

A series of reports on issues facing children today

Children talking to ChildLine about family relationship problems

Key findings

- In 2006/07, 20,586 children and young people spoke to ChildLine about family relationship problems, representing 12 per cent of all calls.
- As well as the 20,586 callers, 22,704 children and young people rang to talk about another issue but also mentioned family relationship problems.
- In total, 43,290 children and young people spoke to ChildLine in 2006/07 about family relationship problems (either specifically or among other subjects), making it by far the most commonly discussed issue overall.

The figures that follow refer to a sample of the data from calls to ChildLine about family relationship problems (see methodology section for more details).

- In 2006/07, 4,215 children and young people in the sample spoke to ChildLine about conflict between themselves and their parents. Some of these callers described very serious conflict. Eighteen per cent talked about being physically abused and 12 per cent said that they had been emotionally abused.
- Parents/carers abusing alcohol was an issue mentioned often by those who called ChildLine to talk about conflict between themselves and their parents.
- In 2006/07, 395 children and young people in the sample spoke to ChildLine because they were worried about conflict between their parents. In some cases, they talked about violence between their parents that they had witnessed and found very distressing.

- Children and young people who called ChildLine about conflict in their family often talked about their parents' separation or divorce, the emotional turmoil that one or both parents were suffering as a result, and the impact that the break-up had had on them and on other members of the family. Many callers talked about feeling confused as to what had caused their parents' separation and about being worried that it might be their fault.
- Many children who called ChildLine to talk about conflict within their family also talked about physical abuse. In the majority of cases this was perpetrated by parents against them or their siblings, though in some cases callers were physically abused by siblings.
- In 2006/07, 56 children and young people called ChildLine about being a carer. Half of this group were either caring for an adult (mainly a parent) who was disabled, who had an illness (mental or physical) that had left them unable to care for themselves, or who had debilitating drug or alcohol problems, while the other half were caring for siblings.
- A lot of the young carers who called ChildLine talked about feeling very stressed and pressured by the responsibilities that they had, and about feeling unsupported, with problems such as not having enough time for themselves or to see friends, and falling behind with schoolwork as a result of trying to fulfil their caring duties.
- ChildLine also received calls from young people (under the age of 18) who were struggling to cope with being a parent, with one in five of them being under the age of 15. Some were struggling so much they were concerned that they might smack or hit their child.

1. Evidence: what children and young people tell ChildLine

1.1 Definitions and methodology

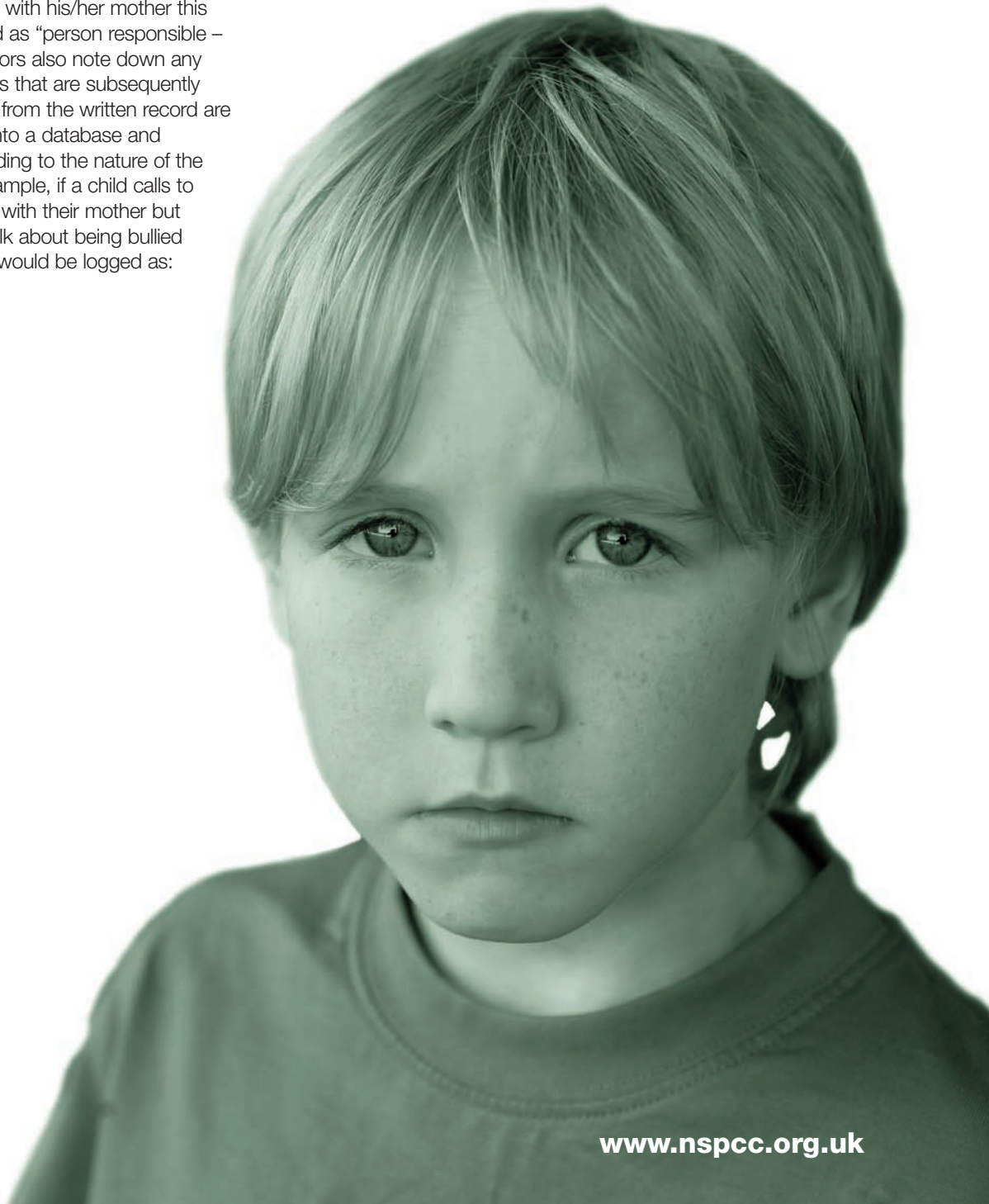
When a child or young person talks to ChildLine, the counsellor should be able to ascertain basic details such as the age and gender of the caller, identify the main reason why the caller rang ChildLine, and who the person responsible for or involved in the main problem is (eg, if the caller is having problems in their relationship with his/her mother this would be recorded as “person responsible – mother”). Counsellors also note down any additional problems that are subsequently discussed. Details from the written record are later transferred onto a database and categorised according to the nature of the problem/s. For example, if a child calls to talk about arguing with their mother but then goes on to talk about being bullied at school, the call would be logged as:

Main problem: family relationship

Additional problem: bullying

Person responsible: mother

In the majority of cases this is the only information that is recorded about callers. However, if the counsellor has concerns about the safety of the caller, feels that they may be at risk of serious harm and/or the counsellor thinks that it is likely that the caller will ring ChildLine back, then more detailed information is recorded and a summary of the discussion that takes place is input into the database.



