

# Teen Talk Project Narrative



## Case Statement and Impact

Jewish Big Brothers Big Sisters of Los Angeles (JBBBSLA) provides mentoring, camp, college guidance, and scholarship programs to

youth in Los Angeles County. The focus of JBBBSLA's programs is to provide vulnerable youth with positive role models. In May 2018, JBBBSLA launched Teen Talk, a peer-to-peer advice app. By the end of 2020, Teen Talk expects over 45,000 teens to download the app and 25,000 of these teens to post a request for help and receive social/emotional support. In addition, this year JBBBSLA will train 100 Los Angeles teens as advisors for the app. This advisor training is conducted with the help of Teen Line, a 41-year-old Los Angeles youth services organization, based out of Cedars Sinai Hospital.

Today's teens are living in a very different world compared to teens who grew up a few decades ago. TIME magazine, in an article about teen depression and anxiety, finds that teens today are "the post-9/11 generation, raised in an era of economic and national insecurity. They've never known a time when terrorism and school shootings weren't the norm. They grew up watching their parents weather a severe recession, and perhaps most important, they hit puberty at a time when technology and social media were transforming society." As one of the teens profiled in this article explains, "We're the first generation that cannot escape our problems at all. We're all like little volcanoes. We're getting this constant pressure, from our phones, from our relationships, from the way things are today."

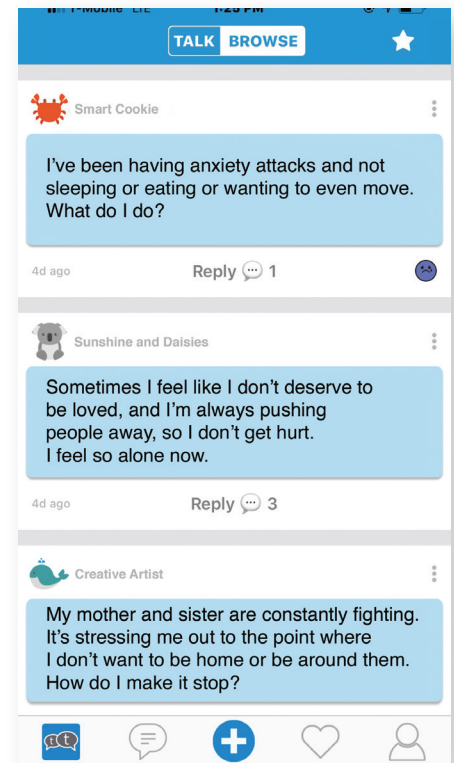
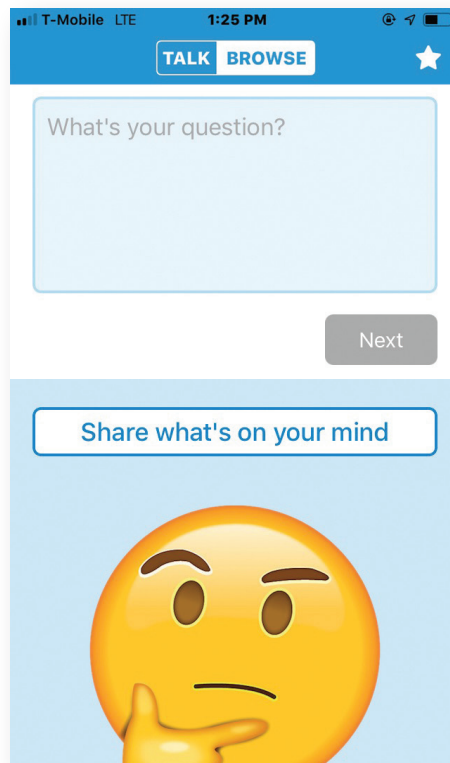
With an increase in pressure on teens, comes an increase in teen depression and anxiety. Yet there has not been an increase in mental health support for teens. TIME magazine, in a different article on teen depression, finds that, "despite the rise in teen depression... there wasn't a corresponding increase in mental health treatment for adolescents and young adults. Researchers said this is an indication that there is a growing number of young people who are under-treated or not treated at all for their symptoms."

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Teens have an intense need for support, yet many find themselves navigating alone, reluctant to ask their parents and teachers for guidance. Instead, teens instinctively seek help online.

