

A series of reports on issues facing children today

Calls to ChildLine about sexual abuse

Key findings

- In its 20-year history, ChildLine has counselled more than 175,000 children about sexual abuse.
- In 2005/06, a total of 11,976 children spoke to ChildLine about sexual abuse – an average of more than one full classroom of children per day, every day of the year.
- On average, children who contact ChildLine about sexual abuse now do so much sooner after the abuse begins than they used to.
- In 94 per cent of calls to ChildLine about sexual abuse in 2005/06, the child knew his or her abuser. Fifty-nine per cent of abusers were family members, 35 per cent were acquaintances, and 5 per cent were strangers.
- Children waited longer before contacting ChildLine when the sexual abuse was committed by a father or stepfather. When the abuse was by an acquaintance or stranger, victims were much more likely to contact ChildLine soon after the abuse began.
- Rape was by far the most common type of sexual abuse reported, accounting for 63 per cent of calls to ChildLine about sexual abuse in 2005/06.

1. Evidence: what children tell ChildLine

1.1 Definitions

At ChildLine, the term “sexual abuse” covers a wide range of behaviours, including indecency (which includes flashing, as well as exposure to pornography); sexual harassment (defined as “comments and/or behaviour which are suggestive or disparaging”); sexual touching; and rape, which ChildLine defines as “vaginal and/or anal penetration or attempted penetration with fingers, penis or objects, and/or oral sex or attempted oral sex”. The Government’s definition of child sexual abuse, as found in *Working Together to Safeguard Children*¹, states that:

Sexual abuse involves forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, including prostitution, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. The activities may involve physical contact, including penetrative



(eg rape, buggery or oral sex) or non-penetrative acts. They may include non-contact activities, such as involving children in looking at, or in the production of, pornographic material or watching sexual activities, or encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways.

2,516 boys) rang ChildLine about sexual abuse, making it the fourth most common reason for children to call the helpline. Additionally, 2,697 children called to talk about other issues, but also discussed sexual abuse. This means that in 2005/06, a total of 11,976 children spoke to ChildLine about sexual abuse – an average of more than one full classroom of children per day, every day of the year².

1.2 How many children and young people call ChildLine about sexual abuse?

In 2005/06, 9,279 children (6,763 girls and

1.3 Calls to ChildLine about sexual abuse, 1 April 2005 – 31 March 2006

(Where sexual abuse is the main reason for calling)

Age	Girls		Boys		Total	
		% of known ages		% of known ages		% of known ages
Age unknown	1,015	n/a	443	n/a	1,458	n/a
5 years and under	42	1	16	1	58	1
6	41	1	12	1	53	1
7	72	1	40	2	112	1
8	89	2	31	1	120	2
9	158	3	52	3	210	3
10	230	4	90	4	320	4
11	351	6	117	6	468	6
12	641	11	140	7	781	10
13	991	17	261	13	1,252	16
14	1,046	18	390	19	1,436	18
15	1,150	20	357	17	1,507	19
16	594	10	309	15	903	12
17	257	4	213	10	470	6
18	86	1	45	2	131	2
Total (all calls about sexual abuse)	6,763		2,516		9,279	
Where age given		%		%		%
5–11 years	983	17	358	17	1,341	17
12–15 years	3,828	67	1,148	55	4,976	64
16–18 years	937	16	567	27	1,504	19
Total where age given	5,748		2,073		7,821	100

1.4 Gender and age

- Girls accounted for 73 per cent of calls to ChildLine about sexual abuse, with boys accounting for 27 per cent.
- Calls about sexual abuse accounted for 6 per cent of all girls' calls to the helpline in 2005/06, and 5 per cent of all boys' calls.
- Children aged 11 and under accounted for 17 per cent of calls to ChildLine about sexual abuse. Young people aged

12–15 accounted for 64 per cent of calls, and those aged 16–18 accounted for 19 per cent.

1.5 Types of abuse

About three-quarters (74 per cent) of the children who called ChildLine about sexual abuse in 2005/06 were specific about the type of abuse they had suffered. Within this group:

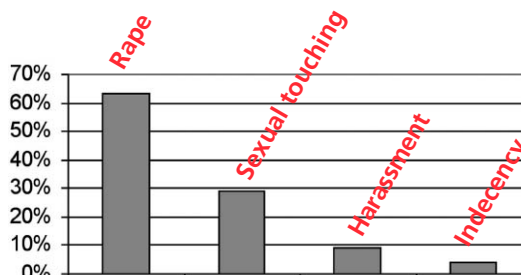
- Rape was overwhelmingly the most common type of abuse, with 63 per

cent of callers saying they had been raped. For example, 14-year-old Jacquie said: "My uncle has been forcing me to have sex with him. Now I think I might be pregnant."

- Sexual touching was mentioned by 29 per cent. "My father gets drunk and touches me when Mum's away," said 12-year-old Jodie. "It's been happening for about six months. We haven't had sex yet, but he says I'll have to soon."
- Nine per cent of callers who were specific about the type of abuse cite sexual harassment, and 4 per cent mentioned indecency. (Throughout this report, callers may have cited more than one type of abuse, so figures will add up to more than 100 per cent.) For example, 16-year-old Aimee said: "Every time one of my neighbours sees me or my sisters, he says something disgusting like: 'Show us your tits, love.' I try to ignore him, but he always says something gross, and I can feel him staring at me. It makes me really angry and scared. But I'm afraid to tell my parents – I think they'd say I bring it on myself because they don't like how I dress."
- Analysis of ChildLine caller records for 2005/06 showed some differences in the types of abuse carried out by different perpetrators. When **fathers** were cited as the abusers, 63 per cent of victims said they had been raped, 33 per cent said they had been sexually touched, and 6 per cent said they had been sexually harassed. (As above, victims may have mentioned more than one type of abuse, so the figures add up to more than 100 per cent.) This differs somewhat from when **stepfathers** were the perpetrators: when that was the case, 57 per cent of victims referred to rape, 44 per cent cited sexual touching and 10 per cent mentioned harassment. When children called ChildLine about sexual abuse committed by a **stranger**, 82 per cent cited rape, 9 per cent mentioned sexual touching, 6 per cent cited harassment, and 6 per cent cited indecency.

Most common types of sexual abuse reported to ChildLine in 2005/06

(Among callers who specified the type of abuse, 1 April 2005 – 31 March 2006)



1.6 Duration of abuse

- Two-thirds (67 per cent) of callers to ChildLine gave some information about how long the sexual abuse had lasted. Only 2 per cent of these callers said that the abuse had happened in the past; the vast majority said that it was still occurring.
- Some young people specified indeterminate lengths of time, saying, for example, that the abuse was "ongoing" (10 per cent of all calls), "recent" (10 per cent), or had been happening "for years" (1 per cent).
- Other children were more specific. Of those who mentioned a particular length of time the abuse had lasted: 27 per cent said less than one week; 18 per cent said one week to one month; 32 per cent said one month to one year; 16 per cent said one to five years; and 7 per cent said more than five years.
- The gender of the victim did not appear to affect the amount of time the abuse had been occurring before the victim contacted ChildLine.

1.7 Correlations between the identity of the abuser and the duration of the abuse

- For callers to ChildLine, the identity of the perpetrator appeared to make a significant contribution to how long the victim waited before contacting ChildLine. Children who were abused by their father or stepfather appeared to wait far longer before contacting the helpline.
- When a father was the perpetrator (and the victim mentioned the duration of

abuse), only 13 per cent of children called within the first week of the abuse starting, with only an additional 11 per cent calling between the end of the first week and the end of the first month.

- Similar results were found when a stepfather was the perpetrator: only 10 per cent of victims called within the first week of the abuse starting, with an additional 12 per cent calling before the end of the first month.
- In contrast, when the perpetrator was a stranger, 45 per cent of children who mentioned the duration of abuse called within a week of it first happening, and more than six in 10 (61 per cent) called within the first month.
- For children being abused by a known male acquaintance, the duration before contacting ChildLine falls somewhere between the above poles: 24 per cent of victims called within a week of the abuse starting, with an additional 14 per cent calling within the first month.
- For more information on the duration of sexual abuse prior to contacting ChildLine, see section 5.2.

1.8 Additional statistical data

While this report is based on ChildLine data, the appendix contains a brief overview of broader research into the sexual abuse of children, including results from the NSPCC's reference study, *Child maltreatment in the United Kingdom: a study of the prevalence of child abuse and neglect*. An important context for this report is that for the children who experienced sexual abuse **in the family**, the most common perpetrator was a brother or stepbrother.

- Of penetrative/oral acts of sexual abuse in the family, 38 per cent were by a brother/stepbrother.
- 23 per cent were perpetrated by a father.
- 14 per cent were perpetrated by an uncle.
- 13 per cent were perpetrated by a stepfather.
- 8 per cent were perpetrated by a cousin.
- 6 per cent were perpetrated by a grandfather.
- 4 per cent were perpetrated by a mother.

