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Interview with Marlies Puentener

Marlies Puentener has been seconded from the Kids Help Line in Australia to take charge of What's Up while Executive Director Grant Taylor is on a six month sabbatical until late October.



Marlies, a highly qualified and experienced child and family therapist, usually works as a Clinical Supervisor for Counsellors on the Australian help line, as well as in private practice.

The experience at What's Up is proving invaluable. "It's a great opportunity to take an in depth look at another freephone, see what What's Up is doing that Kids Help Line might learn from and vice versa," says Marlies, who was brought up in Christchurch, but has worked in Australia most of her professional life.

What's Up was set up almost five years ago by the Kids Help Foundation Trust. It was modelled on the Kids Help Line which had been launched seven years earlier.

We took the opportunity to ask Marlies about how the phone lines compare.

How similar are the phone lines?

What's Up and Kids Help Line share lots of similarities. They both provide a telephone counselling service for children and young people aged from five to 18 years. The counsellors are all paid professionals, who know how to respond ethically when dealing with all issues, including crises. Calls are confidential, although non-identifying data is collected on the callers and their calls.

Any major differences?

Whilst What's Up employs 15 part-time counsellors and operates from noon to midnight, seven days a week, Kids Help Line has about 80 counsellors and operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

To manage Kids Help Line 24/7 is a never-ending process. Because it is the only national freephone for children and young people in Australia, many community agencies in the health, welfare and voluntary sectors, rely on Kids Help Line to pick up their clients after hours. In New Zealand, What's Up is the only telephone counselling service with paid professional counsellors, but there are also two phone lines run by volunteers, Youthline and Lifeline.

And despite the larger scale and longer hours, Kids Help Line, like What's Up, is still unable to answer all the phone calls that come in.

Kids Help Line also offers web and email-based counselling and operates the Parentline freephone counselling service.

What about the callers? How do they compare?

A higher proportion of teenagers aged 15 to 18 years call Kids Help Line than What's Up. But this may be related to the fact that Kids Help Line is now 12 years old and some of those callers have grown up with it. They may not have called much before, but they know it is there and reliable when they need it. In comparison the average age of callers to What's Up is 13 years, although that is beginning to creep up as the phone line gets older.

What are most calls about?

For Kids Help Line most calls are about relationships – family and friends. But these categories are broad, and the core issue may not be disclosed in the first call. Children and young people want to be sure the counsellor will cope/respond well to what is said. So while they may call in the first instance about family conflict, once they have built up trust in the counsellor, they will talk about the real issue, which may be, for example, domestic violence.

Mental health issues are also a pretty big reason for calls made to Kids Help Line. In Australia, mental health has had a significant funding boost over the last decade, so more young people are being seen, more diagnoses made, and more young people are being referred to counsellors and mental health practitioners.

At What's Up problems with friends heads the list, followed by bullying and family relationships.

Both phone lines also get a number of calls from children and young people planning or carrying out self-harm or suicides. Some ring when they have already overdosed or cut themselves. Crisis

Interview with Marlies Puentener continued...

calls on both lines are treated very seriously and we endeavour to ensure the safety of the caller.

What is the benefit of telephone counselling? How does it compare to face to face counselling?

Both types of counselling are good. But the main difference is that any child going to a face to face counselling service, would have been referred, perhaps by concerned parents or a health professional. Children and young people in this situation may be embarrassed about admitting problems, don't want to be told by parents what to do, or may be frightened about the possibility of being crazy and ending up locked away.

With telephone counselling, the power is with the child or young person. They choose to make the connection, when to do it and can choose to end it by hanging up. They can choose whether to talk to a female or male counsellor. And the service is anonymous, which also appeals.

Both phone lines enable clients to place regular calls, with the same counsellor, which means a case plan with goals can be developed, which is what would happen if you were going to see a counsellor once a week.

A really important aspect of telephone counselling is its clear focus on the rights of the child. At both What's Up and Kids Help Line we are looking at how we can support and advocate for children and young people in a way that meets them on their own terms. The phones lines are completely client driven.

Research shows that in western culture, 80 percent of children will talk to their peers before they consult their Mum or Dad or a health professional. And telephone counselling services like Kids Help Line and What's Up can be the next stage up.

What about the counsellors?