2. Statistics

This casenote reports what children and young people told ChildLine about family relationship problems between April 2006 and March 2007. During this period, 20,586 children and young people called ChildLine specifically to talk about relationship problems within their immediate family. This represents 12 per cent of all callers, making it the second most common specific reason (after bullying) that children and young people give for calling ChildLine.

In addition to the 20,586 children and young people who called ChildLine in 2006/07 specifically to speak about family relationship problems, a further 22,704 called to talk about other issues, but also mentioned problems within their family of one sort or another. For example, one 12-year-old girl called ChildLine to talk about being bullied at school but went on to say: "I haven't got anyone to talk to about the bullying, my mum and dad are never around."

This means that, overall (including callers for whom family relationship problems are the

main reason for calling and also callers for whom it is an additional problem that they mention), family relationship problems are by far the most commonly discussed issue for children and young people.

For the majority (61 per cent) of the callers where family relationships were given as the main reason for calling, only the basic data were recorded, ie, gender, age, main problem, additional problem (where there was one) and person responsible (where this was applicable). This analysis of the calls to ChildLine between April 2006 and March 2007, where the main reason for calling was family relationship problems, is based on a sample of records from the 39 per cent of callers for whom a detailed account of the discussion was recorded. The findings are not necessarily representative of all calls about family relationship problems but they do provide a useful snapshot of the sorts of problems children and young people experience. Where direct quotes from children and young people have been used in this casenote, identifying details have been changed to protect the identities of callers.

2.1 Children and young people (CYP) counselled in 2006/07 who said that family relationship problems (FRP) were their main reason for calling.

	Number of girls counselled about FRP	Number of boys counselled about FRP	Total number of CYP counselled about FRP	% of all CYP counselled about FRP
Records with full details	6,173	1,801	7,974	39%
No further information available, ie, basic details, no text	9,115	3,497	12,612	61%
Total callers where FRP is the main problem	15,288	5,298	20,586	100%

In addition to the thematic analysis of a sample of records from calls about family relationship problems, a focus group was conducted with ChildLine counsellors in order to supplement the data with their unique insights into what issues children face in terms of problems within their immediate families.

In ChildLine's caller record system, there are a variety of subcategories for family relationship problems. These include:

- conflict with parents
- conflict with siblings
- conflict between parents
- sibling favoured (ie, the caller feels that their sibling is preferred by their parents or carers),
- under 18s with children – coping problems (ie, young people who are struggling to cope with being a parent)
- young carer (ie, callers who are the main carer for an adult member of their family)^a
- carer sibling (ie, callers who are the main carer for a brother or sister)

2.2 Type of family relationship problem (FRP) that children and young people (CYP) were counselled about in 2006/07.^b (From the sample records these figures represent those records where we have full details (ie, the 7,974 total) and that have sub-coded data.

Subcategory of FRP	Number of girls counselled about specific aspect of FRP from coded records total	% of girls counselled about specific aspect of FRP from coded records total	Number of boys counselled about specific aspect of FRP from coded records total	% of boys counselled about specific aspect of FRP from coded records total	Total number of CYP counselled about specific aspect of FRP from coded records total	% of CYP counselled about specific aspect of FRP from coded records total
Conflict with parents	3,304	82%	911	84%	4,215	83%
Conflict with siblings	609	15%	163	15%	772	15%
Conflict between parents	315	28%	80	7%	395	8%
Sibling favoured	281	7%	55	5%	336	7%
Under 18s with children – coping problems	99	2%	4	0%	103	2%
Young carer	25	0%	3	0%	28	0%
Carer sibling	23	0%	5	0%	28	0%

These subcategories are very diverse, ie, the problems faced by young carers are very different to those faced by young people who are concerned about conflict between their parents. Records for one hundred children and young people from each subcategory were analysed, and the main themes for each were drawn out.^c It was then possible to identify common themes. As is clear from the figures, only a very small number of children were counselled about some subcategory issues, such as being a young carer. However, the experiences of these few are as important as those of any other child counselled and therefore small subcategories have been given the same equal attention in this casenote as larger subcategories.

^a From November 2006, “young carer” and “carer sibling” were no longer sub-codes, but now a “tagging code”, which can be attached to a record with any main problem. Therefore, the totals are only representative of seven months of the family relationships category.

^b NB: percentages do not add up to 100 because in some cases more than one sub-code may apply.

^c For subcategories where there were less than 100 children and young people's records, eg, Young Carer/Carer Sibling, all records were analysed rather than just a sample.

3. Conflict with parents

In 2006/07, over 4,000 (4,215) children and young people (of which 78 per cent were girls) spoke to ChildLine about conflict between themselves and their parents. The majority of these tended to be teenagers, with 86 per cent of callers being aged 12 or over (as compared to 76 per cent of all callers to ChildLine being in this age group). Some callers described arguments with parents of the type that are common among young people, such as rowing with parents about staying out past the time that they were supposed to be home, parents not approving of boyfriends/girlfriends, or about callers not having done household chores.

"I've been having very bad arguments with my mum. We recently had an argument about my hair and staying out late." Girl, teenager.

"My mum is always shouting at me for spending a lot of time on my computer and for not doing my chores. It makes me feel sad and want to run away." Girl, teenager.

In some families, arguments between young people and their parents were caused by differences of opinion about cultural issues, such as what clothes parents thought young people should be wearing (eg, whether Muslim young women should be wearing a veil), or the extent to which young people observed cultural or religious practices.

"I want to leave home...Dad doesn't approve of my boyfriend and he won't let me see him. I'm afraid he's going to beat up my boyfriend." Girl, teenager.

Some callers described very serious conflict between themselves and their parents. Eighteen per cent (735 callers) talked about being physically abused and 12 per cent (485 callers) said that they had been emotionally abused. One 15-year-old girl told ChildLine: "I don't get on with my mum and dad. My dad hits me...I told them that I'd call social services and they said that if I did that I would be kicked out."

In many cases, children and young people said that their parents had separated or divorced, and some said that the conflict between themselves and their parents had started as a result. For example, one 18-year-old boy said:

"I've just had a massive argument with my mum. It happens a lot. Today she threw all my stuff out on the street. It's been bad since Dad left."