2. Perpetrators

2.1 Family, acquaintance, or stranger?

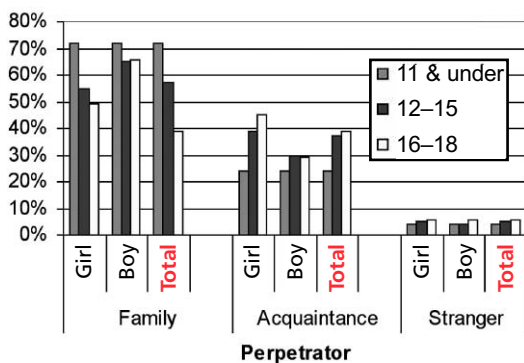
- More than nine in 10 children (91 per cent) who called about sexual abuse in 2005/06 told ChildLine who the abuser was. Among this group, 94 per cent knew their abuser – and this figure was consistent across all age groups.
- When the young person said who the perpetrator was, 59 per cent of abusers were family members (56 per cent for female victims, 67 per cent for male). Slightly more than one-third of abusers (35 per cent) were acquaintances – ie, known non-family members. Six per cent were strangers.
- One factor that did change across age groups was whether or not the abuser was in the victim's family. The younger the victim was, the more likely the abuse was to come from within the family. As children grew up, family members continued to be the most likely source of sexual abuse, but the percentage of reported abuse from known non-family members increased. The percentage for strangers remained consistent, changing by only one to two percentage points.
- For all ages, females were more likely than males to say that an acquaintance was the abuser. This was particularly true for females aged 16–18, for whom male acquaintances (including boyfriends) were the most common source of sexual abuse (24 per cent of cases). For this group, fathers accounted for 17 per cent of calls about sexual abuse.
- Eighty-two per cent of the children who called about sexual abuse specified the gender of their abuser. Of this group, 85 per cent said the abuser was male. When the victim was female, the abuser was male in 95 per cent of cases where a gender was specified. Male victims cited

male abusers in 56 per cent of cases, and female abusers in 44 per cent³.

- For both boys and girls, fathers were the most commonly cited perpetrators, accounting for 22 per cent of all calls about sexual abuse (22 per cent of female victims, 20 per cent of male victims).
- For girls, other frequently cited perpetrators were: male acquaintance (12 per cent), stepfather (7 per cent), boyfriend (6 per cent), stranger (6 per cent), mother's boyfriend (5 per cent), male schoolchild (5 per cent), brother (4 per cent), uncle (4 per cent), and friend of the family (4 per cent).
- For boys, the most commonly cited perpetrators after fathers were: mother (16 per cent), teacher (8 per cent), aunt (5 per cent), male acquaintance (5 per cent), stranger (5 per cent), stepfather (3 per cent), and friend of the family (3 per cent). Males as victims of sexual abuse are discussed in fuller detail in section 3.6.

2.2 Perpetrators of sexual abuse, based on gender and age of victims

(Based on calls to ChildLine about sexual abuse in 2005/06 in which the caller specified the identity of the perpetrator)



2.3 Family

Fathers

- In 2005/06, 2,018 children (1,504 girls, 514 boys) called ChildLine about sexual abuse and cited their father as the perpetrator, making fathers the perpetrators in 22 per cent of all cases. This percentage was fairly consistent

across genders, with fathers being the perpetrators for 22 per cent of girls and 20 per cent of boys. In terms of age, fathers were more likely to be cited as the perpetrator by younger callers than by older ones: 36 per cent of children aged 11 and under cited their father as the abuser, compared with 19 per cent of 12–15-year-olds and 16 per cent of 16–18-year-olds.

- Forty-five per cent of the children who contacted ChildLine after being sexually abused by a stranger did so within a week of the abuse happening. However, as noted previously, only 6 per cent of children who contacted ChildLine about sexual abuse cited a stranger as the perpetrator. Nearly 25 per cent of those abused by an acquaintance who contacted ChildLine did so within a week, but only 13 per cent of those abused by their father did so. One who did contact ChildLine soon after the abuse started was 13-year-old Siobhan. Through tears, she told a counsellor: "Dad made me have sex with him tonight." Like others who have called about sexual abuse, she was so distraught that she kept having to put the phone down during the call in order to be sick. Though too devastated to think clearly about what she wanted to do, Siobhan agreed that in the morning, she might tell her mother, and that she would call ChildLine back.
- More frequently, abuse by a father had been going on for some time before a child felt strong enough to contact ChildLine. For example, 14-year-old Carole contacted ChildLine to talk about her father's physical violence, but eventually admitted that, "for more than a year now, he's been making me watch dirty videos. And then he makes me do what we see on the screen."

Stepfathers and mothers' boyfriends

- Stepfathers were cited as the abuser in 6 per cent of cases (7 per cent of female callers, 3 per cent of male). The mother's boyfriend was cited in 5 per cent of calls (5 per cent of female callers, 2 per cent of male). There were no significant age-related variances in reported abuse by

stepfathers and mothers' boyfriends: in contrast to fathers, who were over represented among younger victims, stepfathers and mothers' boyfriends were equally likely to be cited as perpetrators by all ages of victim.

- As with fathers, opportunity appears to play a key role in abuse by stepfathers and mothers' boyfriends. As 10-year-old Stephanie said: "My stepdad comes into my bedroom and touches me when my mum's at work. He makes me sit on top of him without my clothes on."
- Like fathers, abuse from stepfathers tended to last longer before children contacted ChildLine. For more on this, see section 1.7.

Other male relatives

- Other male relatives were cited as the perpetrators in 9 per cent of calls to ChildLine about sexual abuse: uncles (4 per cent), brothers (3 per cent), and grandfathers (2 per cent).

2.4 Acquaintances (known non-relatives)

- In cases where the perpetrator was specified, known non-family members accounted for 35 per cent of abusers. Whereas boys were more likely than girls to cite abuse from within the family (67 per cent of males, 56 per cent of females), girls were more likely to say that the abuse they suffered was at the hands of an acquaintance (37 per cent of girls versus 29 per cent of boys). In the vast majority of cases involving sexual abuse by an acquaintance, the abuser was male: female acquaintances were the perpetrators in only 1 per cent of calls to ChildLine about sexual abuse.
- Children of all ages are at risk of being abused by older males. For instance, 13-year-old Jessica told of being raped by a friend of the family. "My uncle lives next door with his best friend Gary. Last week I was over there and my uncle went out and Gary forced me to have sex with him. He said he'd kill me if I didn't, and then, when it was over, he said no one would believe me if I told. He's right."

- For girls aged 11 and under, male acquaintances were cited as the perpetrators in 8 per cent of calls about sexual abuse. For example, 11-year-old Nicole said: "A boy at school makes me do things I don't want to do. He used to act like my friend, but then he started touching me. He shouts at me when I tell him to stop – I'm afraid of him."
- Male acquaintances were cited as the abuser in 12 per cent of calls by girls aged 12–15, and in 16 per cent of calls by girls aged 16–18. For instance, Katherine, 16, said: "Last month I was at a party, and these guys I know offered me a ride home. On the way, they raped me."
- For many female callers to ChildLine, boyfriends were less a source of support than of abuse. Boyfriends were cited as perpetrators in 7 per cent of calls from 12–15-year-old girls and 8 per cent of calls from girls aged 16–18, with many girls saying that their boyfriends were using both physical and emotional abuse in order to extract sex from girlfriends who were not yet ready. "I don't know what to do," said 15-year-old Christine. "Last night my boyfriend made me have sex with him. I told him I wasn't ready, but he told me that if I didn't he would dump me. I love him, so I felt like I had to do it."
- Teachers were cited as perpetrators by 5 per cent of the children who called ChildLine about sexual abuse (4 per cent of girls, 8 per cent of boys). For instance, 14-year-old George said that one of his teachers frequently made excuses to be alone with him and often dropped sexual innuendos into their conversation. "I used to like the attention, but it's starting to freak me out," George said. "I'm thinking of telling my headteacher." Other authority figures were cited in 1 per cent of calls about sexual abuse.

2.5 Strangers

- Callers to ChildLine cited strangers as the perpetrators of sexual abuse in 6 per cent of cases, a figure consistent across all age groups. "I was walking home through the park and someone

jumped out of the bushes and grabbed me," said 17-year-old Charlotte. "At first I thought it was a friend trying to scare me, but then he started kissing me. He held me down and tried to put his penis inside me, but I shouted and fought him off and ran away."

2.6 Female abusers

- As noted in section 2.2, 82 per cent of the children who called ChildLine about sexual abuse in 2005/06 specified the gender of their abuser. Of this group, 5 per cent of female victims and 44 per cent of male victims said their abuser was female.

