worried about FDV and IPV.
- Improve data collection to build the evidence base and inform the development of future service delivery (including AI capability).

#### Outcomes:

- Immediate resolution of the known gap in crisis response for young people who have experienced FDV or IPV.
- Increased capacity of key organisations to take calls, respond to texts, webchats and emails, undertake risk assessments and make referrals. For those providing FDV/IPV focused services, boost youth expertise; for those providing youth focused services, boost FDV/IPV expertise.
- Respond to an anticipated increase in help-seeking as a result of the pilot described in Recommendation 1.
- Resolve the critical service gap by providing a crucial entry point for young people seeking immediate support if they are worried about FDV or IPV.

## Proposed Investment: \$2,900,000

Embedded youth expertise	July 2025 – June 2026	July 2026 – June 2027
Collaborative partnership across existing ecosystem models and interconnected services with clinical expertise and insight	900,000	900,000
Embedded model and delivery of support and responses to help seekers	550,000	550,000
<b>Indicative Funding Required</b>	<b>1,450,000</b>	<b>1,450,000</b>

# Appendix A: Evidence and international insights

## Research currently underway at Safe Steps

Early insights from our research partnership with, Melbourne University School of Population and Global Health, with Associate Professor Georgina Sutherland, validates that there are gaps in the current service response for children and young people who have experienced FDV. Specific support gaps include help to adapt to a new (emergency accommodation) environment, disrupted routines, disconnection from school, trauma associated with witnessing or experiencing FDV and managing the ongoing demands of the abusive parent (including coercion to provide information about the family's whereabouts).

## International models

When considering international best practice (via the Churchill Fellowship project), it was evident universally that to build trust and awareness amongst young people, they need to be involved in all aspects of the discussion, planning, development and provision of any services aimed at them. The most successful models overseas had youth advisory groups and lived experience embedded in their design and delivery. The diversity of this cohort, in terms of age, experience and needs, must be acknowledged and embedded in the design of services and pathways to ensure flexibility and inclusivity.

Swedish service “**Unga Relationer**” (UR) (in English: “Young Relationships”) is an example of international best practice. To establish this service, they consulted extensively with young people in the ongoing development and delivery of their anonymous online chat service for young people experiencing dating violence. Through their website young people can access:

- An online knowledge bank with information about healthy relationships and warning signs of abuse.
- An anonymous chat line, open every evening, where young people can discuss their relationship concerns with volunteers who are trained and supervised by psychologists.
- Longer-term ‘support contacts’ where young people can chat weekly with the same volunteer over 10 weeks, and
- Referrals to local resources when appropriate.

The organisation conducted extensive research and consultation with over 200 young people to understand their perspectives on dating violence before launching their support services. Key findings included:

1. Young people did not relate to the common imagery and language around ‘domestic violence’ or ‘intimate partner violence’. They responded better to terms like ‘toxic’ and ‘red flags’.
2. They wanted support services that felt peer-led rather than authority-led, which is why the organisation uses volunteers for their chat/text line.
3. Three key target audiences were identified – victims,

those using violence, and friends/peers who may be confided in or are concerned about a friend.

4. An online knowledge bank with quizzes to self-assess relationships was critical, not just the support services.
5. Using illustrations, short videos, and interactive content was important for engaging youth audiences.

They worked closely with different youth groups in an ongoing way for feedback, but avoided relying too heavily on any single advisory group whose perspectives could become unrepresentative over time as they learned more about the issue. In their own words, overall, deeply involving young people's voices while balancing that input with evidence and realistic constraints was an important but challenging process in designing relevant, accessible services. In-house evaluations at UR show around 3,000 chats per year, with many more visiting the website.

Anonymity is preserved, but data is collected on demographics and relationship details (subject to what is discussed and captured via chat), and self-reported helpfulness ratings.

Another key finding out of the Churchill Fellowship project was the need for innovative approaches to service delivery using technology and digital outreach, drawing on AI tools for triaging and issue identification and tech-based solutions like live chat for young people.