Many callers talked about their struggles to form relationships with parents' new partners. "My stepdad is not my real dad. I don't feel loved or included in anything but my younger brother is...I hate the atmosphere in the house." Girl, aged 14.

In some cases, callers felt that their relationship with their birth parent was suffering as a result of changes in the family, for example, one 12-year-old girl told ChildLine that: "My stepdad moved in over the summer. I feel like mum and him want me out of the family and that he has taken my mum away...I want my mum back, I've tried talking to her but she doesn't listen because she doesn't want him to be cross with her."

Parents or carers with alcohol problems were an issue mentioned often by children and young people calling ChildLine to talk about conflict between themselves and their parents.

"My parents have split up, mum has changed, she is always out, friends are always round and she is always drinking...I told her how I feel but nothing has changed, then I told Dad and he discussed it with her, then she shouted at me for telling him." Girl, aged 12.

"I'm alone in the house with my sister. Mum and Dad have just left, they had a massive fight. Dad has been drinking. He always drinks and then hits us and says it's our fault and that he wishes we hadn't been born." Girl, aged 11.

When young people called ChildLine to talk about conflict between them and their parents, they sometimes mentioned that a family member had recently died. In some cases callers recognised that their parent/s were suffering emotionally as a result of the bereavement and that this was a source of conflict between them.

"I've been having loads of rows with mum...Her sister died recently. I've tried to talk to her about it but we just end up arguing again. We used to have a good relationship." Girl, aged 14.

4. Conflict with siblings

In 2006/07, 772 children and young people can be identified in the sample who talked to ChildLine about problems in their relationships with their brothers and sisters (79 per cent of these callers were girls). There were a slightly higher proportion of younger callers for this subcategory: 25 per cent were aged 5 to 11 (compared to 23 per cent of all callers to ChildLine in this age range). Some callers described arguments with siblings about things that are fairly normal, such as their brother or sister not respecting their privacy and going through their belongings or reading their diary, or older brothers and sisters not wanting to play with them.

“My sister shuts me out when she has friends visiting. It makes me feel lonely and left out. I try to join in but they don’t want me.” Girl, aged 12.

“My younger brother is driving me crazy. He bangs loudly on the door, throws things at me and don’t give me any peace. My parents just tell me not to be so sensitive.” Girl, aged 15.

However, other callers talked about being seriously bullied by their siblings (nine per cent specifically mentioned bullying as an additional problem).

“My brother has been bullying me for a long time, hitting and punching me. He has given me a black eye in the past. I’m frightened of him. He is always angry and bossing me around.” Boy, aged 10.

Some talked about a specific aspect of their brother’s or sister’s behaviour, such as their self-harming, or drug or alcohol abuse, and how this impacted on the family. In many cases, their sibling’s behaviour was causing arguments with them and their parents. Often it was in the context of other problems within the family, such as parental separation or alcohol abuse.

“My mum and my sister are always arguing and my mum hits my sister...Both of them drink which makes it worse. I feel upset and scared. My mum takes it out on me and shouts at me. I’ve tried to speak to my sister about it but she told me where to go.” Girl, aged 13.



5. Conflict between parents

In 2006/07, 395 children and young people in the sample spoke to ChildLine because they were worried about conflict between their parents. There was a higher proportion of callers in the younger 5 to 11 age bracket for this subcategory (28 per cent) as compared to 23 per cent of all callers to ChildLine. Eight out of 10 callers were girls. Children and young people who called about conflict between their parents often described a very unsettled home life where their parents were either still together but had a difficult relationship and were arguing a lot, or who were divorced or separated and were on bad terms. In some cases, children and young people talked about violence between their parents. Callers were acutely aware of what was happening and often witnessed conflict between their parents, which they found very distressing. Many were unclear what had caused the breakdown of the parents' relationship and were concerned that it might be their fault.

"My parents have been fighting a lot for the last few weeks. I think they might be splitting up. I get on very well with both of them but I'm afraid that they will break up. Do you think that it is my fault?" Girl, aged 10.

"My parents were arguing about me today. I think that they might separate because of me." Girl, aged nine.

Many children and young people felt that they were stuck in the middle of their parents, and were being used either as a messenger between them, or to report back to one about what the other was doing.

"I feel stressed out by my parents arguing. Mum talks to me about her problems. Mum doesn't trust Dad and makes me spy on him and tell her what he's been doing. The stress of it is making me ill and made me lose friends." Girl, aged 11.

"Mum and Dad split up. Since then I feel like they've used me as a go-between in their arguments. Mum and Dad don't speak to each other and I am expected to pass messages." Girl, aged 16.

A commonly mentioned problem among callers was having to decide who to live with following separation or divorce, and feeling that they had betrayed the parent that they did not choose to live with.

"My dad has asked me to come and live with him and his girlfriend. At the moment I live with my mum. I'm really happy where I am but I don't want to hurt my dad. I don't want to hurt anyone." Girl, aged 13.

"My mum and dad had an argument. I haven't seen my dad since. I used to see him on Thursdays and at weekends. I'm scared that I won't be allowed to see Dad for ages. I think that my mum is jealous of my dad because when I go there we do really fun things." Girl, aged 11.

In a few cases, children and young people wanted to have contact with their non-resident parent, even though they had been violent towards their other parent, and this caused them to feel confused and guilty. Clearly, in cases like this, contact with the non-resident parent may not be in children's best interests, or supervised contact may be more appropriate. Nevertheless, the situation stirred up a lot of complex and painful emotions for children.

"I live with my mum; my parents have been separated for some years. I want to talk to her about my dad. I saw him on and off but then I stopped because he wasn't being very nice. I haven't seen him at all for the last year and I miss him. I feel trapped between my mum and my dad. My mum gets upset if I talk about him. My dad tried to get custody of me and my parents went to court. I had to decide who I wanted to live with. My dad said that I didn't love him or I would have chosen him." Girl, aged 11.

"I want to see my dad. He has been separated from my mum because he used to hit her. I feel confused and guilty." Girl, aged 12.

6. Sibling favoured

In 2006/07, over 300 (336) children and young people in the sample spoke to ChildLine because they felt that their parents or carers favoured their siblings over them. There were a smaller proportion of callers in the 16 to 18 age bracket for this subcategory (13 per cent as compared to 20 per cent of “all callers” to ChildLine), suggesting that this is an issue that affects children and young people less as they get older. Many of these callers described normal sibling rivalry, such as feeling jealous because their mum was paying a lot of attention to a new baby brother or sister, feeling that siblings get away with bad behaviour whereas they do not, that siblings are allowed to stay up later, or that they get more pocket money.

