

Children talking to ChildLine about loneliness

“I feel like I've got no one; I'm all alone. I'm down and depressed. I just hate myself.”
(Michael, aged 17)

“My mum died three weeks ago and I really missed her today because I have broken my arm and want my mum to hold my hand. I feel lonely.” (Jessica, aged eight)

“I would love to have friends...” (Ravinder, aged 16)

“A lot of the time children don't want to bother their family with how they're feeling because they think they've got enough problems. They can then become really withdrawn and lonely.” (ChildLine counsellor)

“One boy told me 'I've got all these people around me, I'm part of this big gang, but it's the loneliest place in the world'.” (ChildLine counsellor)

Key findings

- Between April 2008 and March 2009, ChildLine counselled 5,525 children about loneliness, sadness and isolation¹ as their main problem. This is four per cent of all children counselled during those twelve months.
- Furthermore, 4,399 children were counselled about loneliness as an additional problem. This means that, in total, 9,924 children (6,835 girls and 3,089 boys) were counselled about loneliness as their main or additional problem. This is six per cent of all children counselled by ChildLine.
- There are different types of loneliness. Some children and young people phone ChildLine because they need someone to talk to. For some young people, loneliness may be a natural part of growing up. However, other children and young people may feel so desperately lonely that their lives are affected in a debilitating and devastating way. Loneliness can be a very serious problem.

¹ “Loneliness, sadness and isolation” is the full name of the category used by counsellors to record calls. However, to avoid repetition within this casenote, the shortened term “loneliness” will be used to represent the category.

Key findings continued

- Family relationship problems, bullying and physical abuse are the top problems associated with loneliness (as a main or an additional problem). Depression and mental health problems, school problems and bereavement are also associated with loneliness.
- Depression and mental health, suicide, bereavement and self-harm are disproportionately associated with loneliness. They were all considerably more evident in calls about loneliness than in calls to ChildLine overall.
- There has been a significant increase in the number of children counselled for loneliness as a main problem, tripling over the past five years from 1,853 to 5,525. Calls about loneliness thus represent a greater proportion of calls to ChildLine than five years ago.
- This increase is more marked for boys, but also applies to girls. The number of boys counselled about loneliness (as their main problem) has increased by more than five times over the past five years. The number of girls counselled about these issues has more than doubled over the same period.
- Of the 639 instances where young people called ChildLine about loneliness as a main problem and said whether they had told someone about their problem before or not, 35 per cent had told no one.

1. Introduction

For some young people, loneliness can be a natural part of growing up. However, loneliness is a very serious problem for many of the callers to ChildLine. Counsellors emphasised the sense of helplessness and trauma that loneliness can cause.

For many ChildLine callers, loneliness is a problem they have been coping with for some time: a pervasive, painful and ingrained problem. Many children experiencing loneliness phone ChildLine because they have reached a point of desperation.

The category that counsellors use to record calls about loneliness is called “loneliness, sadness and isolation”. What are loneliness, sadness and isolation? The ChildLine counsellors we spoke to defined loneliness as *“feelings of being on your own and missing having friends and relationships with people around you. That no one understands and you can’t connect”*.

They defined sadness as a *“feeling of emptiness, no energy and general lowness”* but in this context they tended to use the term when it connected with loneliness and isolation.

Counsellors also saw isolation as *“no significant person to turn to, no support network and no connection with friends and family”*. They emphasised how loneliness, sadness and isolation were all connected and inter-related.

This casenote examines how loneliness can be linked to a variety of other problems. One of the key issues explored is the link between loneliness and family relationship problems. It might be thought that, within a family, children are emotionally supported and therefore should feel that there are people who care and are accessible to them.

However, arguments with parents and siblings, being left home alone, being left out of the family, and parental divorce and separation can all cause loneliness. Also, those experiencing abuse (be it physical, sexual, emotional or neglect) often tell ChildLine that this can lead to feelings of loneliness and to not knowing with whom they can share their anguish.

For some children, experiences with their peer group can also lead to isolation. Even when surrounded by their peers, young people can still feel lonely. This casenote looks at the connection between loneliness and problems with friends, bullying, partner relationship problems and school problems more generally.

Sadly, for many children counselled by ChildLine there were other serious problems disproportionately associated with loneliness. These included depression and mental health problems, self-harm and suicide. Counsellors found that some groups of children and young people are more vulnerable to loneliness, including those who have suffered bereavement and those who are looked after within a care setting.