The **Kids Help Phone** (KHP) in Toronto is an excellent example of how technology and digital spaces can be used to reach young people. Identified as Canada's most trusted charitable organisation, they interact with millions of young Canadians annually, 4.7 million youth in 2023 alone. KHP offers a stepped care model, ranging from low-intensity self-help digital tools and online peer programs to high-intensity over-the-phone professional counselling, allowing for flexible service delivery to meet the individual needs of the young person in question. Crucially, the pathway through the stepped care model is led by the young person, at their pace and at their discretion. They provide a variety of digital pathways including:

- An online resource library and navigational website chatbot.
- A support service directory.
- Text-based crisis support with trained volunteer responders, supervised by professional counsellors.
- Counselling over the phone (including interpretation services in 100+ languages) and Live Chat with professional counsellors.
- A Peer-to-Peer Community, which acts as a support forum where young people can share their real-life stories.

The Peer Community is their fastest-growing service and was co-designed with 400 youth during COVID-19. It is also one of their lowest cost services. It has been styled on Reddit and allows young people to post and respond to posts. It is moderated by trained, paid young people who

can escalate concerns to the professional counsellors as necessary. A key finding from the co-design process was the need for moderators to invite posters to edit posts deemed incompatible with community standards (and providing an explanation as to why), as opposed to changing it on their behalf. This speaks to the need to honour and maintain the young person's autonomy in this exchange, which contributes to building trust in the service and KHP as a support to turn to.

They are currently seeking to create a gamified ecosystem that reaches youth where they spend time online, increasing awareness of services and reducing barriers to accessing support. This involves partnerships with tech companies and piloting initiatives like Snapchat filters and Roblox non-player characters. They recently trialed a non-player character in Roblox called 'Hope'. Players could chat with Hope, who was equipped with a prepared script. Future iterations of this would ideally include the ability for Hope to link the player into one of their support services (e.g. the Peer Community) without the young person needing to leave the Roblox platform – a 1-click user journey.

They have also started gamification on the back-end, with the crisis text-line. New volunteers are assigned a baby chick avatar which signals their transcripts are being monitored by supervising counsellors. As they meet certain milestones they level up and earn rewards, etc within the gamified platform. The desire is to replicate this gamification interface for young people, allowing them to navigate online resources and content in an interactive and engaging way.

Another point of difference in KHP's service delivery is their partnership with AI Institute Vector and use of data. They have what they call a 'data lake' made up of unidentified transcripts (phone, chat and text), frontline staff surveys (issue identification), evaluations completed by young people (detailing issues, location, age) and dedicated staff who collect information on every service available to young people in Canada. The 'data lake' is constantly updated and

feeds into an AI language model which has been used to develop what they call their Frontline Assistant. At the time of development, KHP were able to provide Vector with 45 million real-time, real-language data points, capturing young people's voices and experiences in the moment. Applying natural language processing to this dataset resulted in the Frontline Assistant being able to determine the issue being discussed with 90% accuracy and to identify and triage the most distressed users and allow immediate human-to-human crisis response to those in need. The Frontline Assistant works by 'chatting' to the young person while they wait to be connected to a real person. It is not intended to replace the real person, but instead use natural language processing to 'brief' the volunteer or counsellor as they connect with the young person and avoids them having to repeat their story.

KHP's origins are youth wellbeing, so frontline responders are trained in issues such as abuse and neglect. The legacy of these roots is that confidentiality and anonymity are foundational to their service offerings. Their phone system is designed so that the callers' numbers cannot be unmasked, allowing anonymity to be maintained. One of the advantages of the anonymous phone (or chat) function is that they can host three-way calls with the likes of Child Protection, allowing the young person to ask questions (e.g. what will happen to my sister, will I be taken away from dad, etc) which they would otherwise not be able or willing to do. The text-service however can be unmasked, and they are exploring ways to alert young people to mandatory reporting requirements should they disclose issues such as abuse or suicidality over the text-line.

The importance of confidentiality and anonymity in services, particularly for sensitive issues like abuse or mental health crises, was identified by both Kids Help Phone Canada and Unger Relationer as essential to engaging young people, and something that digital services can help facilitate, acknowledging the legislative environment within which an Australian service would operate.





1800 015 188  
[safesteps.org.au](http://safesteps.org.au)