“I’m having problems with my mum. I feel really left out when I see her cuddling my baby sister. She is a week old.” Boy, aged 10.

In a number of cases, children and young people felt that their parents or carers treated their brothers and sisters differently for a particular reason, such as they had a serious illness, and therefore their parents’ attention was focused on them.

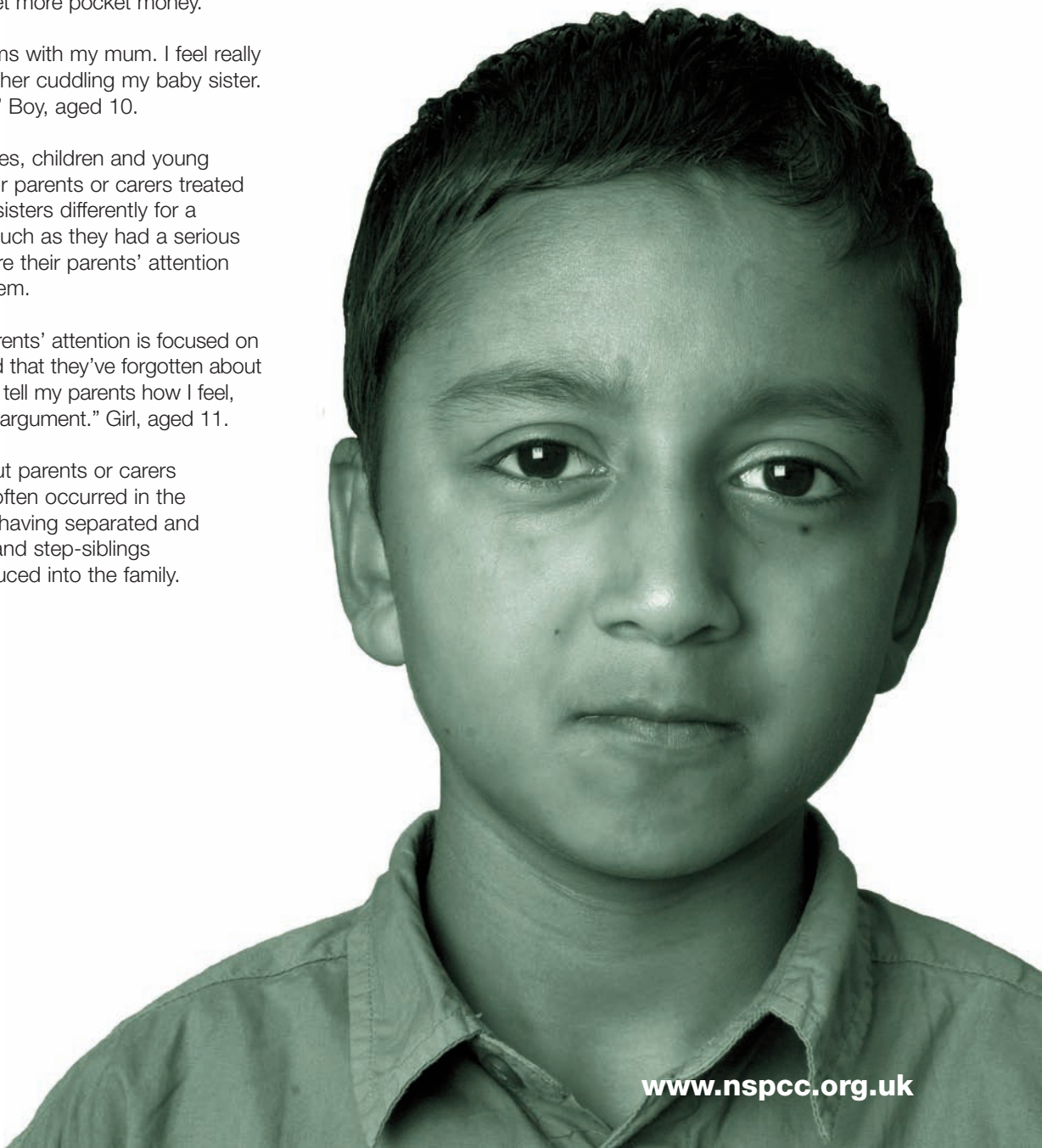
“I feel like all my parents’ attention is focused on my sick brother and that they’ve forgotten about me. When I tried to tell my parents how I feel, we got into a huge argument.” Girl, aged 11.

Callers talking about parents or carers preferring siblings often occurred in the context of parents having separated and new step-parents and step-siblings having been introduced into the family.

“My dad loves my brother more than he loves me. My parents divorced years ago and I live with my mum.” Girl, aged 10.

Of the 336 children and young people who talked to ChildLine about being treated differently from their brothers and sisters by their parents or carers, 19 per cent (62 callers) also said that they had been physically abused, and 18 per cent (59 callers) said they had been emotionally abused.

“My mum is threatening to kick me out. I used to live with my dad but he beat me up. My mum treats me differently to my sister because she thinks I’m like my dad.” Girl, aged 13.



7. Under 18s with children – coping problems

In 2006/07, 103 children and young people in the sample spoke to ChildLine because they had become a parent and were struggling to cope. Of these, four were boys and the rest were girls. The ages of callers ranged from 12 to 17, and one in five (20 cases) were under the age of 15.

The most recent government statistics show that in 2005 there were 42,187 conceptions to girls under the age of 18 in England and Wales. Of these, 46.6 per cent led to abortion, which means that approximately 22,000 babies were born to teenage mothers.¹ Although conception rates for the under 18s are at their lowest for 20 years, the UK still has the highest rates of teenage pregnancies in Western Europe.

Many of the problems that young people calling ChildLine were experiencing reflected those faced by new parents of any age, such as feeling overwhelmed by the responsibility of having a child, feeling exhausted from having to get up during the night and not sleeping enough, and finding it stressful if their baby cried excessively.

The majority of callers lived with their parents or other family members, although some of the older teenagers lived alone with their babies. Research shows that family support is extremely important for teenage mothers, and that the person they most rely on for practical and childcare support is their own mother. This support appears to have a positive influence on the parenting behaviour and practices of these young women.²

Most callers were no longer in a relationship with the father of the baby (some had never been), and for some their relationship with him was a concern. In fact, 16 per cent (16 callers) mentioned this specifically.

Research suggests that while maternal grandmothers may provide quantitatively more support, partner support (whether or not that partner is the father of the baby) becomes increasingly important to teenage mothers over time. Emotional support from

partners in particular has been related to better parenting practices.³

Even those young people who had a good support network felt apprehensive. For example, one 14-year-old girl said: "I had a baby yesterday. I live with my mum and my step-dad who are both very supportive but I still feel scared that I'm not responsible enough."