The counsellors working at What's Up and Kids Help Line do it because they want to be there. They believe in the philosophy/model of child-centred practice. We're aware that a lot of systems fail kids, but if we can be a stop gap or bridge to helping children, it's great. I have worked in a lot of government and other agencies and have been really struck by the fact that counsellors on both Kids Help Line and What's Up stay. They don't burn out, they are loyal, passionate about the phone lines and believe in their job. It stands out. And it's not because they don't have the qualifications and experience to get other jobs. It's their choice to be there. All credit to them!

Cookies and chaos

By a What's Up Counsellor.

Children swarming everywhere, trailing overwhelmed parents. Counsellors let loose for a few days. Sound like a recipe for disaster?

In fact it was Kids Fair 2006, an annual event in Auckland.

What's Up were invited by key sponsor, Griffins, to share its Cookie Bear Clubhouse space. This was a great opportunity for Counsellors to spread the word on What's Up, as well as share their enthusiasm for their workplace with kids and parents.

Armed with balloons and pamphlets, What's Up staff met the crowd head on in three days of cookies, chats and chaos.

Needless to say, a good time was had by all!



What's Up Counsellors get friendly with Griffin's Cookie Bear.



What's Up was delighted to receive \$18,000 from Plumbing World, raised at a recent charity event. Ray Ferner of Rinnai NZ presents the cheque to Marlies Puentener.

Bidding for What's Up

Yellow Pages staff continue to actively support What's Up with their in-house fundraising events. The latest, an online charity auction with goods and services donated by staff members and the company, raised more than \$2,200. Lots on offer included a fishing trip, the services of a marriage celebrant, a DJ and a professional babysitter, computer gear, and hip hop dance lessons.

"Since I joined Yellow Pages I've been heartened by the passion our people show in supporting youth through our charity partner What's Up," says Dudley Enoka, General Manager. "I'm a firm believer that helping build strong kids is one of the most important investments we can make in the future of our country and I'm proud to be part of an organisation that plays such an active role."

New Staff at What's Up...

Let us introduce Yoda the Cat
Who, as you see is not into laps.
No, Yoda finds
The office sink most sublime,
To stretch, preen, oversee and nap.

What's Up office has been taken over
By this masterful Cassanova
A play in the in-tray
A fluff on the files
Yes, the new Admin Manager is Yoda.

But when job demands push him
to the brink,
It's down tools and back to the sink,
Can't get too stressed,
It's time for a rest!
And so handy for the occasional drink.



A once thin, unwell and homeless Yoda thrives thanks to the care of his adopted What's Up family.

“Can you please tell me how I can be better so my dad won’t hit me anymore?”

Debate on the proposed repeal of Section 59 of the Crimes Act 1961 and the use of physical discipline is heating up in the public arena. In light of her work with children and young people, Marlies Puentener calls on the Government to repeal Section 59.

At What’s Up we present a unique opportunity for kids: contact is completely client initiated, everything is on a first or no name basis and the topic is totally the caller’s choice.

With 7,000 calls per week, telephone counselling is clearly very attractive for many kiwi kids.

Of the callers ringing about abuse, 49% experienced physical abuse. 48% of those people stated they were experiencing it regularly or currently felt at risk of injury or death. Some questions we get are really hard to answer:

“Can you please tell me how I can be better so my dad won’t hit me anymore?”

“What can I put on my legs to like cover up the bruises so I can go to school?”

In the current debate on the repeal of Section 59 of the Crimes Act, much has been made of the difference between smacking and child abuse. But what starts where? And importantly, do children internally process smacks and beatings so differently?

Pain and fear are not wise teachers.

Smacking doesn’t work in the long run. Sure, a quick hard smack gets results at first. It’s much quicker than time-out, negotiating, or helping children to work out disputes. It also gives the smacker a quick reinstatement of hierarchy. “I’m in control again. Phew.”

But hang on, let’s rewind. What made the difference from the child’s point of view?

Reasoning? No. A chance to ponder the situation from the other’s point of view? No. The chance to practise sharing or negotiating skills? No.

None of these. A smack allows no time for that. Let’s be brutally honest – what made the difference here is pain and fear.

What was the lesson here? Big people can hit you and watch out because there may be more to come.