The fact that teens go online for mental health support should not be surprising, considering how attached teens are to their phones. According to the latest Pew Research Center survey on teens and their use of social media and technology, "smartphone ownership has become a nearly ubiquitous element of teen life: 95% of teens now report they have a smartphone or access to one." This study shows a 22% increase in teen smartphone ownership or access since the Pew Research Center's previous 2014-15 study. The new study finds that "these mobile connections are in turn fueling more-persistent online activities: 45% of teens now say they are online on a near-constant basis." When it comes to mental health, teens now head online. If we want to help teens, we should meet them there.

Teen Talk is the ONLY cell phone app that uses TRAINED teens to respond to other teens in crisis. Teen advisors help their peers "remotely," which means they give advice via texts on their smartphones during an assigned shift. Shifts are during appointed times, in whatever location the teen advisors happen to be in and are mostly in the evenings in a home setting. Teen advisors always have the supervision of a mental health professional, who monitors all posts on the app. The mental health professional also works remotely.



The number of Teen Talk posts has grown exponentially, and our teen advisors are working their shifts to capacity. JBBBSLA needs financial support to increase the number of teen advisors and the staff who train and supervise them. This will enable approximately 220 Los Angeles teens to become advisors over the next three years, so together we can provide compassionate and empathetic advice to thousands of teens in need.

## Goals and Implementation Plan

By the end of this year, we will have trained over 100 teen advisors who will have responded to 25,000 posts (requests for help). It is critical to note that an additional 20,000 teens will have downloaded Teen Talk. Although these teens may not have posted a question themselves, they are viewing the questions asked by other teens and the responses of their teen advisors. As anticipated, teens have posted questions about, bullying, sexuality, self-harm, assault, anxiety, depression, and relationships – to name a few. We have also had instances in which the adult supervisors have had to report child abuse. The number of posts has been growing exponentially and our teen advisors are working their shifts to capacity. To accommodate more and more teens who are downloading Teen Talk and asking for advice, JBBBSLA has established the following goals:

At year end, we will have 100 teen advisors who have been recruited from JBBBSLA's camp, mentoring, teen empowerment programs and local partners. Our goal is to recruit more teen advisors by partnering with local organizations and schools that already work with teens. Potential partners include Los Angeles affiliates of Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, Boys & Girls Clubs of America, YMCA, Green Dot Public Schools, Fusion Academy, and Aspire Public Schools. For every 20,000 downloads, there are typically 10,000 posts that require teen advisors to respond. During the next three years we anticipate a total of 100,000 downloads, 55,000 posts, and 250 teens who will have been trained to be teen advisors.

The teens undergo rigorous training before they can start offering advice and adhere to strict guidelines. They complete a comprehensive 50-hour training program that focuses on difficult teen issues. Part of the training includes a series of role plays between the trainer and the teen. Teens must demonstrate that they have successfully handled each role play scenario before being assigned a shift. The training challenges perceptions and helps them grow as individuals and as leaders. This year, we will offer four teen advisor training programs. It is our goal to not only increase the number of

trainings but also to try different training modalities including video conferencing. With increased marketing and outreach efforts, we anticipate being able to attract, with the aid of community partners enough youth to reach our goals.

Currently, Teen Talk has two teen advisors offering advice five-hours per night, six nights a week, with one supervisor per night. By the end of year three, we want to have 16 teen advisors offering advice eight-hours per night, seven nights a week. This would require 4 supervisors per night. As the number of teen advisors increases, it is our goal to have a pool of 20 trained supervisors to draw from as we assign shifts throughout the week. In addition to our paid supervisors, we will identify and partner with graduate schools in Los Angeles that require students to gain experience in the field by volunteering their services.

## Evidence of Effectiveness

In their 41 years of training teens as peer advisors, Teen Line has found that participating teens build self-confidence and empathy, and gain skills in problem solving, negotiation, and crisis management, skills which will help teens throughout their lives. Their most recent training evaluation shows that after their training, 93% of teens feel confident they can provide necessary support as well as provide important resources for the teens in crisis. This is 50% higher than teens reported prior to the comprehensive training. Teen Talk teen advisors will be trained to approach each app user with compassion and empathy, making them feel validated and understood. This experience gives them the opportunity to become leaders of change in their community, breaking the silence and stigma that surround teen issues.

## Conclusion

In today's challenging environment, Teen Talk provides support to tens of thousands of teens in need. In order to continue to grow the impact of this critical resource, Jewish Big Brothers Big Sisters of Los Angeles needs additional support. Your gift can change the lives of distressed teens throughout Los Angeles and around the country.

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