There were many young people, however, who did not feel adequately supported to look after their child and who were finding it very difficult to cope alone. Sixteen per cent of callers said that they felt lonely.

"I have a baby and I'm living alone in a flat. Mum kicked me out when she found out I was pregnant. It's so tiring. It's too much responsibility." Girl, aged 16.

"My kids are so draining; I can't look after them any more. I've got two kids. I had one at 17 and one at 18 and they were both a mistake. I've got no one to help me with them... I just feel like closing my eyes and never waking up again." Girl, aged 19.

"I feel sad and lonely. I've got a year-old baby who I love, but sometimes I'd just like to go out and act silly with friends. I feel like I'm missing out. I want some rest and some fun." Girl, aged 15.

Many callers were worried that they had failed to bond with their baby and did not love him/her. This is not uncommon among new mothers who are adults and is therefore not surprising among this younger group.

Worryingly, a few young people talked about the fact that they had not wanted to have the baby in the first place, and said that they had been forced to have him/her by their parents.

"I didn't want the baby from the beginning. I was going to have a termination but my mum wouldn't let me. I've tried to love the baby but I can't." Girl, aged 16.

"I never wanted my baby since getting pregnant, and now I'm not bonding with her or loving her, but am forcing myself to do the right thing and take care of her. I feel guilty because I hate doing it." Girl, aged 17.

"I didn't want the baby and I hate my mum for making me have it." Girl, aged 15.

"I am 15 and I've got a six-week-old baby. I wanted to have an abortion but my mum wouldn't let me." Girl, aged 15.

"I hate her. I can't get to sleep. I don't want her. She keeps crying." Girl, aged 15.

"I fell pregnant at 15, I arranged to have a termination but when I told my mum she made me have the baby. I feel angry with her for it." Girl, aged 16.

A number of young girls said that they had not realised that they were pregnant until a month or two before the birth, or even until they were actually in labour.

"I recently had a baby and I don't want it any more. I had no idea that I was pregnant because I didn't put on any weight and my periods didn't stop." Girl, aged 14.

Callers commonly talked about not finding time to do schoolwork, or about being too tired to concentrate when they are at school.

"I'm finding things really tough because I'm trying to juggle looking after my baby and going to school." Girl, aged 13.

Some young parents told ChildLine that they were struggling so much that they were concerned that they might smack or hit their child.

"I'm finding it so difficult to deal with her. She screams non-stop for hours. I feel like launching her across the room although I wouldn't do it." Girl, aged 17.

"I'm living on my own with my baby and I can't cope, I want to put him up for adoption because I'm scared that I might hit him." Girl, aged 17.

"My son is really bad. He is two and he has tantrums all the time. I keep smacking him because I can't cope." Girl, aged 15.

Some studies have pointed to a higher risk of child maltreatment among younger parents,⁴ although it is recognised that this risk is confounded by the environmental factors experienced by many younger parents,

including socio-economic deprivation, lack of social support, depression, low self-esteem and emotional stress.⁵ This suggests that in the absence of other factors, the age of the parent is not necessarily a risk factor for child maltreatment, but that younger parents may be particularly in need of support.

Some callers talked about their own experiences of abuse. In some cases, girls had become pregnant as a result of being raped. This resulted in very confused feelings towards the baby.

"I got pregnant after being raped and gave birth to my baby girl three weeks ago. I haven't slept since. I have mixed feelings about her. I love her but I hate her as well even though I know it's not her fault. I'm being supported by social services and a health visitor but I'm scared to tell them about my feelings towards the baby." Girl, aged 14.

Research shows that more than one-third (36 per cent) of all rapes recorded by the police are committed against children under 16.⁶

7.1 Counsellors' insights on under 18s with children – coping problems

The following quotes are direct quotes from ChildLine counsellors, obtained during a focus group exploring the types of issues raised by children and young people calling about family relationship problems.

"Lots of girls don't know that they're pregnant until not long before the birth. They are very young and don't really know their bodies very well, but in some cases there is also an element of being in denial of the facts and choosing to ignore them."

"Of girls who have become pregnant because they have been raped, the very worst cases are where it is incest. Sometimes the father of the baby is the girl's father or stepfather. Often there is no one that these girls feel they can tell. When they go to doctors appointments or to the hospital they are accompanied by the abuser, which makes it impossible for them to tell anyone. If other members of the family are aware of the situation, they sometimes conspire to keep it a secret."

8. Young carers/ carer sibling

In 2006/07, 28 young people in the sample spoke to ChildLine about caring for an adult member of their family (mainly a parent) and an additional 28 young people called ChildLine to talk about caring for sibling/s. Of these 56 young people, eight were boys and the rest were girls. The vast majority of these young people (38) were aged between 12 and 15.

Recent estimates of the numbers of young carers (children and young people who provide informal care for relatives, usually parents, in the home) suggests that there are approximately 175,000 young carers in the UK,⁷ although there may be many more who are not captured in official statistics.

Around half of the young carers identified in the small sample of calls to ChildLine were caring for an adult who was disabled, who had an illness (mental or physical) that had left them unable to care for themselves, or who had debilitating drug or alcohol problems. In the majority of cases this was a parent, although in some cases it was another adult member of their family, such as a grandparent.

The other half of the children and young people who called ChildLine to talk about being a carer were caring for siblings. Often this responsibility had fallen to them because their parents were mentally or physically ill or because they had drug or alcohol problems.

One caller rang to say: "My dad drinks and shouts all the time. I feel upset like crying and killing myself. I look after the little one – feeding him, getting him ready for bed, getting things ready for the morning and telling him stories. It's like I've got kids of my own." Girl, aged 15.

In some cases however, callers were caring for siblings because their parent/s were working very long hours.

Some of the children and young people who called ChildLine were caring both for a parent and for siblings: "After school and on weekends and holidays I have to look after everyone. I sometimes go to bed after midnight, having cleaned, cooked, washed and ironed." Girl, aged 14.

Research shows that the majority of people with care needs are mothers (and this is especially true in lone-parent families where mothers account for 70 per cent of people needing care), followed by siblings and then fathers. One in ten young carers is caring for more than one person. Two thirds of young carers provide domestic help in the home; 48 per cent provide general and nursing type care; 82 per cent provide emotional support and supervision; 18 per cent provide intimate personal care; and 11 per cent also provide child care.⁸

Young carers who call ChildLine talk about feeling very stressed and pressured by the responsibilities that they have, and about feeling unsupported: "My mum has a disability and lots of pain. My dad and brother are not very helpful; I feel so responsible. It's all too much; my head is so full of stuff." Girl, aged 12.

