IETP Worker Helpline
Celebrating 10 Years of Support
Introduction

2020 marks the tenth anniversary of the ICTI Ethical Toy Program (IETP) Worker Helpline. Over the last decade, our Worker Helpline has provided free, confidential counselling and advice to 17,776 workers – supporting them across a broad range of personal and work-related issues.

Front-line workers in factories play a critical role in the success of the global toy, play and entertainment industries. From piloting new approaches to advance women’s empowerment to established programs supporting migrant parent workers, our Worker Helpline is one of a range of IETP initiatives to advance worker well-being at factories.

Alongside offering guidance and support, our Helpline serves as an important grievance mechanism which factory workers use to report and resolve issues they may otherwise have difficulty raising. Since launch, the Helpline has received calls from 17,776 workers, with 1,145 cases escalated to our teams on the ground in China for further investigation and remediation where necessary.

It’s because of these measurable impacts that our Worker Helpline is highly valued by workers, factories and buyers alike. Factory workers have access to an effective, trusted resource which they can rely on for guidance and support. Factory managers receive important insights to help them understand workers concerns, uncover potential issues and quickly resolve these before they escalate.

Brands and retailers have confidence in our Helpline’s effectiveness in identifying and remediying issues in their supply chains at factories – supported by IETP’s experienced teams who work directly with factories to ensure that issues are resolved to the satisfaction of workers.

New technologies will bring new opportunities to support workers. Looking ahead, IETP’s Worker Helpline will continue to play a key role as we expand our reach to support more workers across a wider range of countries and sectors.

Carmel Giblin
CEO & President
ICTI Ethical Toy Program
IETP works hard to ensure that products are manufactured in safe work environments which respect the rights and well-being of workers. To support front-line workers at factories, many of whom are migrant workers, back in 2010 IETP established a confidential Worker Helpline service which workers could use to ask any questions related to their work or personal lives.

The purpose of the Helpline is to inform, educate and empower workers so they can effectively manage work-related issues and their personal lives. It also acts as a confidential grievance mechanism, when needed. Workers typically use the Helpline to obtain information about appropriate overtime wages, labor contracts, social insurance, pension plans or paid maternity leave to be sure they are receiving the correct pay and benefits entitlements under Chinese law. They also seek support with relationships, homesickness, health issues or other personal issues.

To ensure workers are aware of the Helpline service, all certified factories are required to post information about worker’s rights and the Helpline in public areas, and to distribute Helpline Cards, which are pocket-size worker information cards that highlight worker’s labor rights, and include the toll-free Helpline number. The Helpline Cards also provide information about the type of support workers can expect when they contact the Helpline.

A total of 1,659,000 Helpline Cards have been distributed to approximately 1,879 factories covered in the Helpline program since the Helpline first launched in June 2010. Factories are required to distribute Helpline cards to all their workers to obtain IETP certification.
## 10 years of impacts

- **1,659,000** Helpline Cards distributed (new design and number introduced in 2018)
- **1,879** factories covered
- **17,776** workers contacted the Helpline
- **1,145** cases escalated
- **792,116** workers available to
- **10** years in operation

Insights from the Worker Helpline inform the ongoing development of IETP’s tools and services for responsible sourcing, helping to ensure that IETP remains effective in supporting the evolving needs of front-line workers. Data insights from the Helpline also help factories and buyers to predict and manage risk and raise standards, strengthening resilience in supply chains.

Women make up the majority of the global toy manufacturing workforce; in China approximately 61% of toy factory workers are women. Reflecting this, the majority of callers to IETP’s Worker Helpline are women – for example, in 2019, 72% of calls made to the Worker Helpline came from women.

In supporting toy factory workers, IETP’s Worker Helpline promotes action towards achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) covering both gender and other health and well-being issues.
Helpline Process

1. Workers call or email the Helpline

2. Our trained Helpline specialists answer workers’ questions, provide suggestions, listen to workers concerns

3. If a case cannot be solved via the call, we collect additional details to allow further follow-up

4. Follow-up steps may include liaising with the factory, or passing details to IETP’s technical team for further investigation

5. Verify that issue(s) raised have been resolved to the satisfaction of the caller
Celebrating 10 Years of Success

Key milestones over the past 10 years

- Worker Helpline launched (2010)
- Answered the first 1,000 inquiries (2011)
- Resolved the first 500 escalated cases (2011)
- Convened our first worker Helpline roundtable, bringing together Helpline organizations to exchange ideas and best practices (2012)
- 5,000 total inquiries (2012)
- “Word of mouth” became the 2nd highest method of how workers discover the Worker Helpline, an endorsement of the Helpline among workers (2013)
- Extended hours of operation to 11 am to 9:30 pm (2014)
- 93% of factory management shared positive feedback on the Helpline, an increase from 55% in 2013
Added QQ, an instant messaging software, for workers to contact IETP