Loneliness is thus a consequence of many problems children call ChildLine about, although sometimes it does not have a specific cause. This casenote explores each of these issues in more detail.

Over the past five years there has been a tripling in the number of children counselled about loneliness. It appears, therefore, that loneliness is an increasingly more prevalent problem, as demonstrated by the number of children counselled by ChildLine.

ChildLine counsellors suggest that this may be due to changes within families and society, which may mean that more young people are vulnerable to feelings of loneliness and isolation. ChildLine counsellors suggest that this may also be due to young people being better able to talk about feelings of loneliness.

Counsellors describe the depths to which children and young people can plummet as a result of feeling lonely, and the strong sense of despair that they feel when no one understands or appears to care.

If you are a parent or carer of a child who is experiencing loneliness, advice is given in appendix 1.

For information about the methodology used in this casenote, see appendix 2.

2. Evidence: what children tell ChildLine

2.1 Calls to ChildLine about loneliness

This casenote reports on calls to ChildLine about loneliness between April 2008 and March 2009.

During this period, 5,525 children were counselled by ChildLine with loneliness as their main problem. This consisted of 1,972 boys and 3,553 girls, and represented four per cent of all calls to ChildLine. Loneliness was the seventh largest reason for children calling ChildLine in 2008/09.

The gender ratio for calls about loneliness as a main problem is equivalent to two girl callers to every one boy caller. This is the same ratio for callers to ChildLine in general. The ratio five years ago for children counselled about loneliness as a main problem was four girl callers to every one boy caller.

In addition to calls about loneliness as the main problem, 4,399 callers talked about loneliness as an additional problem. This means that 9,924 callers (6,835 girls and 3,089 boys) talked about loneliness as either a main or an additional problem. This is six per cent of all children counselled by ChildLine.

The gender ratio for loneliness as a main or additional concern is also two girl callers to every one boy caller.

2.2 Increase in calls about loneliness

As figure 1 shows, there has been a tripling of children counselled about loneliness as a main problem over the past five years, from 1,852 to 5,525 (or an increase of 198 per cent). As overall calls to ChildLine have increased by only 10 per cent, this means there has therefore been a disproportionate rise in the number of children counselled about loneliness.

Boys counselled about loneliness as their main problem have increased by more than fivefold, from 371 to 1,972 (or an increase of 432 per cent) over this period. This compares to a 74 per cent increase in boys counselled about all problems over this period. Again, there has been a disproportionate rise.

The number of girls counselled about loneliness has more than doubled, from 1,481 to 3,553 (or an increase of 140 per cent) over the same period. This compares to a 7 per cent fall in the number of girls counselled overall between 2003/04 and 2008/09.

The ChildLine casenote *What boys talk about to ChildLine*, published in July 2009, explores the trends in calls from boys in this period. It found increases in calls from boys, especially related to talking about feelings and emotions.

The cultural shift and success of ChildLine in reaching out to boys could explain the particular increase in boys' calls about loneliness, as compared with girls' calls and with children counselled overall.