- Fifteen-year-old Dan said: "I've been having sex with my aunt – she's 28. I want it to stop 'cause I know it's wrong and my mother would go crazy if she knew, but we keep doing it." Some boys also said that while they wanted to tell someone about the abuse, they did not think they would be taken seriously. Boys felt that to admit to their misgivings would somehow be seen as unmasculine, and that people were more likely to tell them how "lucky" they were, rather than to sympathise with them.

Female abusers in the family

- Sixteen per cent of boys and 3 per cent of girls calling about sexual abuse cited their mother as the abuser. For instance, 15-year-old Pete said: "Sometimes, when Mum is very drunk, she touches me and tries to get me to touch her. It makes me feel really weird – it's not right." Some of the boys who called about being sexually abused by their mother said they felt they were being used to assuage their mother's loneliness. There was a clear sense in many of these calls that the mother's drinking played a key role.
- While most young people who called about sexual abuse by a mother said the abuse was ongoing, some called about abuse in the past, and wanted to discuss the problems it had caused them. (Though it should be noted that, as with some other male and female victims of sexual abuse, some of these callers also cited emotional and physical abuse, and

indicated that the problems they currently suffered were a product of their entire experience of childhood abuse, rather than solely the product of sexual abuse.) "When I was 11," said 14-year-old Andy, "my mother used to do things to me and I would do things to her. Social services found out and I got taken into care. I still have flashbacks about it – and it makes me worry that it runs in the family. What if I have kids and do the same thing she did?"

- Five per cent of boys who called about sexual abuse cited an aunt as the perpetrator. Like other callers, males who were being sexually abused by an aunt often focused on the emotional turmoil they were experiencing. For instance, 14-year-old Paul said that what was happening made him feel confused about his aunt's feelings towards him and his feelings towards her. "When we're alone, my aunt rubs my crotch and then we do things. When we're doing it, she says she loves me, but after it's over, she acts like nothing happened." As Paul implies, sexual abuse is emotionally damaging even when it is physically pleasurable. He added: "I like it, but at the same time I don't. Does that make sense? When it's over I feel embarrassed and confused. I don't hate my aunt, but what we do makes me really uncomfortable." Paul said that he was "too ashamed" to tell anyone about the abuse.

Females abusing females

- Five per cent of the girls who called ChildLine about sexual abuse and specified the gender of the perpetrator said that their abuser was female. Within this group, mothers were the most commonly cited perpetrators, accounting for 3 per cent of all girls' calls about sexual abuse. For example, 14-year-old Keeley said: "Mum came home drunk last night and started kissing me and touching me. I just froze – I wanted to say 'no' but nothing came out. Now I just feel numb." Other female perpetrators were also cited. Ruth, 16, said: "A woman I work with keeps touching me and telling me she wants to do rude things. It's scaring me – I try to avoid her."

3. Issues associated with calls to ChildLine about sexual abuse

3.1 Self-blame

- Self-blame is a common theme in calls to ChildLine about sexual abuse. Some children said that their abuser consciously and deliberately tried to shift the blame onto the victim. "My father says I deserve everything he does to me," said 15-year-old Kirsty, who had been raped regularly by her father since she was 11. "I feel like he's right, but I don't really know why."
- Other young people blamed themselves because they felt they had contributed to the abuse. As 16-year-old Daniella said: "I feel like what happened is my fault – I was the one who was drunk, and I was the one who got into that car. If I tell anyone I was raped, they'll say it was my fault." Like many other callers, Daniella was far quicker to blame herself than she was to blame her attackers (all of whom she knew) for their assault. She did, however, agree to have a regular call with ChildLine, speaking to the same counsellor once a week.
- For other young people, self-blame manifested itself in a more nebulous manner. "I was sexually abused two years ago, when I was 10," said Thomas. "I feel guilty about the abuse, like it's my fault. I don't know why – I just want to feel normal."
- Other children explicitly stated that since they loved and trusted their abuser, they felt that the abuse had to be their own fault. "He was my father and everyone loved him," said 17-year-old Ben. "Since he was so good, and what was happening felt bad, it had to be my fault, didn't it?"

3.2 Self-harm

- Nearly 640 children spoke to ChildLine about sexual abuse and self-harm, and many young people spoke of using self-harm as a coping mechanism after being sexually abused. "Two years ago,"

said 15-year-old Charlotte, "my uncle offered me a massage because I was stressed by school. He ended up 'massaging' me everywhere. I couldn't make him stop – I just froze. Now I feel like it's my fault, because I agreed to the massage. I feel like I can't go on. I cut myself this morning – it's how I cope."

3.3 Suicide

- More than 450 young people (451) spoke to ChildLine in 2005/06 about sexual abuse and suicide, with many saying that they did not see any other way out of the misery generated by the abuse. "My father makes me have sex with him," said 13-year-old Leah. "I feel like killing myself after it's over. I want him to stop, but I don't want to tell the police. I think they'll think it's my fault, and it will hurt my family." Leah went on to say that she saw no reason to keep living, and had tried to kill herself four times in the previous six months.

3.4 Pregnancy and sexual abuse

- Nearly 1,000 young people spoke to ChildLine about both pregnancy and sexual abuse. (However, it is important to note that this does not necessarily mean that all of these callers said that they were pregnant because of sexual abuse. For instance, a caller could fall into this category by saying that she was pregnant at the age of 17, and had also been sexually abused when in her early teens.) Some callers said that they had been impregnated by their abusers. "I was raped by my best friend's father," said 14-year-old Chantal. "Now I'm five months pregnant. I don't know what to do."
- Others said that they were already mothers, and that they could not tell anyone who the father of their child was. Among this group, a few girls noted wryly that people looked down on them as "slags" for having given birth so young, but said that, in truth, they were yet to have consensual sex, having been raped. "One of my cousins is the father of my son," said 16-year-old Becky. "I can't tell anyone – it would tear the family apart."

- A number of girls called because they were afraid of being pregnant after having been sexually abused. When 14-year-old Lexi rang, for instance, she was extremely distraught after having been raped by a friend of her older brother. She said she just wanted to forget about it and did not want to tell anyone, but was worried about being pregnant. After talking with ChildLine, she said that she would make a doctor's appointment and possibly tell her best friend.

3.5 Sexual abuse and physical abuse

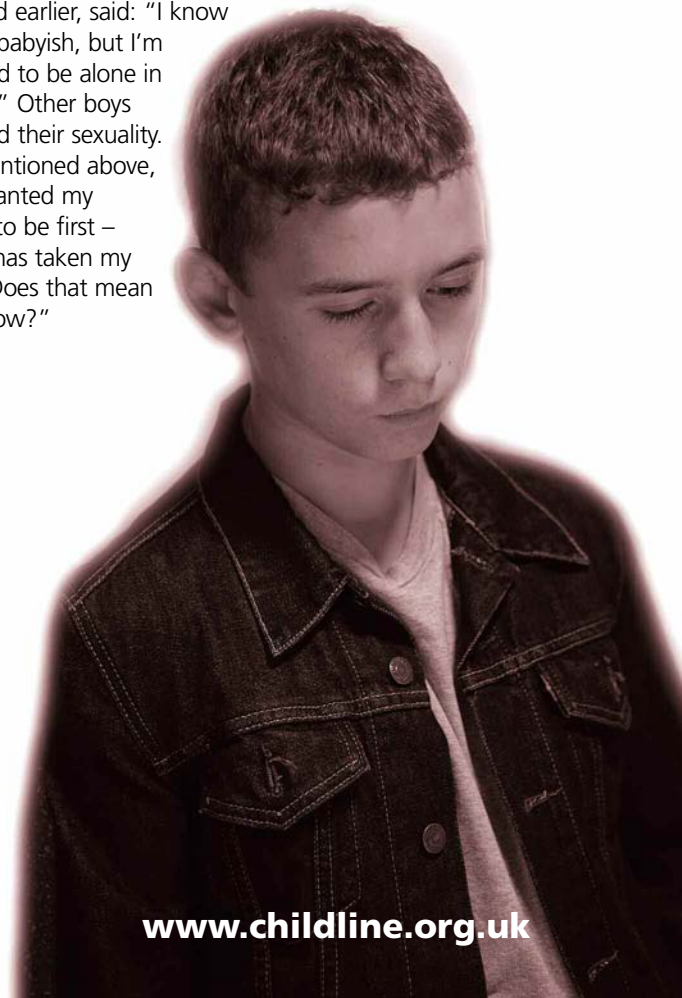
- In many ways, sexual abuse cannot be separated from physical abuse, as the former is by nature a form of violence. However, in many calls to ChildLine, children and young people spoke specifically about the ways in which their abuser had used physical abuse or the threat of it to facilitate sexual abuse. Typical of the 1,636 young people who specifically mentioned both sexual abuse and physical abuse was 13-year-old Linda. "My mum's boyfriend has been forcing himself on me," she said. "He threatens to beat me if I don't do what he wants."