Being a young carer can be very isolating and some children and young people feel that there is no one to turn to for help. One caller who cared for her disabled relative called ChildLine asking for the number to: "...put myself in a care home. I can't do it any more without any outside help." Girl, aged 15.

Aside from the pressure of having the responsibility of caring for others at a young age, one of the main problems that callers faced was a lack of time. They had very little time for themselves or to see friends. One 10-year-old girl said: "I've got too much to think about, I don't have any time to play or see my friend. I've only got one friend."

Some callers talked about being afraid to go out and leave the person they were caring for alone. "I spend all my time looking after her [mum]. She takes drugs regularly, and I worry that she is going to kill herself. I have to keep her on a relaxed level. I never get to go out. It's peaceful if I do, but I just worry about what she's doing so it's not worth it." Girl, aged 12.

Callers to ChildLine also talked about having problems at school, either because they missed a lot of school, or fell behind with their schoolwork in order to fulfil their caring duties. "Mum gets ill and she makes me do things because she can't. I have to do all the housework. I've got my GCSEs coming up and it's really not helping. I feel scared and upset." Girl, aged 16.

Some callers said that teachers at their school knew that they were carers and were supportive of them when they were struggling with schoolwork or when they had days off school. Other callers, however, had either not told anyone at school or had told someone but had not found them to be very supportive. Some talked about getting into trouble for falling behind with their schoolwork as a direct result of being a carer.

Research shows that a fifth of young carers experience educational difficulties. This is especially marked in the 11 to 15 age group – the age when young people are making educational decisions and taking important examinations. Children and young people who are caring for a relative with drug or alcohol problems seem to be at particular risk of having educational difficulties.⁹ However, these figures do show some improvements since 1997, when 33 per cent of young carers were found to experience educational difficulties. This is due to increased awareness within schools of the educational difficulties of young carers.¹⁰

However, a recent survey of 1,000 teachers asking them about their views on young carers based on their own experiences at work, suggested that schools vary in the level of support that they offer to young carers and in the efforts that they make to identify young carers in their student population. Nine out of 10 teachers were concerned that some young carers might be falling through the net and remaining unidentified and unsupported. Almost half (44 per cent) were not aware whether the young carers that they had encountered were known to the wider teaching staff and to the senior management team, and 59 per cent said that they had no knowledge of a designated link person at their school with responsibility for looking after the needs of young carers. Fifty per cent also thought that the mechanisms in schools to identify and support young carers were not effective enough.¹¹

Some young carers who called ChildLine also talked about being bullied at school for being a young carer.

8.1 Counsellors' insights about being a young carer

The following quotes are direct quotes from ChildLine counsellors, obtained during a focus group exploring the types of issues raised by children and young people calling about family relationship problems.

"Children talk a lot about getting bullied, other children calling the person that they care for names or saying that they are smelly, for example."

"Children feel duty bound to help the person they are caring for but they really struggle to balance caring for them with schoolwork and seeing friends. It's far too much responsibility for them; I spoke to one young girl who was the sole carer for her mum. Her mum kept saying 'I don't know what I'd do without you' in a nice way but the girl felt that it put a huge amount of pressure on her and she had been feeling depressed and having panic attacks."



9. Conflict within the family – common themes

When children call ChildLine to talk about conflict in their families, whether that conflict is between them and their parents, between them and a sibling, or between their parents, there are a number of issues that they often talk about. These are:

- parental separation, divorce and living in step-families
- physical abuse
- alcohol abuse
- violence between parents/ domestic violence.

9.1 Parental separation, divorce and step-families

Many callers talked about their parents' separation or divorce, the emotional turmoil that one or both parents were suffering as a result, and about the impact that the break-up had had on them and on other members of the family. Callers talked about feeling worried that their parents' separation might be their fault and felt confused about what had caused it. Many talked about being caught in the middle of the conflict between their parents and being forced to choose with whom to live, or to decide how much contact they wanted to have with a non-resident parent.

Understandably, children and young people found this very upsetting and were very concerned about hurting one or both parents. Many children told ChildLine that they had no one else to talk to about what was happening and that it was very difficult to discuss the separation at home. What is clear from these accounts is that family break-up can be a source of great pain and anguish for children. What is also clear is that the impact of separation and divorce can be exacerbated or relieved by parents' responses or behaviour. Conflict between parents and a lack of communication between parents and children adds to the confusion and distress.

Divorce is increasingly common in the UK. Two-thirds of divorcing couples have

dependent children under the age of 16, and some three million of the 12 million children in the UK will experience the separation of their parents during the course of their childhood.¹² We know from research that it is usual for these children to experience a period of unhappiness and possibly behavioural problems, and a loss of self-esteem. Most will fully recover however, once they have settled back into a routine. This recovery process is helped enormously by a variety of factors including:

- good communication between parents and children
- parents maintaining a good relationship with each other
- the availability of wider family networks (especially grandparents) who are able to support children around the time of separation.

High levels of conflict between parents during or post separation can be extremely detrimental to the wellbeing of children and their future outcomes.¹³

Parental separation can be particularly difficult for children when followed by a number of changes to the family setting, for example where parents find new partners, or where new children are brought into the house.¹⁴ Calls to ChildLine reflect this, with many callers talking about finding it difficult to forge relationships with new step-parents, or feeling that their relationship with their birth parent has suffered as a result of the addition of new family members to the household. Lots of children also talked about feeling jealous of new step-siblings, revealing deep insecurities regarding their feelings about how much they are valued by their parent or step-parent.

9.2 Physical abuse

Many children who called ChildLine to talk about conflict within the family also talked about physical abuse. In the majority of cases this was perpetrated by parents against them or their siblings. In some cases however, this was perpetrated against the caller by a brother or sister. Research shows that a quarter of all children experience one or more forms of physical violence during childhood, the majority of which is experienced at home.¹⁵

9.3 Alcohol abuse

Callers often mentioned that their parent/s had a problem with alcohol abuse. The links between alcohol abuse and problems within the family are well documented; research shows that alcohol is a factor in one-third of child abuse cases.¹⁶ There is also a clear link between alcohol abuse and domestic violence: thirty per cent of men who assault their partners do so under the influence of alcohol.¹⁷ It is estimated that between 780,000 and 1.3 million children in England alone are affected by parental alcohol problems.¹⁸

9.4 Violence between parents/ domestic violence

Many children who called ChildLine about conflict within their families talked about violence between their parents. Research shows that over a quarter (26 per cent) of young adults report that physical violence sometimes took place between those caring for them during childhood. For five per cent this violence was constant or frequent.¹⁹

9.5 Counsellors' insights on conflict within the family

The following quotes are direct quotes from ChildLine counsellors, obtained during a focus group exploring the types of issues raised by children and young people calling about family relationship problems.