Figure 1

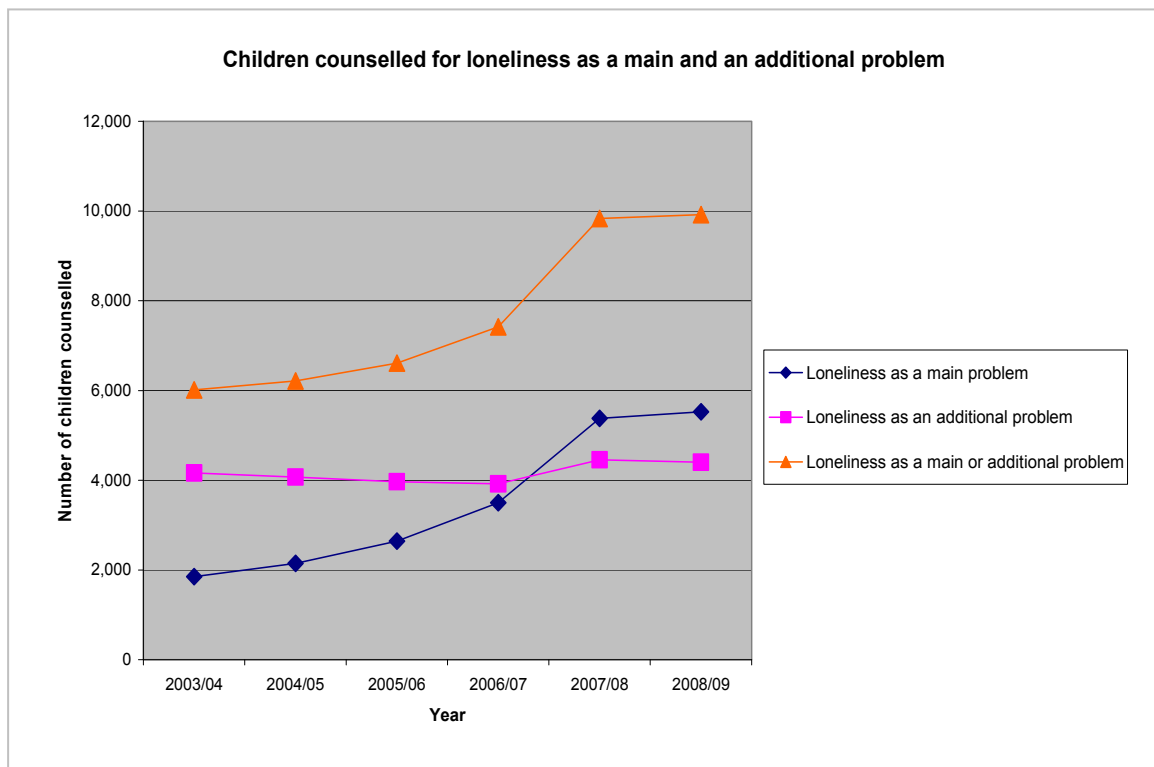


Figure 1 shows the increase in loneliness calls over the past five years. As can be seen from the graph, there has been a rapid increase for loneliness as a main problem and for loneliness as a main or additional problem.

The rate of increase has reduced, however, between 2007/08 and 2008/09. This is likely to be linked to a decrease in calls to ChildLine overall in this period.

Children counselled about loneliness as an additional concern have not increased as fast as children counselled about loneliness as a main concern.

2.3 Why has there been an increase in calls about loneliness?

The quantitative data indicates that loneliness calls have increased over and above the overall increase of calls to ChildLine, particularly for boys. Below, ChildLine counsellors discuss if they thought this was the case and why it might be so.

One counsellor said:

“The fact that families and people in general increasingly don’t eat together, and then like to go off and do their own things...I think that social skills among younger people are not being encouraged.”

Another counsellor said:

"It's lifestyle changes as well. Everyone's so busy all the time. So even if you do have some time at home with your parents, these young people are going home and the only time to talk to their parents might be tea time, which isn't a good time as all their siblings will be about. Then it's time to go to bed...everything's really rushed."

Children counselled by ChildLine have shown how family relationship problems, including the impact of divorce and longer working hours, have all added to young people's loneliness.

For some counsellors, the increase in calls about loneliness was linked to changes in talking about emotions.

One counsellor said:

"I think that it is a change in society. Talking about feelings and emotions is much more acceptable. This is apparent in many TV shows and in online communications and chat. I think there's a shift in content so that it is more acceptable for boys to talk about their feelings."

Another commented:

"I think loneliness has always been there. People are now beginning to be more open to talking about it."