3.6 Male victims of sexual abuse

- Like girls, boys who called ChildLine in 2005/06 about sexual abuse were most likely to cite their father as the abuser. One such boy was 15-year-old Derek, who said: "My father has been making me do things with him for years. I don't live with him any more, but I still have to stay with him sometimes, and when I do he touches me and more. It makes me feel sick." Derek went on to say that he had told no one about the abuse, and that he was drinking heavily as a coping strategy. "My mum thinks I'm going off the rails because I'm a bad kid and need more discipline, but I can't tell her the truth."
- Five per cent of male victims who specified a perpetrator said that they were assaulted by a male acquaintance. In some cases, the caller reported sexual touching, but not rape. For example, 16-year-old Tom said: "My neighbour is 50 or so, and he does things to me. Touches me. I like him, and I like the attention, but I don't like some of the things he does."

- Another 5 per cent of male sexual abuse victims said they were abused by strangers. As with abuse from any perpetrator, the fear instigated by this abuse had the power to take over the victim's life. As 15-year-old Lewis said: "Last week I was attacked by a guy with a knife. He held me down and did things to me. The thing is, now I'm scared to leave the house. I'm scared to close my eyes, scared to open a window, scared that something terrible will happen to me."

- Just like female rape victims, boys who called ChildLine spoke of being overwhelmed by thoughts of suicide or wanting to die. For example, 17-year-old David said: "Since I was raped I've been drinking a lot and taking shed-loads of drugs to keep my mind off it. Mostly I feel like topping myself." Another boy, 14-year-old Ewan, said that since being sexually abused, "I feel like dying. I might take an overdose."
- Boys also express anxiety about how being abused – or their reaction to it – affected their masculinity. For instance, Lewis, mentioned earlier, said: "I know it sounds babyish, but I'm even afraid to be alone in my room." Other boys questioned their sexuality. David, mentioned above, said: "I wanted my girlfriend to be first – this man has taken my virginity. Does that mean I'm gay now?"



4. Who children tell, and what happens then

Of the 9,279 children who called ChildLine about sexual abuse in 2005/06, slightly more than four in 10 (43 per cent) gave information about whether or not they had told someone about the abuse before calling the helpline.

- Among those who gave information about whether or not they had spoken of the abuse to anyone besides ChildLine, 43 per cent said they had told no one, and 57 per cent had told someone.
 - Among young people who had confided in someone, the most common people to tell were: friend (33 per cent), mother (27 per cent), police (12 per cent), teacher (9 per cent), parent – with the child not specifying which parent – (6 per cent), and sister (5 per cent). Only 3 per cent of victims had told their father. Two per cent had told social services.
 - Of the callers who gave information about whether or not they had told someone, there were significant gender differences, with boys being far less likely than girls to have spoken out. Whereas 63 per cent of girls **had** told someone else about the abuse before contacting ChildLine, 65 per cent of boys **had not** told anyone what they were suffering.
 - Boys and girls were equally likely to tell friends (33 per cent), but 28 per cent of girls had told their mother, compared to only 21 per cent of boys. However, while only 3 per cent of girls said they had told their father, 6 per cent of boys had done so.
 - For callers to ChildLine, the identity of the abuser did not appear to make a significant difference to whether or not the victim had told someone else about the abuse before calling the helpline.
 - However, the identity of the abuser did appear to affect who the victim told before calling ChildLine. When a father was the abuser, victims (both boy and girl) were more likely to tell a friend (37 per cent) than their mother (28 per cent). However, when a stepfather was the abuser, victims appeared more willing to tell their mothers. For this group of callers, mothers were the most likely people to be told about the abuse (49 per cent), with friends second (31 per cent).
- When the abuse was in the family, callers to ChildLine appeared reluctant to confide in an authority figure. For instance, when the father was the abuser, 7 per cent of callers to ChildLine (who gave information about who they had spoken to) had talked to the police before contacting the helpline, and 6 per cent had spoken to a teacher. Similarly, when the abuser was a stepfather, only 4 per cent had spoken to the police, with 5 per cent speaking to a teacher.
 - When the abuse was outside the family, callers were more likely to tell an authority figure. Of callers who said they had been sexually abused by a male acquaintance (and who gave information about whether or not they had told anyone before contacting ChildLine), 32 per cent had spoken to the police and 10 per cent had spoken to a teacher. For those who had been sexually abused by a stranger, 20 per cent had spoken to the police before contacting ChildLine, 17 per cent had spoken to their mothers, and 45 per cent had spoken to friends.
 - One strong reason for young people to disclose was when they were afraid that a younger child, such as a sibling or cousin, was now being targeted by the abuser. A clear theme in these calls was that, even though the young person had suffered in silence when they were being abused, they could not remain silent when someone else was suffering. This highlights the level of self-sacrifice that characterises so many calls to ChildLine: many children would rather suffer themselves than hurt loved ones or break up their families.

4.1 Can't talk about it

- Of the children who called ChildLine about being sexually abused and who discussed whether or not they had told anyone before, more than four in 10 said they had told no one. For many, the experience was simply too painful and devastating to disclose, even when others were seeking to help them. "I was raped last month," said 17-year-old Sophie. "My dad knows something is wrong, because I've been locking myself in my room and am afraid to leave the house. He got the police to come round and talk to me, but I couldn't tell them the truth. I'm scared it's going to happen again, but I'm also scared to tell anyone about it."
- Other children said that they could not tell because doing so would hurt loved ones or damage the family. "My stepfather makes me have sex with him," said 14-year-old Grace. "I want him to stop, but I don't want to tell the police. I think they'll think it's my fault, and will break up my family."
- Other callers were able to disclose partially, but, faced with the ramifications of full disclosure, were not able to be more forthcoming. "I told a teacher what had been happening," said 15-year-old John, "and she got social services to come talk to me, but I wouldn't say who had done it. It would break Mum's heart."

4.2 Not being believed

Research indicates that not being believed can be particularly damaging to a child who discloses sexual abuse⁴. Callers to ChildLine who had confided in someone about the abuse, but had not been believed, expressed particularly strong frustration.

- Some callers said that one parent did not want to believe that the other parent could have committed such an act. "I told my mum what Dad was doing, but she didn't believe me," said 17-year-old Niamh. "She didn't want to know what he was really like."
- There are strong psychological barriers to believing that one's spouse or partner

could be abusing one's child, and many parents may find it easier to accept the possibility of abuse from strangers. Yet some young people reported not being believed by parents after being sexually assaulted by strangers. "I was attacked one night when I was walking home," said 13-year-old Cherie. "I told a teacher and she believed me, but when I told my mum, she said I was just making it up to get attention."

- Young people also said that abusers exploited the esteem others held them in. "I was abused by a friend of the family for years," said 15-year-old Natalie. "He told me that there was no point in me telling anyone, because everyone would believe him since he was considered such a great man, and no one would believe me. He was right."

4.3 Don't make a fuss

- In some cases, children said that they were believed, but not supported – that a parent (usually a mother) had put family harmony above the needs of the child who had been abused. "I was sexually abused by my grandfather for years," said 16-year-old Lynne. "I told my mum, but she said not to tell the police – she said to just forget about it." Another caller, 16-year-old Antony, said: "When my mum found out what Dad had been doing to me, all she said was, 'everyone makes mistakes'."

4.4 Experiences of telling

- Some children reported being supported when telling their family about sexual abuse. "When I told my mum what my stepdad had been doing," said 13-year-old Vicky, "she chucked him out. But now I feel guilty, because she's all alone. It's been really hard on her." Although Vicky had been believed, she still ended up feeling in some way responsible for her mother.
- As noted earlier, children who called ChildLine about sexual abuse were more likely to have told a friend than anyone else. In many cases, children and young people told ChildLine that the only reason they had been able to survive the

abuse was because they had been supported by one or more friends. However, there was a sense that, while friends could be there for support, they were powerless to help the caller end the abuse. As 15-year-old Rachel said: "I've told my best friend, and she's trying to help me cope. But I still don't know what to do about what's happening."