"Within some cultures, a lot of rows between parents and children are caused by differences in expectations between the generations. For example, because parents want their daughter to have an arranged marriage and she isn't happy about it, or because she has got a boyfriend who has a different religion, which the parents feel jeopardises the family honour."

"Often when parents are splitting up, they don't know how to talk to their children about it, or they don't even realise that they need to talk to them about it because they are so caught up in their own grief. A lot of children ring ChildLine because they can see that their parents are having a lot of problems and they're worried about what's going to happen, but neither parent has said anything to them."

"Children tell us that they feel like they have

no control over what is happening when their parents separate; they might have to move house, change schools and have their whole world turned upside down and they are just expected to get on with it. No one talks to them about how they feel about it or what they want."

"Having to decide which parent they want to live with following a break-up can be terribly traumatic for children. We get calls from children who feel devastated by having to make the choice because they desperately don't want to hurt either of their parents by not choosing them. Sometimes they might choose to live with Dad because they feel sorry for him because he would be living on his own otherwise, even if that's not what they really want to do. Once the decision is made, it's then very difficult for them to move, even if they're not happy where they are."

"When children suffer the loss of someone close to them, either because there has been a death in the family or because a parent has walked out of their lives, their grief is not always acknowledged. Somehow children are not expected to react in the same way as adults do by becoming depressed or withdrawn, for example. Children may also not show how sad they feel because they are afraid of upsetting their parent/s."

"Sometimes children may not understand how they are feeling, and their grief may come out in other ways like behaving badly at school. They may not even realise what is making them feel sad until they are talking to ChildLine about it."

"We get a lot of calls from children who are struggling to accept someone new into their lives like their parent's new partner or the partner's own children. Often they feel jealous or left out and that their parent doesn't have time for them any more. This is especially true if their parent and step-parent have a new baby together."

"We hear a lot from children about physical abuse, children talk about being hit by their brothers or sisters, but often it sounds like it's happening a lot in the family. The parents are hitting the children and each other; violence has become the norm for them."

10. Recommendations

10.1 Listening to the silent child

When families have problems, the silent child witnessing parental conflict may be experiencing a great deal of pain. This is not always noticed, and the child may not feel able to talk to anyone about their worries. Parents, professionals and other adults should ensure that children do not end up suffering alone. We all have a responsibility to find the time and the space to listen to children, and to encourage them to express their concerns.

10.2 Early intervention services for families

Experiencing domestic violence can impact on key outcomes for children. To reduce this impact and improve outcomes, the individual needs of children/young people affected by domestic violence must be identified and acted upon. Given the high degree of under-reporting of domestic violence, especially at an early stage, there is a need for early identification by all agencies. To undertake routine questioning, staff need to have an awareness of the nature and dynamics of domestic violence. They also need training to be able to recognise it, to ask the right questions and to take appropriate follow-through action, including referral.

Children's needs vary, even within the same family. Service provision must be responsive to this. Services must be based on the individual needs of the child, so that a range of provisions should be available in every area. Services should nurture the child's capacity to understand and survive their experience and build on existing strengths, while also recognising that children's coping abilities vary.

Children cannot be supported in isolation from the non-abusing parent. A good parent-child relationship, particularly with the non-abusing parent, is the best predictor of good outcomes. Supporting the abused parent is also an essential part of responding effectively to children's distress.

10.3 Therapeutic support

Children who have witnessed domestic violence should have access to therapeutic support services. It is possible to reverse the negative impact domestic violence can have on children only if they have access to specialist child-focused therapeutic support services, tailored to meet their individual needs.

10.4 Parenting programmes for young people

There is some evidence of poorer outcomes for children of young parents, including language and developmental problems, lower educational attainment, behaviour problems and increased risk of maltreatment. As mentioned earlier, this may be largely due to the adverse circumstances experienced by younger parents and their offspring, such as poverty. A recent review of the literature (Coren & Barlow 2007²⁰) evaluating the effectiveness of individual and group-based parenting programmes for teenage parents showed positive effects on a range of maternal and infant measures of outcomes. These included mother-infant interaction, language development, parental attitudes, parental knowledge, maternal mealtime communication, maternal self-confidence and maternal identity. There is a clear need for these to be available to all young people in order to maximise the parenting skills of adolescent parents.

In Northern Ireland, parenting education for young people and parents should be a key component of the Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) Family Matters Strategy.

10.5 Additional support for children and parents affected by separation and divorce

There is clear evidence that children and young people benefit emotionally post-separation where there is a positive relationship with both parents (Maclean 2004²¹) and that they are harmed by violence, abuse and conflict between their parents. However, there is a lack of comprehensive support aimed at helping

parents to resolve their difficulties and prevent harm to their children. Recently published research on the Government's piloting of in-court conciliation services has found that, while they have resulted in contact between children and their non-resident parent, it does not make this work well for children. The research states that "Co-parental relationships were competitive or non-existent, trust was low and conflict was high." On a test of children's wellbeing, called a strengths and difficulties questionnaire, roughly twice as many of the children of the 117 parents in the study had low or borderline scores as in the general population of children. The researchers have recommended that there needs to be a more therapeutic approach, where parents are taught anger management and how to focus on the needs of their children. "Interventions are needed where the primary goal is to address parental attitudes... and give children the best shot at contact that works for them, rather than for their parents and the courts." (Trinder & Kellett 2007²²)

It is clear that many children who call ChildLine are extremely distressed about their parents separating and feel they have no one to talk to about their concerns. There is a need for a nationally coordinated range of direct support services for children and young people experiencing parental separation, familial conflict and domestic violence.

Dedicated therapeutic work with children should take place when the child is in a safe and child-friendly environment, over several sessions, with the same support worker.

Direct work with children should help them to cope appropriately with the abuse they have heard or witnessed and to learn not to blame themselves for what has happened.

10.6 Support for young carers

While there has been increased recognition of the difficulties faced by young carers within schools over the last few years, and fewer are experiencing educational difficulties (Dearden & Becker

2004²³), it is still the case that many young carers are not getting the support that they require (Barnardo's 2006²⁴). The responsibility for identifying and supporting young carers rests with schools, adults and services for children. Currently many of these young people are falling through the gaps in the system.

10.7 PSHE as a statutory subject

Personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) (personal and social development (PSD) in Scotland) should be a statutory subject for all children to offer practical tips and advice for those who may be experiencing domestic violence. It should cover personal safety, relationships at home, domestic violence, and offer practical tips and advice for children who may be experiencing domestic violence. All PSHE and PSD teachers should be trained and know how to handle disclosures of violence and/or abuse.