2.4 Age and gender breakdown for callers about loneliness in 2008/09

Figure 2

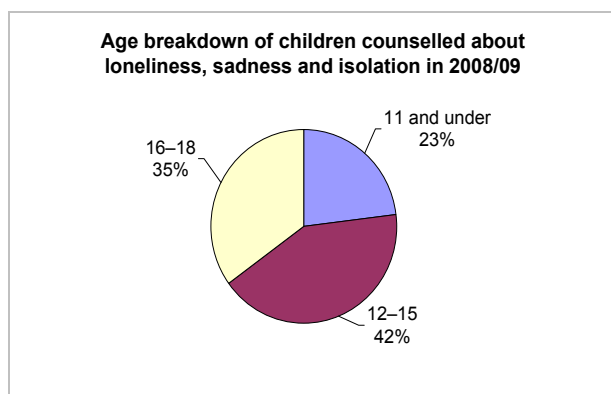
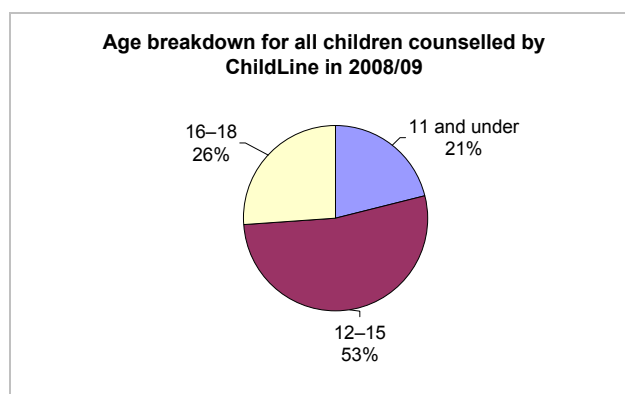


Figure 3



Of the 5,525 children who were counselled about loneliness as a main problem, 3,744 gave their ages and 1,781 did not. Counselling is ChildLine's foremost function, so children are not pressed to give their age or any other demographic details if they do not want to.

Children aged between 12 and 15 years old comprise the largest category of children counselled about loneliness (where the age is known). The smallest proportion is children under 11 years old (23 per cent).

Additionally, as can be seen by comparing children counselled about loneliness to all children counselled, children counselled about loneliness are on average older, with 35 per cent in the 16 to 18 category, compared with only 26 per cent in this category for all ChildLine callers.

Table 1

Age breakdown for children counselled about loneliness in 2008/09

Age	Percentage of all children counselled (where age known)	Percentage of those counselled about loneliness (where age known)	Number of children counselled about loneliness
5 years and under	1	2	80
6 years	1	1	46
7 years	2	1	46
8 years	2	3	103
9 years	3	4	138
10 years	5	5	197
11 years	8	7	253
12 years	11	11	406
13 years	13	11	405
14 years	14	10	377
15 years	14	11	394
16 years	12	15	574
17 years	9	12	446
18 years	4	7	279

If this data is analysed by individual ages, we can see that there was a large difference between children aged 16, 17 and 18 counselled about loneliness and for children in the same age groups counselled overall. This shows that children aged 16, 17 and 18 are at particularly vulnerable ages for loneliness.

This is likely to be the result of two factors. First, older children may be experiencing more loneliness due to life changes (such as leaving home, leaving or changing school, or emotional changes linked to adolescence).

Second, they may be more able to articulate feeling lonely and express these feelings to counsellors. Younger children, however, may not be able to express what they are feeling.

Figure 4

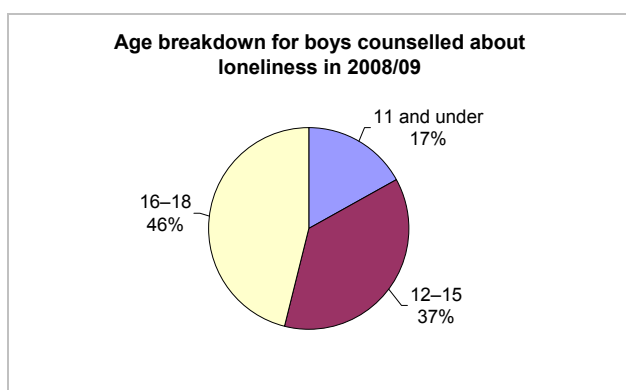
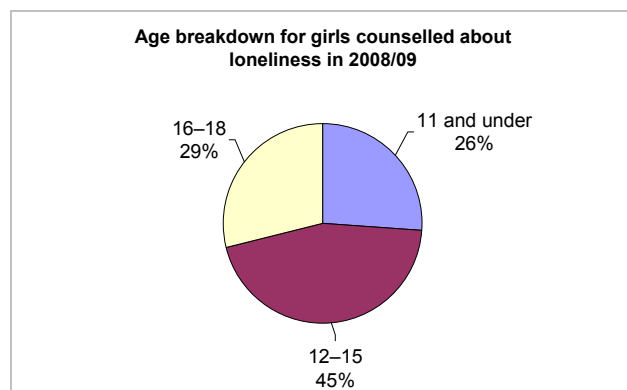


Figure 5



Girls counselled about loneliness (where the age is known) are on average younger than boy callers, with more in the under 11 age category (26 per cent compared with 17 per cent) and in the 12 to 15 years category (45 per cent compared to 37 per cent).