4.5 Speaking to the police

- After friends and mothers, the police were the third most common group that children had told: 12 per cent of those who had confided in someone before contacting ChildLine had told the police. However, as noted earlier in Section 4, young people were most likely to contact the police when the abuser was a stranger, and significantly less likely to do so when the abuser was a family member.
- Children who did go to the police reported mixed results. Some complained that the standard of evidence required was too high. "I was raped by a boy I met at a party," said 13-year-old Gemma. "I went to the police, but they said there wasn't enough evidence. Now the same boy is hassling me again. There's no point in telling the police – they didn't do anything last time."
- Others complained that the police were inconsistent. Sixteen-year-old Jennifer said that when she reported a sexual assault by a classmate to a male police officer, he told her that there was nothing he could do, as it wasn't an offence. When she later spoke to a female officer about the same incident, she was offered far more support, and a video interview was arranged.
- Some young people who were seeking a prosecution called ChildLine to say that, while the police had been helpful, the legal process itself was nerve-wracking. "I have to do a video interview tomorrow," said 16-year-old Callum. "I'm really scared."

4.6 The court system

- Many young people have told ChildLine that their fear of getting involved in the

legal system is what keeps them from disclosing their abuse to social services, the police, or other professionals. Most of the young people who told ChildLine that they had become involved in the court system expressed extreme frustration with the process, and did not understand how the abuse they had suffered for years could be so difficult to prove in a court of law. "I had to go to court yesterday," said 14-year-old Alisha. "My uncle was on trial for raping me. I lost, he won. It's not right. Most of my family won't even speak to me any more. He still hassles me, and the police know that. I'm really scared he'll do it again."

- "I was sexually abused by my father from when I was 10 to 13," said Brooke, 17. "He was taken to court, but the case got thrown out because of lack of evidence – my word against his. Since then I've been self-harming, and have tried to commit suicide twice. I've got two younger sisters, and I'm sure he's raping one of them at least." After talking with ChildLine, Brooke decided to contact the police in the hope that they would investigate.



- Callers also expressed fear of the adversarial legal process. “My mum’s boyfriend raped me,” said 16-year-old Trisha, “and the case is going to go to court. I feel happy that he might be punished, but scared also – scared at having to see him and go through it all again.”
- “The lawyer kept asking me the same questions,” 15-year-old Alison told ChildLine. “He made me feel as if I was lying and it was all my fault, as if I was guilty. He said that I was jealous and had lied so that my mum [and her boyfriend] would split up. That’s not true, but everyone believes him.” Alison added that, even though she was separated from the accused by a screen during the trial, his presence made her frightened. “I was so nervous. At the end, I saw him in the corridor – he just stared at me. I keep seeing his face.”
- Following the trial, Alison told the counsellor that her mother’s boyfriend had been found guilty. “He’s in jail, but I just wish I had never told anyone about it. I keep having flashbacks and hearing the lawyer’s questions. I just want to pretend it didn’t happen and to get on with my life, but I can’t. I know I should feel better now that he’s in jail, but I keep having flashbacks of court. They made me feel that I was telling lies and that I was the one who did wrong.”

4.7 Third-party calls

- In 2005/06, ChildLine counselled 632 girls and 126 boys who were concerned about another child being sexually abused. In the same period, ChildLine also advised 439 adults who were concerned about the sexual abuse of a child. Like other callers, they often felt that the complex nature of proving sexual abuse left them helpless to improve the situation. “My cousin keeps touching his sister,” said 14-year-old Darren. “I’ve seen him do it. She’s too scared to tell anyone, and when I told her what I’d seen, she denied it. I told my mum, but she doesn’t believe me.”

5. Counsellors’ views

Because of the nature of confidential, telephone-based counselling, ChildLine counsellors have unique interaction with children and young people. In this section, some of these counsellors discuss what children tell them about sexual abuse.

5.1 Self-blame

Victims of sexual abuse are quick to blame themselves for the abuse, according to ChildLine counsellors.

- “Shame is such a key part of the problem,” says a counsellor. “Sexual abuse is the ultimate self-esteem destroyer. Many young people have no feelings of self-worth left. They feel confused, abused, and manipulated. They feel that no one will believe them if they tell, and that there’s no way out of the situation they’re trapped in.”
- “There’s also a lot of guilt involved. From a child’s perspective, adults are supposed to be good, they’re supposed to be the models. So children will feel that they must have brought the abuse on themselves – which is something that abusers will reinforce. Children don’t want to attribute blame to an adult. They think it must be them who’s to blame. And that’s very damaging.”
- “Because they feel that they are the cause of all their problems, that contributes to this black abyss many young people fall into. The sense of your self being destroyed is complete. They feel, ‘It’s all my fault, and maybe the only way out is through suicide,’ or they cope through self-destructive behaviour.”

5.2 Being believed

Being believed when one discloses sexual abuse is one of the keys to being able to recover from it, according to counsellors.

- Confiding in someone is incredibly risky, say counsellors. “You’re opening yourself up, you’re making yourself very vulnerable. Usually the abuser is someone in the family, or perhaps a friend of the family, and to a child, the

idea that you can safely tell your mum what this person – a boyfriend or a husband, someone she loves – is doing to you, is a tremendous risk.”

- “You’re saying that this horrible thing is happening, and it’s possible that someone’s going to turn around and say that you’re a liar, you’re causing problems, you want to break up the family – it’s like you’ve set off a bomb. What child wants to set off a bomb in the middle of their family?”
- “If you tell someone and they don’t believe you, then you’re in worse trouble than you were before.”
- Sexual abuse is particularly problematic when, as in the majority of cases, it happens inside the family. “It’s more socially acceptable to have a stranger leap out of the bushes and assault a child – that makes it easier to disclose than when the abuser is someone in your family, or someone you know. It’s a greater betrayal when it’s someone you love. You’re not taught to trust strangers, but you’re supposed to trust your parents.”
- Disclosure is particularly hard because of the nature of the abuse. “The physical proof aspect is difficult. For instance, with physical abuse, one of the things we ask is: ‘Do you have bruises, do you have cuts?’ If they say yes, then it’s a much more clear-cut situation. Sexual abuse is such a hidden thing. You can’t see bruises. And the children have probably been told that it’s a secret, and threatened that if they do tell anyone they’ll be hurt, or sent away.”

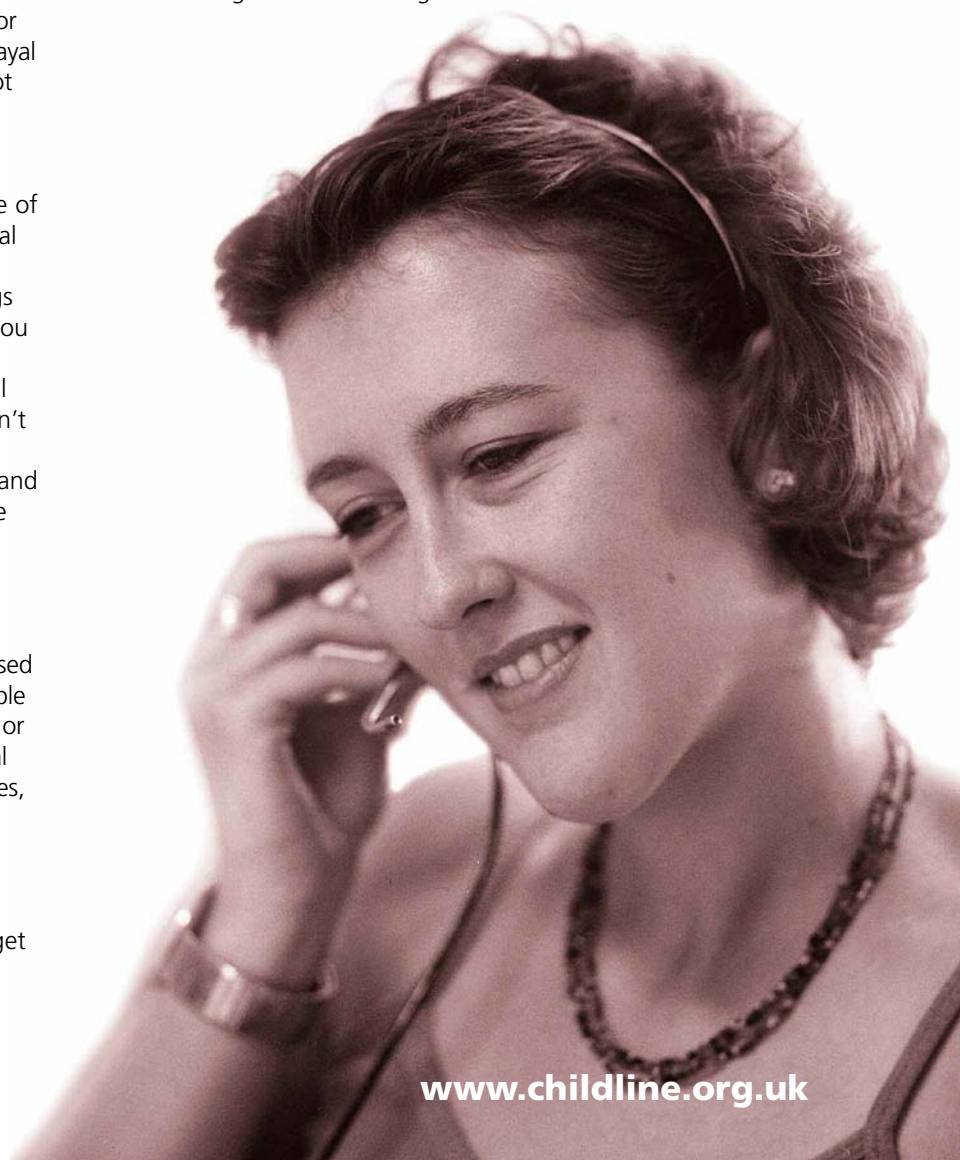
5.3 Coping

According to counsellors, most of the coping strategies utilised by sexually abused young people are negative. “Young people self-harm, drink too much, abuse drugs, or engage in sexually risky behaviour. Sexual abuse becomes self-abuse in a lot of cases, if it’s not dealt with.”