In Northern Ireland, where the PSHE equivalent, Personal Development (PD), is a statutory part of the curriculum, there is considerable discretion as to what is taught. The Department of Education, Northern Ireland (DENI) should ensure that this matter is given priority in the teaching of PD and that teachers are equipped with materials, resources and training to teach it.

10.8 School counselling and listening services

Schools should offer counselling for children who are experiencing or have experienced domestic violence. Research into the needs of children affected by domestic violence identified their two primary needs as being safe and having someone to talk to. There have been some positive government-led initiatives to support listening services, including government funding for ChildLine services in Scotland, but it is essential that all children should have the help they need when they need it.

High thresholds for receiving local authority services mean that many 16- to 18-year-olds do not receive support from children's services and some vulnerable young people in violent intimate relationships are falling through this gap

and not being protected. It is important that all children are able to access confidential and responsive services such as ChildLine, the NSPCC Helpline, and the NSPCC's there4me.com service. These have a key role to play and the NSPCC welcomes the new funding from Westminster for these services and the support in Northern Ireland for ChildLine from the Department of Education. Schools should also offer counselling for children who are experiencing or have experienced domestic violence. Schools-based peer counselling or peer-to-peer support initiatives should be complemented by independent and fully trained school counsellors.

There is also a role for school counselling services to support children in dealing with wider problems they may experience in terms of family relationships. An evaluation of Glasgow's Counselling in Schools pilot project by Strathclyde University found that the most common presenting issue for young people using school counselling services was family problems, while the most common issue emerging during counselling for young people was relationships with parents.²⁵

10.9 Family support

Eighteen per cent (735 callers) of the sample talked about being physically abused by parents. This highlights the need for strong messages from government that physical punishment is not acceptable and for legislation to give children equal protection from assault. Families who are struggling to cope may require parenting or family support services to help them to address the underlying causes of the conflict, learn more about positive parenting techniques and to help them to communicate better. Information about parenting and family support services should be made available in easily accessible locations, such as GP surgeries. All children must be taught that physical abuse is unacceptable and encouraged to seek help from teachers or other trusted adults.

There needs to be a cultural change whereby parents are encouraged to access parenting and family support

services before problems escalate. These services should be non-stigmatising and non-judgemental in their approach. The calls from young parents highlight the incredible pressure that they face.

We recognise that the government is piloting a number of positive initiatives aiming to support vulnerable families, including ten health-led demonstration projects supporting young parents in disadvantaged communities. We hope these pilots will prove successful and that the learning from the pilots will be used to inform more widespread parenting support provision for young parents. It is essential that universal services, such as health visiting services, support young parents during the early years of their child's life, and signpost parents in even greater need to more specialist or intensive support services. We know there are considerable problems with the provision of health visitors in some areas and there is no relationship between the number of health visitors and of vulnerable families.²⁶

10.10 Services

When adult substance misusers are in receipt of support from one or more statutory or non-statutory bodies, the paramountcy principle must inform the work at all times. This states that the welfare of the child is the paramount consideration. It is imperative that agencies working with substance abusing parents or carers have (a) a clear process for identifying the family circumstances of their clients and (b) clear protocols in place for sharing information with external agencies when there is a child or children in the family.

Health and social care professionals need to be aware of the impact of parental alcohol and substance misuse on children, which is highly correlated with domestic violence and physical abuse. A child living with a substance misuser is therefore highly likely to be a child-in-need or a child-in-need-of-protection. More and better training is required to ensure that children and young people are adequately assessed and the provision of flexible, universal services should be substantially improved and made widely available.

Users of the NSPCC's Family Alcohol Service (FAS) report that they value its therapeutic approach, which identifies and builds upon the families' own values and strengths to achieve the treatment goals. They also appreciate the flexible approach adopted, including the provision of taxis for clients, the

willingness of staff to work out of hours, and the provision of home visits. Such therapeutic services should be more widely available, and should adopt the FAS model of working with children and the non-substance misusing partners of substance misusers.

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About the information in this report

The findings in this report are based on detailed analysis of calls to ChildLine from 1st April 2006 to 31st March 2007. Children and young people often talk to ChildLine because they know they will receive a confidential service and that what they say will not go any further unless they wish. ChildLine will always make an informed judgement as to whether the child can give realistic consent to act on his/her behalf. On rare occasions this contract of confidentiality can be broken if the child is assessed to be in a dangerous or life-threatening situation. The majority of children do not identify their whereabouts and maintain their own anonymity.

The counsellor will listen and take the child or young person seriously when they call. ChildLine will help the child to talk through their concerns, exploring what might make a difference, and whether there are supportive adults in their lives. Sometimes the child will practice what they would say to increase their confidence in speaking to such an adult. The counsellor will also give the child information on how other agencies can help. If the child wants ChildLine to make contact on their behalf, or this is assessed as necessary, ChildLine will mediate, advocate or refer the child to a relevant agency or person, such as social services, the police, the ambulance service, or a parent or teacher.

ChildLine's data is not comprehensive, as the main priority for helpline counsellors is to provide comfort, advice and protection to the caller, not to gather demographic or other information for research purposes.

The content of ChildLine counselling conversations is captured through written records. Every time a counsellor speaks to a young person, the counsellor notes the main reason the child called, any other concerns raised, and details of family and living circumstances revealed by the child, and a narrative of the discussion. Conversations are child-led, and not conducted for the purposes of research; but it is for precisely these reasons that they often reveal information that formal research might not uncover.

ChildLine provides a confidential telephone counselling service for any child with any problem, 24 hours a day, every day. In February 2006, ChildLine joined the NSPCC as a dedicated service, in order to help, support and protect even more children. ChildLine continues to use its own name, and the 0800 1111 phone number remains unchanged. Volunteer counsellors continue to provide a free 24-hour service for any child or young person with a problem.

For more information, please contact the NSPCC Library and Information Service on: **020 7825 2775** or email: **info@nspcc.org.uk** or contact the NSPCC Media Team on: **020 7825 2500**, email **media@childline.org.uk** or visit: **www.childline.org.uk/casenotes.asp**

Photographs posed by models. Photography by Larry Bray Photography (page 2 & 6) and Jon Challicom (page 8 & 12). All names and potentially identifying details have been changed to protect the identity of callers.

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NSPCC
Weston House
42 Curtain Road
London EC2A 3NH
Tel: 020 7825 2500
Fax: 020 7825 2525

www.nspcc.org.uk

ChildLine is a service provided by the NSPCC. In Scotland the ChildLine service is delivered by CHILDREN 1ST on behalf of the NSPCC.

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