

How US schoolkids launched a hotline to spread joy

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. Which of these things are most likely to ease your worries and help you to forget your troubles, at least for a short time? Rank them in order 1-8, with 1 being the most likely and 8 the least likely.

- _____ kittens and puppies
- _____ having some ice cream or cake
- _____ reading the news
- _____ the laughter of small children
- _____ doing sports
- _____ shopping for something nice
- _____ shouting and screaming where no one can hear you
- _____ going for a long walk

b. Compare your answers and give reasons for your preferences.

2 Key words

a. Write the correct word from the wordpool next to the definitions below. Then find and highlight them in the article to read them in context.

administrator	anxious	bleak	eager	encouragement
envisioned	facility	frustrated	gleaned	overwhelming
principal	profound	reach	resilient	spoil

- worried because you think something bad might happen _____
- feeling annoyed and impatient because you are prevented from achieving something or improving a situation _____
- words or actions that give someone confidence or hope _____
- very keen to do something _____
- to give away information that can ruin a surprise or joyful anticipation _____
- imagined; planned _____
- showing serious thought and wise ideas _____

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8. able to quickly become healthy, happy, or strong again after an illness, disappointment, or another problem _____
9. small pieces of information learned by asking questions, watching, or listening carefully _____
10. without any reasons to feel happy or hopeful _____
11. the amount of authority or influence that someone or something has _____
12. used about things that make you feel very strong emotions _____
13. the head of a school; The usual British word is *headteacher*. _____
14. someone whose job is to manage a business, organization, or institution _____
15. an area or building used for a particular purpose _____

b. Use some of the key words above to complete these sentences.

1. Things are looking rather _____ for the team this season. We're not playing well.
2. The main message of his presentation was very _____ and thought-provoking.
3. He works at the company's manufacturing _____ in Texas.
4. Their decisions were based on financial information _____ from the internet.
5. The coach ran up and down the side of the pitch, shouting _____ to the team.
6. I found their kindness quite _____.
7. You haven't watched the latest episode, so I won't _____ it for you by telling you what happens.

'If you're sad, get a cookie': how US schoolkids launched a hotline to spread joy

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The pep-talk project has been overwhelmed with calls from people in need of a lift in difficult times

Matthew Cantor

12 March, 2022

- 1 A group of California elementary-school students has launched a free hotline featuring on-demand inspiration and advice for anxious souls. With joy in short supply these days, the tiny school's project has since gone viral, receiving thousands of calls hourly.
- 2 Dial the number and you'll hear a cheerful voice listing your options: "If you're feeling mad, frustrated or nervous, press one. If you need words of encouragement and life advice, press two. If you need a pep talk from kindergarteners, press three. If you need to hear kids laughing with delight, press four."
- 3 After reading the morning's headlines, I need all of the above, so I was eager to give it a try. It took several attempts to get past the busy signal, but it was well worth it. I was immediately transported back to the optimistic days of my youth and reminded that often life is less complicated than we make it. It was clear these students have quiet wisdom well beyond their years, as well as a true appreciation for ice cream. I won't spoil things by revealing all their tips, but here are a few I took to heart:
- 4 "If you're nervous, go and get your wallet and spend it on ice cream and shoes."
"If you're frustrated, you can always go to your bedroom, punch a pillow or cry on it and just go and scream outside."
"If you're angry or frustrated, you can do what you want to do best or you can do flips on the trampoline."
"If you're sad or angry, go and get a cookie, a smoothie or an ice cream."
- 5 Other pieces of advice could save you a great deal of money on therapy:
"You are OK."
"Don't give up – power through."
"The world is a better place with you in it."
"Choose weird."
- 6 The project was envisioned by Jessica Martin and Asherah Weiss, who teach art at West Side Union Elementary School in Healdsburg. "We wanted to do a project that was going to be simple enough to do and call on kids to think about what they wanted to say in the world, to uplift other people," Weiss said. "And as we all know, we've been going through a lot these last few years. So we wanted to do something really simple but profound."
- 7 They went to each classroom in the small school, whose 141 students range in age from kindergarten to sixth grade. They gave the kids a simple prompt. "We said: 'It's been a very rough few years. You kids are incredibly resilient. And you found all kinds of ways to stay joyful,'" Martin said. They encouraged the children to think of moments when they felt frustrated and they'd received good advice, or come up with something helpful on their own. "So all of the responses are really coming from the kids and their own life experience, and the advice they've gleaned over their short years on this planet."
- 8 In crafting their advice, the students were keenly aware of the bleak backdrop: the war in Ukraine, local wildfires that have required yearly evacuations and the seemingly endless pandemic. After more than a year of remote learning, the students were all too familiar with the isolation of Covid. "I experienced it – home schooling and quarantine," said Natisse, a fifth-grader.
- 9 Rosalie, another fifth-grader, said it wasn't hard to come up with ideas. "It's good to say nice things to people," she said. "So I'd say a lot of things come into your head."
A pink poster reads, "If you are angry, think of positive thoughts" above a drawing of a cat. The yellow poster next to it reads "Think of fun things."
- 10 In Healdsburg, a northern-California community of 12,000, the hotline was "a fun project that seemed like it was going to have kind of a small reach," said Susie Dalton, the school's fifth-grade teacher. "But it's been amazing for everybody to see the impact it's had on a larger scale."