- Self-harm is a frequent coping mechanism and can last for years, or start up years after the abuse. “We get

calls from people who are 17 and are self-harming, and when you’re exploring with them the reasons for their behaviour, they’ll eventually say: ‘Well actually, I was raped when I was eight.’”

- ChildLine counsellors encourage young people to get support from loved ones if possible. Building self-esteem is particularly important for sexually abused children, say counsellors. “Anything that helps their self-esteem – anything that helps them to think, ‘I’m an okay person.’”
- “I’ve found that girls in particular seem to cope through writing letters.”
- “Some people, when they’re older, they want to go back and help others who are going through the same thing. So you might have older teenagers who say: ‘I want to help girls who have been through this same thing that I suffered.’”



- “There really is no magic answer with this, but being believed is so important.”

5.4 Confidentiality, disclosure and referral

Confidentiality was cited as a key reason why children turned to ChildLine.

- “A lot of times, we’re the first people that children have opened up to, because we’re confidential, so they feel that they can talk to us on their terms. By making those early calls to ChildLine, they’re taking the first tentative steps. Very seldom will they be ready at that stage to take the step of contacting a social worker, because that is like setting off a bomb.”
- “Children ask us questions. For instance: ‘Will he go to prison? Will they tell my parents?’ And the answers we have to give are ‘maybe’ and ‘yes, definitely’. We have to be totally honest, and our answers are sometimes less than ideal from the child’s perspective.”
- “What we try to do is work with the child so that they can address the problem and approach social services at their own speed because we know that it causes damage if they are rushed. A child who has been abused for two or three years needs to be helped along very gently in order to get to a place where they feel they can change the situation.”

5.5 The legal system

ChildLine counsellors were told time and again that the legal system was a problem.

- “I spoke to one girl who said that, even though she had gone to the police, and the perpetrator had admitted the abuse, he still couldn’t be prosecuted because of a technicality. And understandably, she found that incredibly frustrating.”
- “I counselled a girl for a very long while, and she eventually disclosed and got the authorities involved, but the wait to get the case to court was so long that she just couldn’t face it. She bottled out. If the process had been speedier, she could have made it through.”

6. Looking back: sexual abuse 20 years on

In its 20-year history, ChildLine has counselled more than 175,000 children (175,278) about sexual abuse. In that time, much has changed, though too much remains the same. On the positive side, calls to ChildLine indicate that children now appear to seek help earlier in the cycle of sexual abuse than they did before ChildLine was launched in 1986. Analysis of the helpline’s caller data from its first year shows that nearly two-thirds (65 per cent) of the children who called the helpline about sexual abuse (and said how long it had been going on) had been being abused for more than one year. That figure has now dropped to 23 per cent.

For children in the mid-1980s, ChildLine’s launch was a watershed, offering for the first time somewhere to turn for child-centred advice, support and protection. As one adult survivor of sexual abuse has told ChildLine, seeing Esther Rantzen on television in 1986 telling children that there was now a helpline just for them “had the power of revelation – that’s how strong it felt. For a little girl to be all on her own with these terrible things happening and then for someone to say: ‘You can talk to us about it’... I remember thinking, ‘My God, I could call and I wasn’t going to get caught out.’ And I remember that I actually felt myself smile, which was something that I never, ever did as a child. And then I thought something else, too. I thought, ‘This happens to other people? I thought it was only happening to me⁵.’”

Since ChildLine’s launch, more children have become more aware that sexual abuse is not something they have to accept. Analysis of ChildLine’s caller data over the last two decades has shown two positive developments: children who contact ChildLine are doing so earlier in the cycle of abuse, and more children who contact ChildLine say that they have also spoken to someone else. (See charts below.) The most rapid changes took place in the helpline’s first decade – little surprise, given the climate of almost total secrecy that cloaked the subject of sexual abuse until the mid-

1980s. However, these positive trends have continued throughout ChildLine's history. For example, by the mid-1990s, 40 per cent of children who called ChildLine about sexual abuse did so within one month of the abuse starting; by 2005/06 that figure had risen to 46 per cent. And while comparable figures do not exist for earlier years, ChildLine knows that in 2005/06, more than one in five (21 per cent) children who contacted the helpline about sexual abuse (and specified the duration of that abuse) did so within one week of the abuse starting.

These are positive changes – more children are speaking out and sooner. We must ensure that they then get a positive response. However, there have been far fewer gains in terms of what happens after children disclose sexual abuse. Young people still have to face disbelief, threats not to shame the family, and a tremendous burden on their individual testimony if they do decide to disclose, and this at a time when they feel in some way responsible or to blame for the abuse and damage to the family.

Children and young people are still fearful of losing all control over their lives if they "tell". They are often justifiably afraid of having to

talk about what happened to them in public, in court, in front of the perpetrator. They do not have confidence that they will be heard and supported by agencies, contributing to the continued extremely low rates of disclosure to social services or to the police. Among those who do disclose, some go on to retract their assertions because they find the process following disclosure too difficult to cope with.

The likelihood of a successful conviction remains extremely low, and callers to ChildLine repeatedly state that the current child protection and court systems are neither child-friendly nor effective. Many say that the system actively prevents them from seeking help. Those who do make it to court and find their evidence deemed insufficient are often devastated, coming away from the process even worse off than when they went into it. As too many children have told ChildLine: "They didn't believe me... I knew it must be my fault... I shouldn't have told." A system that prompts these sorts of responses – a system that makes a child feel that it is better to suffer sexual abuse in silence than to report it to the authorities – is clearly one in desperate need of repair.

6.1 Duration of sexual abuse prior to calling ChildLine

	1986/87	1995/96	2005/06
Number of young people who were specific about how long the abuse had been going on	3,053	4,134	4,635
Less than one month	7%	40%	46%
One month to one year	27%	36%	32%
One to five years	37%	16%	16%
More than five years	28%	8%	7%

(Percentages are rounded to nearest whole number, so totals may not add up to 100 per cent)

6.2 Percentage of children who had told no one about the abuse before speaking to ChildLine

1986/87	1995/96	2005/06
80%	47%	43%

7. Conclusions and recommendations

7.1 Children must have the opportunity to speak out safely and confidentially

Children and young people need to be able to speak out about sexual abuse, and to access help, but currently face a number of barriers which prevent them from disclosing abuse. These include their concerns about the consequences of disclosure and their powerful feelings of personal responsibility for those consequences. Most children do not speak out, and many find it very difficult to seek help through social services and the police. We need to provide confidential, accessible and responsive services that give children and young people someone they can trust for advice, support and protection. In order to provide this help, services that enable children and young people to disclose concerns **at their own pace** and that give consideration to children and young people's expressed needs and wishes are essential, and should be made easily available to each and every child who needs them. Such services include ChildLine, the NSPCC 24-hour Child Protection Helpline, online advice and support, and SMS text advice provision.

Development of a more child-orientated child protection system is vital in protecting children from abuse, as well as in truly serving their best interests when abuse is an issue. Key features of this system would need to address accessible, confidential services that move at the child's pace. This would include support for children throughout the disclosure process; more control for children over what happens when they do disclose abuse; honesty and clarity regarding levels of confidentiality; where children are at risk in the home, removal of the abuser rather than the child, when possible; and a review of the system to investigate whether criminal prosecution of abuse is in the child's best interests.

Currently, UK national helplines are not well resourced and existing services are unable to meet demand. For example, 43 per cent of children who ring ChildLine

are unable to get through the first time they call. More government funding is needed to ensure that all children can access confidential advice when they need it, through telephone helplines, text services and online support facilities, 24 hours a day, every day of the year.

Most children disclose to their friends or members of their family and are reluctant to approach authority figures and statutory services⁶. By increasing the provision of accessible and confidential services and ensuring that services are responsive to the needs of young people, we can increase children's trust in the system.