It’s true you can teach compliance through pain and fear. Dogs and horses can be broken in through force and physical discipline. The animal will eventually comply, or perhaps ‘submit’ is a more apt term. But the animals who learn through trust and confidence in their trainer demonstrate better results in behaviour, and tend to be well-adjusted and happy. And so it is with humans.

Smacking doesn’t work in the long run.

I’ve lost count of the numbers of tired, desperate, conflict weary mums who have tried smacking, yelling, Dexamphetamine or Ritalin. When they come to me as a therapist, one of the first questions I ask is “So what works?” Inevitably the answer is nothing.

We will all revert to what we have learned at stressful times even if we know it is not actually working.

From my experience, the child whose behaviour is responded to by smacking several to many times a day becomes pretty disconnected from it. “It hurts, there’s nothing I can do about it, I’ll just keep going, business as usual.”

Parents do need opportunities (and open minds) to learn about addressing the difficult bits of raising our little people without physical ‘discipline’. The support of partners and family and time to test out and make the changes is also vital.

Hitting kids gives dangerous messages.

Namely, your body is not your own. While you are not allowed to hit your parents or siblings, your parents can hit you. Child computes: hitting is OK by some people.

We then expect our children and young people to adhere to messages about sexual abuse safety: your body is your own; no one should touch your body without your permission; if anyone touches you in a way that doesn’t feel OK you need to tell someone.

Children who have experienced physical abuse are already somewhat disconnected from any sense of their body being their own and their right to personal safety. And from my experience as a therapist, it’s these kids who are the least likely to disclose sexual abuse.

Bullies breed bullies.

No child is born violent. The message that big people can hit little people is often well learned by the time kids start school.

Bullying can be vicious. It can include racism, sexual harassment, verbal, text and physical assault, and stalking.

For those with no release from physical abuse in the home, the school environment offers quite a platform on which to act out all one has been taught in a violent home.

How powerful and in control it feels to be top dog for a change. And so the cycle revolves.

If there’s one thing kids learn – hitting hurts. And sooner or later, they’ll pass on that lesson to another kid.

Support the repeal of Section 59 for all our sakes.

Repeal of Section 59

Sue Bradford, Green Member of Parliament, introduced a Bill calling for the repeal of Section 59 of the Crimes Act 1961 in May 2005. The Justice and Electoral Select Committee is considering the Bill and will report back to Parliament in October.

Section 59 says: ‘every parent or person in place of a parent of a child is justified in using force by way of correction towards a child if that force is reasonable in the circumstances’.

Repealing Section 59 would mean that parents or caregivers who seriously assault their children would no longer have a legal defence for their actions. It would give children “the same protections in law as all other groups in our society enjoy”.

What’s Up key facts

- What’s Up is a free telephone counselling service for children and young people aged five to 18 years.
- The What’s Up help line number is 0800 WHATSUP (0800 942 8787).
- What’s Up operates seven days a week from 12 midday to 12 midnight.
- What’s Up is operated by The Kids Help Foundation Trust, an independent New Zealand-registered charity, based in Auckland. What’s Up works in association with Barnardos New Zealand and is supported by funding from Griffin’s, White Pages and the Child Health Services Trust.

Working with young people who self-harm

What's Up receives a number of calls from young people who harm themselves by cutting, burning, hurting and scarring their own bodies. Marlies Puentener runs workshops for counsellors on self-harm, throughout Australia. She discusses the issue.

As a young youth worker, cleaning up a bloodied room in the young women's homeless refuge where I worked was a shocking introduction to self-harm. The initial disbelief and disgust of "how could someone do that?" gave way to a long-term curiosity and interest in people who use self-harm for emotional reasons.

Fifteen years on, tentative invitations into the internal worlds of clients who self-harm have provided insight into the paradox of the coexistence of fearlessness, fear, feistiness and timidity, determination and fragility within.

While self-harm suggests a very visual 'out there' kind of behaviour, this impression actually is in contradiction with the reality of self-harm. Those who self-harm are usually intensely private about their behaviour. Self-harm is used as a coping mechanism, and those who use it are very similar to the rest of us who don't necessarily admit to all the props and vices we use to get through the day.