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- 11 Students initially distributed cards and flyers announcing the project, dubbed Peptoc – which was how Martin's son, a first-grader at the school, spelt "pep talk". As word of mouth spread, the project went viral on social media and in the news.
- 12 Martin had signed up for the cheapest hotline provider she could find, thinking the kids would be excited to hear 100 people had called in a month, she said. "And then two days later, we're getting 500 an hour, and now we're getting 9,000 an hour."

A poster on a telephone pole shows a drawing of a rainbow sun with positive messages that can be torn off.
- 13 The positive response has been overwhelming. "We get people saying, 'Oh, we're so relieved to have the resource' or 'This made me cry so I sent it to all my friends,'" said Rosalie.
- 14 Martin said staff and patients at Johns Hopkins Medical Center had been regularly calling the hotline. Rima Meehan, the school's principal and superintendent, heard from a woman with cancer who calls during her treatments. Weiss said she had seen the school's office manager in tears on the phone with the administrator of an Iowa elder care facility, where most patients are over 90 years old. "She was calling to thank all of the kids because she played it for everyone who was part of that facility, and she said, 'I haven't heard laughter like that from them in years.'"
- 15 Martin said she was "pretty thrilled" for the kids: "They get to see that literally just one kind word can lift up millions."
- 16 The hotline, which will be updated with new messages in the coming months and is funded by donations, has also had an effect closer to home. A teacher who has taught at the school for 28 years recently heard from a friend who'd been facing some personal challenges. "He had called the hotline, and he texted me: 'I just bought myself an ice cream.'"

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3 Understanding the article

a. Answer the questions with information from the article.

1. What do you know about the school?
2. How did they set up the project and how is it funded?
3. How many options do callers get and what are they?
4. What has contributed to these young children being so wise?
5. How was the project advertised initially?
6. Why do they no longer need to advertise?
7. What type of callers do they get and what sort of response has calling provoked in the callers?
8. What life lesson does the author learn when he calls the number?

4 Key language

a. Write the missing word into these phrases and then find them in the article to check your answers.

1. be in short _____ = when there is not enough of something
2. _____ talk = a talk during which someone encourages you to do something better or to work harder
3. wise beyond their _____ = cleverer than you would expect them to be at their age
4. take something to _____ = think about something seriously
5. word of _____ = communication that consists of comments that people make to each other in an informal way, not formal communication such as news reports and advertisements
6. close to _____ = involving someone you know personally or a topic or experience you can easily relate to

b. Use each of the phrases in sentences or short anecdotes of your own.

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5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions and statements. Expand your with anecdotes and details.

- Which of the children's pieces of advice do you like best and why?
- Who do you call or what do you do when you need some advice or a few nice words of encouragement to brighten up your day?
- Talk about a time when you felt frustrated or anxious and you received good advice or came up with something helpful on your own.
- What else can people do to help spread joy in difficult times?

6 In your own words

- a. Think of three problems you have or challenges you need to deal with. Write each one on a separate piece of paper.**
- b. Fold the pieces of paper and put them into a bag.**
- c. Take three pieces of paper from other students. Read the problems and challenges and decide what advice you could give.**
- d. Read out the problems and give your advice.**
- e. Discuss the quality of the advice you've heard.**