7.2 Children must be given information and advice about sex and sexual relationships

It is important to provide children and young people with knowledge of – and opportunities to discuss – sexual activity, in order to give them the tools to recognise inappropriate and abusive behaviours.

The NSPCC calls for Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) to be made a foundation subject at key stages 1, 2, 3 and 4 in England and Northern Ireland, as it currently is in Wales. PSHE is the planned provision in schools for promoting the emotional and social development of children and young people. It gives children essential information about a range of health issues that are relevant to their age, maturity and understanding, including: emotional health and well-being; sex and relationships; diet and exercise; alcohol, tobacco and other drugs; and safety. Young people should be offered advice on all aspects of sexual activity, educated to recognise sexual activity that is abusive or exploitative, and taught how they can speak up about sexual abuse.

In addition to providing PSHE in schools, governments in each UK jurisdiction must run awareness-raising campaigns about sexual abuse using materials such as the NSPCC's *Hands Off!* magazine, which covers issues of consent within healthy relationships and helps children and young people to recognise acceptable and unacceptable or abusive behaviours.

Given the prevalence of abuse between teenage females and their boyfriends (or male acquaintances), there should also be dedicated campaigns aimed at educating older children about peer abuse. It is vital that services and interventions are available to address sexually aggressive behaviour by young people – and particularly to address the issue of power within relationships and partner abuse perpetrated by young men against young women.

Because young people are often more comfortable disclosing abuse to their peers than to adults, peer support could form an essential aspect of the child protection system. Training for peer supporters would need to be underpinned by readily accessible professional support for young people who have been confided in.

7.3 Raising public awareness about the nature of child sexual abuse

As attested by the calls to ChildLine discussed in this casenote, the majority of child sexual abuse occurs within families and in contexts where the perpetrator is known to the child. However, sexual abuse within the family is still an uncomfortable, if not taboo, subject which many people do not like to acknowledge or attempt to understand. The failure to engage with the reality of child sexual abuse leaves children at risk by perpetuating myths and misunderstandings.

Only a very small percentage of the children and young people who call ChildLine about sexual abuse talk about being abused by strangers. The public discourse around stranger danger – and continued silence on familial abuse – must inevitably make it more difficult for children to understand and cope with the complex feelings they have surrounding abuse by those they know and even love. There is a compelling need for greater social recognition of abuse perpetrated by those to whom children are close, so that young people can more readily recognise and understand what is happening to them, and more readily seek help.

There should be properly funded education, and public awareness initiatives must be based on what is known about child sexual

abuse: that while strangers commit some child sexual abuse, most occurs within families and in contexts where the perpetrator is known to the child. Local safeguarding children boards (LSCBs) in England and Wales, and area child protection committees (ACPCs) in Northern Ireland need to work with the multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPAs) to run co-ordinated awareness-raising campaigns on this issue. Such campaigns need to highlight the fact that most sexual abuse occurs within families and in situations where children know the offender. In Scotland, this should be undertaken jointly by child protection committees⁷, community safety partnerships and the pilot community justice authorities.

There is also a need for public education about how sexual abusers operate. It is significant that most of those who are abused outside their homes are abused by someone they know. There is a need to develop greater public understanding of how sex offenders operate in the community; that they do so often by becoming known and trusted by the family and the child.

7.4 Prevention work with perpetrators and their partners

If children are to be better protected, and sexual abuse prevented, it is important to offer ways for perpetrators and others who are concerned about potential abuse in their own families to come forward and seek help. Helplines such as Stop it Now! provide one way of doing this. In addition, follow-up treatment services must be developed so that potential perpetrators can address their feelings and behaviours before they go on to abuse. Other work is also critical: supportive group-work with carers of abused children, particularly the partners of adult perpetrators, can assist the child's recovery, improve the carer's protective skills, and facilitate understanding and decision-making in the home environment, helping to prevent further risk.

Given the fact that most abusers never come into contact with the criminal justice system, it is important that those who might sexually harm children are encouraged to come forward and are offered treatment

through Home Office accredited community sex offender treatment programmes. These programmes should be made available to those who commit sex offences regardless of whether or not they are in contact with the criminal justice system.

7.5 Female sex offenders

It is important to be aware of the risk posed by female offenders. From the child's perspective, this is particularly important, as many young people say that the fear of not being believed is a major barrier to disclosing sexual abuse. Recent research for the NSPCC by Dr Lisa Bunting has identified a lack of awareness or acceptance of female-perpetrated child sexual abuse as being a particular barrier to professionals responding to this type of abuse⁸. The issue of female sex offending should be recognised in any guidance and policy, and LSCBs and MAPPA should provide training for staff and professionals on the extent and nature of female offending.

7.6 All sexually abused children should be offered therapy and support to help them overcome the effects of their abuse

The standard and degree of therapeutic help available to children should be the same as that for adults and should on no account be withheld or restricted on the basis of not weakening a case. The majority of children who are deeply traumatised by abuse currently receive little or no help to deal with the serious and lasting damage it can cause, and its effects can last well into adulthood. The therapeutic needs of children and young people who have been sexually abused must be recognised and addressed to help them overcome the effects of the abuse. A detailed NSPCC research study shows that the majority of sexually abused young people who need help do not receive it⁹. More funding should be made available to increase child-centred therapeutic resources for children and families.

The Department of Health and DHSSPS in Northern Ireland should commission a detailed analysis of the shortfall in current provision in England and Northern Ireland, including an examination into which children are not receiving services, either

through child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) or other provision, and identification of the reasons why.

The UK Government and devolved administrations should establish a fully funded delivery plan at national and local levels to ensure that children who are abused receive child-centred therapeutic services. There should be comprehensive access to therapeutic services in all areas. To achieve this, the children and young people's plan must ensure that CAMHS and other therapeutic services are commissioned in such a way as to ensure that, at the absolute minimum, there is at least one such service in every children's trust in England and HSS Trust in Northern Ireland. To support this, the Department of Health should review CAMHS services, and the extent and type of services they provide, with a view to modifying them so that they can undertake the type of child-centred therapeutic work that is needed to help children overcome the effects of abuse.

In addition, the relevant government departments in each jurisdiction should consider either funding a new delivery model for providing therapeutic services through the voluntary sector in a similar way to the funding arrangements for victim support schemes or maximising the experience and knowledge of the voluntary sector in delivering services. As part of this work, they should examine the potential of sexual assault referral centres (SARCs) for children and young people.

Children who have been abused should not be denied access to therapeutic services for any reason, including a pending criminal trial, where they will be called on to give evidence as a victim and/or witness. The comprehensive existing government guidance on pre-trial therapy must be promoted to police and other relevant practitioners by the Office for Criminal Justice Reform and other relevant government departments, both in Westminster and in the devolved administrations. The Northern Ireland Office should ensure that relevant guidance is applicable to Northern Ireland.

7.7 Children reporting sexual abuse and going through the court system

Children who have been the victims of sexual offences must be supported to make their cases as well as possible. Training and professional development of lawyers and the judiciary is crucial in order to ensure that they understand the experience of going to court from the child's point of view and that prosecutors make full use of the powers at their disposal in cases involving children. The NSPCC recommends that within prosecution teams there should be specialist prosecution units trained to take cases with child witnesses. In addition to the use of specialist units to look at these cases, there should be greater training in child development for all professionals involved in the court process.

There is also an urgent need for a coherent UK-wide support system for young witnesses. Victim Support has recently estimated that many young witnesses who are entitled to special measures are not being referred to witness services¹⁰. A vital safeguard for children is to ensure that there is consistent practice in the use of special measures.

7.8 Vigilance among professionals, teachers and health workers

Training in child protection must be part of basic and continuing professional development for all professionals who work with children. It is important that all such professionals are able to identify signs of sexual abuse and know how to act in order to support and protect children.

7.9 Children who sexually harm other children

Given that some young people are abused by other young people, it is essential that there is proper and consistent assessment, referral and treatment for children and young people engaging in sexually harmful behaviour. Work by the NSPCC¹¹ suggests that the policy response to this problem is often disjointed and inadequate. There is a clear need to establish a common screening framework and guidance on how services should be configured. There must be a clearly established multi-agency assessment and treatment process at a local level with

referral to more specialist provision where this is necessary.

7.10 Helping children to disclose abuse

NSPCC research by Featherstone and Evans¹² shows that, for a number of reasons, children are reluctant to approach formal agencies with their concerns. These reasons include fear of the consequences of disclosing, fear of not being believed, fear that information will be passed on without their control, and ignorance of sources of support. This is evidenced in the calls from ChildLine cited in this report: only 2 per cent of callers had approached social services about their abuse, and 12 per cent had approached the police (20 per cent when the abuse was perpetrated by a stranger). Local services need to be designed to be more child-focused, and children need to be able to establish trusting relationships with those who can help them. Consulting with children and young people is an important way in which practitioners, managers and policy-makers can learn how to bring this about.