203,050 Helpline cards distributed free-of-charge to factories, boosting promotion of the Helpline to reach more workers

Completed a special project for a toy brand to operate the first of its kind *Helpline service for factory construction* workers in China

Extended hours of operation further to *9 am to 9 pm*, brought the Helpline operation team in-house

Resolved 1,000 escalated cases

Updated internal procedures to ensure resolution of critical Helpline cases is verified in the most recent on-site audit

10,000 total inquiries

2014

2015

2016

2017

2018

2019

15,000 total inquiries
Extending operating hours to support more workers

In 2018, we extended the Helpline hours of operation from 10 to 12 hours a day, improving accessibility and adding convenience for both day and night shift workers. As a result, compared to 2017, the total number of inquiries significantly increased by 57% (2018) and 70% (2019).

![Number of Helpline Inquiries by year](chart)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total No.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>1,328</td>
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<tr>
<td>2016</td>
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<td>1,079</td>
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<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>1,694</td>
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<td>2019</td>
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Investing in our Helpline to provide more follow-up support

Helpline cases which cannot be fully resolved through phone or email conversations with workers are referred for further follow-up. The majority of these cases are subsequently resolved via our Simplified Procedure (SP). Following this procedure, our dedicated team of helpline specialists contact the factory and liaise with the factory management to discuss and resolve issues on the workers behalf. In most cases, factories respond with a prompt explanation or a solution to issues raised.
IETP’s Helpline team works to clarify any misunderstandings, provide suggestions, and educate both workers and factories about their rights and responsibilities. Supporting factories to strengthen communication with their workforce helps to promote a harmonized working environment and enables factories to respond to issues before they escalate.

The last few years have seen an increase in the number of cases referred for further follow-up. This increase is not an indication of a shift in levels of compliance at factories, but instead reflects recent investments made to further develop the Worker Helpline service. These investments include extended operating hours; newly-designed promotional materials and Helpline cards; additional contact points via WeChat; and streamlined processes for escalation and remediation.

These enhancements have enabled our teams to increase the level of support and follow-up offered to workers via the Helpline – resulting in increased usage and greater confidence and trust in the Helpline service.
Helpline inquiries increase during peak production season

Each year, we usually see a reduction in the number of helpline inquiries between January and March. This period reflects the Chinese New Year holidays – a time when factories close and workers reunite with their families, hence fewer personal or work issues occur.

Production demand in the toy, play and entertainment industries is highly seasonal. These seasonal swings in production may require factories to substantially increase their workforce during the summer months, with worker numbers fluctuating by as much as 58% between high and low production season at some factories.

Recruiting a high intake of workers over a short time-frame can create added pressures for workers and factories alike. As a consequence, the IETP Worker Helpline receives more inquiries during the summer peak production months (April to August) in China.
Geographic distribution of inquiries

The majority of helpline inquiries come from the traditional manufacturing hub area in China – the Canton area (including Dongguan, Shantou, Shenzhen) – reflecting the geographic distribution of IETP’s factory members.

Number of Helpline Inquiries by area:
Benefits for Workers

The Worker Helpline provides information and personal support for workers and serves as an effective, confidential grievance mechanism, which workers can trust and use without fear of retribution.

Factory workers also use the Helpline to build their knowledge of occupational safety issues, labor rights, wages and benefit entitlements under national labor law.

Through the Helpline’s support, workers are better equipped to resolve issues, either directly themselves or via the Helpline – labor disputes have been effectively resolved, back pay provided and living conditions improved.

Having independent qualified professionals to confide in ensures that workers receive help both personally and professionally and that they are protected from retaliation – all of which helps to relieve stressful emotions, improve job satisfaction and positively influence morale and motivation.

HELPLINE IN ACTION

Correcting a misunderstanding on wage calculations amid COVID-19

A factory resumed operations in late February 2020. Workers flagged to the IETP helpline that the factory had only paid them wages from the end of February. However, as per guidance issued by the Chinese Government, workers should have received their basic salary for the whole month.

The helpline team contacted the factory’s Human Resource Department and discovered that the factory’s Human Resources staff had misunderstood the guidance. The factory admitted the mistake and back paid all workers the correct salary amounts covering the whole month.
Helping a Migrant Parent deal with stress related to COVID-19

A worker contacted our helpline to share that due to school closures, her two children had to attend classes via the internet. However, since the factory started resuming operations, she had to leave her children to be looked after by her grandparents who were incapable of helping her children with their studies. She was concerned because one of her children would be sitting a critical exam that might determine his/her future. She wanted to quit her job, but her husband’s earnings could not feed the family of six.