For young people, secrecy around self-harm is often of paramount importance. This is for a number of reasons, with the first being the fear of being crazy. When young people first self-harm, they usually do not know why they are doing it, only that they feel compelled to. Unable to make sense of their actions and this impulse to self-harm, they often come to the conclusion that they must be crazy. Once this conclusion is drawn, these young people may employ considerable effort to hide the fact they self-harm, by creating and maintaining a coping persona on the outside, to deflect any suggestion of internal angst or conflict. This in itself can drain energy and further internalise real emotions.

This secrecy poses a challenge for the therapist seeing a young person for the first time. The topic of self-harm must be introduced with great sensitivity, as the young person may be absolutely convinced that if you found out they were self-harming, their self diagnosis of 'crazy' would be rubber stamped and they would be locked up in a psychiatric ward.

Another reason young people keep self-harm a secret is the fear of a punitive response. One young woman I worked with said: "My mum will kill me if she finds out what I did", a view shared by other self-harmers. In this case, the irony was she had cut herself so deeply she had haemorrhaged to the point the self-harm was life threatening.

The attitude that self-harm is 'only attention-seeking' and therefore should be responded to with disinterest or punishment, can be very damaging for the young person, who is then forced to drive

the incidents of self-harm along with the complex emotions and associated needs further underground.

When we understand self-harm as a coping mechanism, I believe we have the opportunity to avoid knee-jerk responses whether we are in a parent/carer role or that of counsellor. The focus on reducing the number of incidents or frequency of the self-harm can place the young person who self-harms under significant stress, often feeling they have to lie in order to not let anyone down, or worse, to avoid experiencing a negative reaction.

Focusing on the self-harm infers the symptom is more worthy of a response than the cause or causes. If the cause is not dealt with the self-harm continues to be used as an emotional prop.

I have been concerned to see cases where the focus is almost solely on the self-harming behaviour with the goal being elimination. Although self-harm may be reduced or eliminated, the behaviour is usually replaced by another coping mechanism that may have more risks associated, such as taking hard drugs or binge drinking.

As a professional trainer for counsellors in the area of self-harm, I ask participants to list feelings that are evoked when working with someone who self-harms. I cannot think of another issue which engenders so many intense and diverse emotions. As workers and carers it is important we are aware of how our responses impact on our interactions with those young people who try to deal with what life has dished out to them by cutting, burning, hurting and scarring their own bodies.

It is essential and very simple when working with young people who self-harm, to remember and honour the importance of one human being reaching out to another, rather than forget the person and deal instead with the 'self-harmer'. "So tell me about you" is often a much better place to start than "tell me about your self-harm".

When enough of a relationship has developed within the therapeutic context and I am invited into the internal world of someone who uses self-harm, I continue to be awestruck by a number of things. These include: the conflict of emotions within that space, the energy that goes into propping up the fall out of trauma that refuses to allow itself to be forgotten, and especially the incredible but fragile courage it has taken for the person in pain to invite another to enter their internal world.

If you do get the invitation, choose your steps with care.

Child Health Services Trust



At its latest funding round, What's Up sponsor Child Health Services Trust divvied up more than \$50,000 between 16 community-based child and family services across New Zealand.

As well as funding, the Trust provides valuable information about child welfare issues in New Zealand, and is putting the final touches on a free online directory of nationwide child and family therapeutic services, available to relevant professionals.

"It is a wonderful feeling to be able to help those who are working with children," says Trust member, Brendan New. "We look forward to continuing to support hard working professional and community groups, such as What's Up, and through them help New Zealand children and families grow."

For more information check out www.chs.org.nz.

“Hi, my name is Gustavo Restivo. I am a New Zealand registered psychologist and I work at What's Up as Personal Supervisor.



I am originally from Buenos Aires, Argentina, where I trained as a clinical psychologist and a psychoanalytic psychotherapist. I have been practising within this field since 1990 and I fulfilled a wide range of clinical, managerial, supervisory and academic roles in Buenos Aires.

In 1999 I moved to Auckland and have since been practising in mental health, drugs and alcohol, and torture and trauma services. I also run a private practice.

I joined What's Up in April this year. My role is to provide clinical supervision to the team of telephone counsellors.

What's Up is an amazing work place; a professional organisation that provides first class telephone counselling to New Zealand kids, with fantastic outcomes. ”