Scotland-specific recommendations

7.11 In Scotland, the Children's Charter sets out children's expectations, stating that when they have difficulties or problems, they will be listened to, taken seriously, and involved. However, when children disclose abuse, the child protection system provides little space to listen to them. The role of advocacy in helping children's voices to be heard and taken seriously needs to be considered. The confidential space that ChildLine allows by phone, and which children say they value so highly, could be available within the child protection system.

7.12 There is a lack of help and treatment for those who admit they have a problem as a potential or actual sex offender. Sufficient services need to be provided and made accessible.

7.13 Standards should be set for the investigation of sexual abuse cases so that all possible evidence is collected, not just the statements of the key participants. Corroborative evidence needs to be gathered and assessed. This would include forensic, alibi and circumstantial

evidence. Other than direct evidence from or about the child, active police investigation – including surveillance and the checking of alibis and all details of fact – is essential.

Police inquiries should proceed on the basis that the child's own evidence will not normally form the major part of the case, and substantiating evidence should be obtained. In cases where it is not in the child's interests to take a direct part in proceedings, the child's evidence – in the form of a videotaped interview – should be admitted as evidence and heard by the court.

- 7.14** Specialist training should be undertaken by judges, sheriffs and other personnel and should be regularly updated in order to be accredited in child cases.
- 7.15** The NSPCC proposes the much greater, if not routine, use of taking evidence on commission from children outside of the court premises. In cases where it is agreed that the child can take part in the proceedings, there need to be significant changes in how that child participates. It should be arranged routinely for all children under 12 to give evidence on commission, and this option should be open to children over that age, according to their wishes, vulnerability, maturity and other considerations related to the case itself. Evidence on commission should normally take place in specially adapted premises – with facilities for children to wait and play. These could be premises in which the support and therapeutic services could also be based, or the premises could be a place that the child would have visited before and would be comfortable in. Cross-examination should only take place via the interviewer, who would act as an intermediary between the court and the child, explaining questions when a child is confused, simplifying difficult language, and assisting the court in helping the child to answer as fully as he/she is able. Children should not be subject to repeat cross-examination, and the defendants' or pursuers' legal representatives should only be able to cross-examine via the interviewer/

intermediary. The video and transcript of this evidence on commission would be the child's evidence¹³.

Wales-specific recommendations

- 7.16** The NSPCC calls on the Welsh Assembly Government to ensure that the Personal and Social Education (PSE) Framework includes sections on abuse and appropriate relationships, and that there are opportunities for teachers delivering this aspect of PSE to receive relevant training and information about resources they can use.
- 7.17** We welcome the decision by the Welsh Assembly Government to hold a mid-point review of its CAMHS strategy, *Everybody's Business*. We urge the Welsh Assembly Government to ensure that this is a thorough review, which not only looks at what therapeutic services are available for children and young people who have suffered abuse, but also examines shortfalls in provision. We urge the Welsh Assembly Government to ensure that in addition to service users being included in the process, so too should those who have tried and failed to access a service. The outcome of the review should ensure that there is a locally accessible therapeutic service for all children and young people who have suffered abuse and need this vital support.



Appendix: a brief summary of research into child sexual abuse

In *Child maltreatment in the United Kingdom: a study of the prevalence of child abuse and neglect*, Cawson¹⁴ found that:

- 1 per cent of children aged under 16 experienced sexual abuse¹⁵ by a parent or carer, and a further 3 per cent by another relative during childhood
- 11 per cent of children under 16 experienced sexual abuse during childhood by people known but unrelated to them
- 5 per cent of children under 16 experienced sexual abuse during childhood by an adult stranger or someone they had just met
- in total, 16 per cent of children under 16 experienced sexual abuse during childhood
- overall, 11 per cent of boys under 16 and 21 per cent of girls under 16 experienced sexual abuse during childhood
- the majority of children who experienced sexual abuse had more than one sexually abusive experience; only indecent exposure was likely to be a single incident
- three-quarters (72 per cent) of sexually abused children did not tell anyone about the abuse at the time, 27 per cent told someone later. Around a third (31 per cent) still had not told anyone about their experience(s) by early adulthood
- for the children who experienced sexual abuse **in the family**, the most common perpetrator was a brother or stepbrother
 - of penetrative/oral acts of sexual abuse in the family, 38 per cent were by a brother/stepbrother
 - 23 per cent were perpetrated by a father
 - 14 per cent were perpetrated by an uncle
 - 13 per cent were perpetrated by a stepfather
 - 8 per cent were perpetrated by a cousin
 - 6 per cent were perpetrated by a grandfather
 - 4 per cent were perpetrated by a mother.
- for the children who experienced sexual abuse **outside of the family**, the most common perpetrator was a boyfriend or girlfriend
 - of penetrative/oral acts of sexual abuse outside of the family, 70 per cent were by a boyfriend/girlfriend
 - 17 per cent were perpetrated by “someone I recently met”
 - 10 per cent were perpetrated by a fellow student/pupil
 - 6 per cent were perpetrated by a friend of their parents
 - 6 per cent were perpetrated by a friend of their brother/sister
 - very few children (less than 1 per cent) experienced abuse by professionals in a position of trust, for example a teacher, religious leader or care/social worker.

Additional research

- In *Females who sexually offend against children: responses of the child protection and criminal justice systems*¹⁶, Bunting reports that females are responsible for up to 5 per cent of all sexual offences committed against children, with maternally perpetrated abuse emerging in various studies as a particularly damaging form of abuse.

References

- ¹ Department for Education and Skills (2006) *Working Together to Safeguard Children: a guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children*. London: Department for Education and Skills.
- ² ChildLine speaks to an average of 33 children per day about sexual abuse. The average UK class size is 26 for primary school and 25 for lower secondary. See eg Wilson, Valerie (2006) *Does small really make a difference? An update on a review of the literature on the effects of class size on teaching practice and pupils' behaviour and attainment*. SCRE Research Report No 123. The SCRE Centre, University of Glasgow: Glasgow. Available online: www.scre.ac.uk/resreport/rr123/index.html. Last accessed: 19 September 2006.
- ³ NSPCC research has found that females are responsible for up to 5 per cent of all sexual offences committed against children. See Bunting, Lisa (2005) *Females who sexually offend against children: responses of the child protection and criminal justice system*. London: NSPCC.
- ⁴ Travers, Olive (1999) *Behind the silhouettes: Exploring the myths of child sexual abuse*. Belfast: Blackstaff Press, p 15.
- ⁵ Easton C and Carpentieri JD (2004) *Can I talk to you again? Restoring the emotional and mental well-being of children and young people*. London: ChildLine, pp 5–6.
- ⁶ Featherstone, Brid and Evans, Helen (2004) *Children experiencing maltreatment: who do they turn to?* London: NSPCC.
- ⁷ See www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/022067552304.
- ⁸ Bunting, Lisa (2005) *op cit*.
- ⁹ Baginsky, Mary (ed.) (2001) *Counselling and Support Services for Young People aged 12–16 who have experienced sexual abuse*. London: NSPCC.
- ¹⁰ Victim Support (2004) Annual Review. Victim Support.
- ¹¹ Lovell, Elizabeth (2002) *"I think I might need some more help with this problem...": responding to children and young people who display sexually harmful behaviour*. London: NSPCC.
- ¹² Featherstone, Brid and Evans, Helen (2004) *Children experiencing maltreatment: who do they turn to?* London: NSPCC.
- ¹³ Under the Vulnerable Witnesses (Scotland) Act 2004, in sexual and violent cases, children under 12 are to give evidence away from the court building by remote CCTV link.
- ¹⁴ Cawson, Pat (2000) *Child maltreatment in the United Kingdom: a study of the prevalence of child abuse and neglect*. London: NSPCC.
- ¹⁵ The study defined sexual abuse as acts against the respondent's wishes when aged under 16, or acts perpetrated by someone five or more years older when the child was aged 12 or under. Sexual acts were categorised as "contact" (physical contact with genital, anal or other normally private areas of the body; and other physical contact such as sexual hugging and kissing) and "non-contact" (exposure of genitals or other private areas of the body, voyeurism, exposing children to, or using them to make, pornography or to watch sexual acts). The study only included acts experienced by children aged up to 16.
- ¹⁶ Bunting, Lisa (2005) *Females who sexually offend against children: responses of the child protection and criminal justice systems*. London: NSPCC.

About the information in this report

The findings in this report are based on detailed analysis of calls to ChildLine in April 2006. Children and young people often talk to ChildLine because they know they will receive a confidential service and 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 practise 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 will continue to use its own name, and the 0800 1111 phone number will remain unchanged. Volunteer counsellors will 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. Names and identifying details have been changed to protect confidentiality.

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