The Helpline team showed sympathy by listening to her concerns, shared that we understand the difficulties of being migrant parents, and shared techniques to help improve the workers remote parenting skills – for example, video calls to maintain the relationship with her children and to care for their health and to help support them in their studies.

The worker thanked our Helpline team for listening to her concerns and said she would contact the Helpline again if she experienced similar in the future.

Resolving a misunderstanding about resignation

A worker called the Helpline to tell us he had resigned from his post, but the factory’s Human Resource team would not process his resignation request or issue his final salary payment – the worker had already purchased a train ticket to return to his hometown and therefore needed to resolve this matter urgently.

Our Helpline staff contacted the factory and determined that the worker had not followed the factory’s internal resignation procedure that requires workers to submit applications to resign in writing. Our team liaised with the factory who agreed to release the worker from their employment and pay the outstanding salary amount due to him. We also provided recommendations to the factory, so that it could strengthen internal communications to ensure that workers are aware of the correct procedures for resignation and other issues.
Benefits for Factories

The Helpline acts as a communication bridge and effective labor dispute mechanism between factory workers and management. It enables factories to assess real-time situations and, as a result, uncover potential abuses, hazards or other issues that they may have been unaware of but urgently need to address.

Since Helpline operators encourage factory workers to maintain a constructive dialogue with factory management, our Helpline fosters positive and fruitful exchanges between factory management and workers. Factory managers report that the Helpline “improves worker-management relationships, builds trust and increases the ways that workers and management can communicate”.

The Helpline paves the way for IETP follow up where necessary – factories can, therefore, achieve quicker resolution of worker-related issues before these escalate. All of these processes help to reduce employee turnover and increase workers satisfaction.

HELPLINE IN ACTION

Helping a factory respond to a strike

A factory contacted the Helpline for help with an escalating labor dispute related to the factory’s relocation. The factory reported that “workers had heard about our plans to relocate the factory and then began to speculate that factory would not follow its legal obligations to provide employees with necessary compensation.” These misplaced concerns subsequently triggered a day of strikes by all workers in the factory.

Our Helpline team helped the factory improve its communication and strengthen worker engagement to ensure all managers were aware of the details behind decisions made and, where possible, supportive of these. We recommended that the factory hold a meeting with worker representatives to explain the details behind the factory’s relocation and to seek their consent. We also suggested that the factory create an internal response mechanism to respond to labor disputes and appoint staff trained in employee relations to listen and address workers’ concerns. Our advice helped the factory resolve the labor dispute and strengthen communications at the new production site.
Benefits for Toy Brands, Retailers & Licensors

The Helpline provides workers with an alternative vehicle to communicate their personal and work-related concerns in between IETP factory audits and Progress Visits. Workers are on the front-line of production, the issue or potential risks raised by them via our Helpline for timely remedy by the IETP team enables brands, retailers, licensors, and vendors to deliver on their responsible sourcing commitments and support the safety and well-being of workers in their supply chain.

Insights gathered via the Helpline help brands to understand areas of vulnerability and address potential risk in their supply chain. The levels of follow-up action taken by factories are considered by some buyers as an indication of their commitment to ethical manufacturing, helping buyers to select strategic suppliers for long term collaboration.

A thank you call

Our Helpline team received a call from a worker who had recently left a job in a factory outside of the program to start work at an IETP Certified Toy Factory:

“I used to work in another factory where I often had to work overtime and was treated poorly, but I had no one to talk to about it. I am grateful that my new employer provides this Helpline service for us, and I am pleased to see a more caring and supportive environment”.

Get in touch

Join forces with us through our worker well-being programs, social certification program, and capability-building program. Together, we can build better lives for workers and stronger industries through ensuring ethical production.

Contact us if you would like to:
- Learn more about our worker well-being, social certification, or capability-building programs
- Participate in our well-being programs to support thousands of workers employed at factories
- Arrange a trial of our Connect Platform – a user-friendly and effective responsible sourcing management tool
- Explore the capability-building programs we offer to buyers and factories

Contact us:
- **Email:** info@ethicaltoyprogram.org
- **Website:** www.ethicaltoyprogram.org
- **Phone:** (+852) 2111-2462

About ICTI Ethical Toy Program

ICTI Ethical Toy Program (IETP) is a leading responsible sourcing program. We work with factories, brands, retailers, and civil society groups to protect labor standards in global supply chains, address common challenges, and improve standards through the provision of training.

We provide certification, assessment tools, capability building and training programs which support companies to achieve their objectives and support supply chain stability and reliability. Our in-factory worker well-being programs support thousands of workers employed at factories around the world, as well as a Worker Helpline in China which has supported over 17,000 factory workers since launch.

In addition to offices in Asia, Europe and North America, we work with four approved audit firms who provide us with the global network needed to implement our certification program, and other industry partners on worker well-being programs.