There were also fewer girls than boys in the 16 to 18 years category (29 per cent compared with 46 per cent). It could be that girls are more vulnerable to these feelings and experiences at a younger age. This could be linked to girls going through emotional changes (adolescence) and experiencing the associated loneliness at a younger age than boys.

Similarly, with the ChildLine category "facts of life", boys counselled were older than girls counselled, with more boys in the 16 to 18 years age category (46 per cent) than girls (23 per cent). This again shows the vulnerability of older boys to changes as part of growing up.

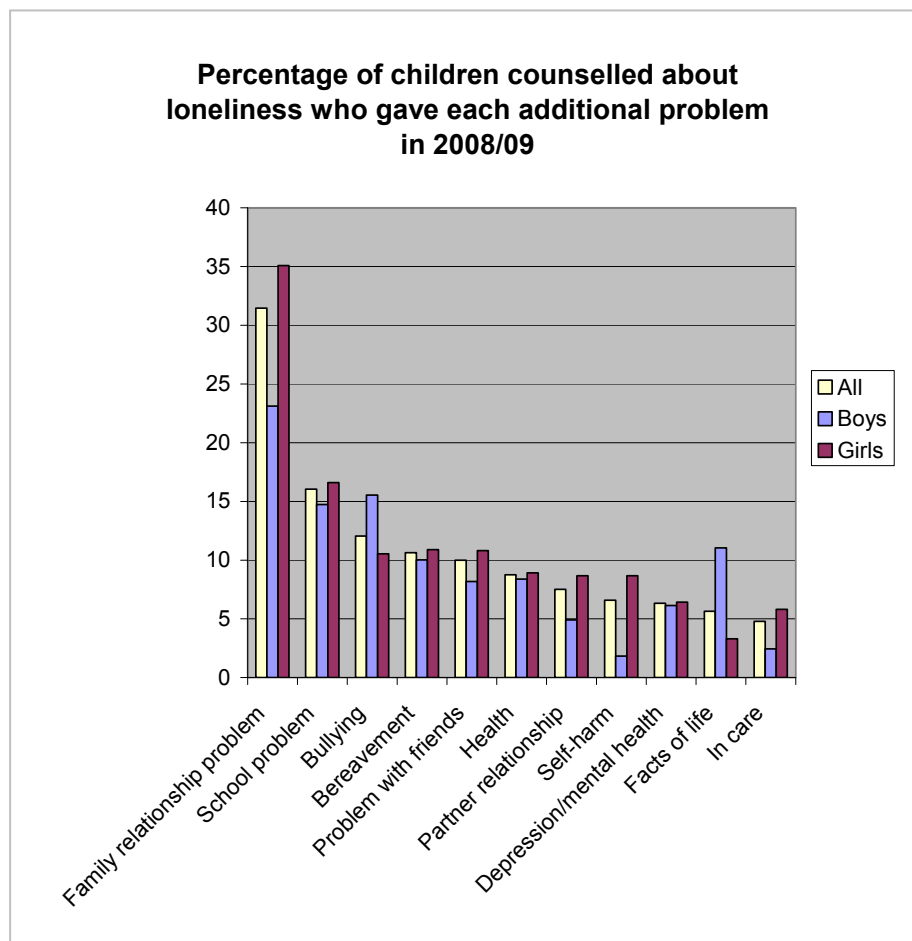
The younger age of girl callers is in keeping with the ChildLine casenote *What boys talk about to ChildLine*, which found that girls counselled by ChildLine were on average younger than boys counselled by ChildLine.

2.5 Additional problems for children counselled about loneliness in 2008/09

Of the 5,525 children counselled about loneliness as their main problem, 1,609 also gave an additional problem. Figure 6 shows the additional reasons that callers gave.

Please note that the percentage given is a percentage of those who gave an additional problem, not of all loneliness callers.

Figure 6



As figure 6 indicates, family relationship problems (506 children counselled) was by far the biggest category. This shows how the breakdown of family relationships impacts on children and adds to loneliness. It was double the next biggest category of school problems (258 children counselled). School problems were followed by bullying (194), bereavement (171) and problems with friends (161) as the top additional problems referred to. These issues are explored in greater detail in this casenote.

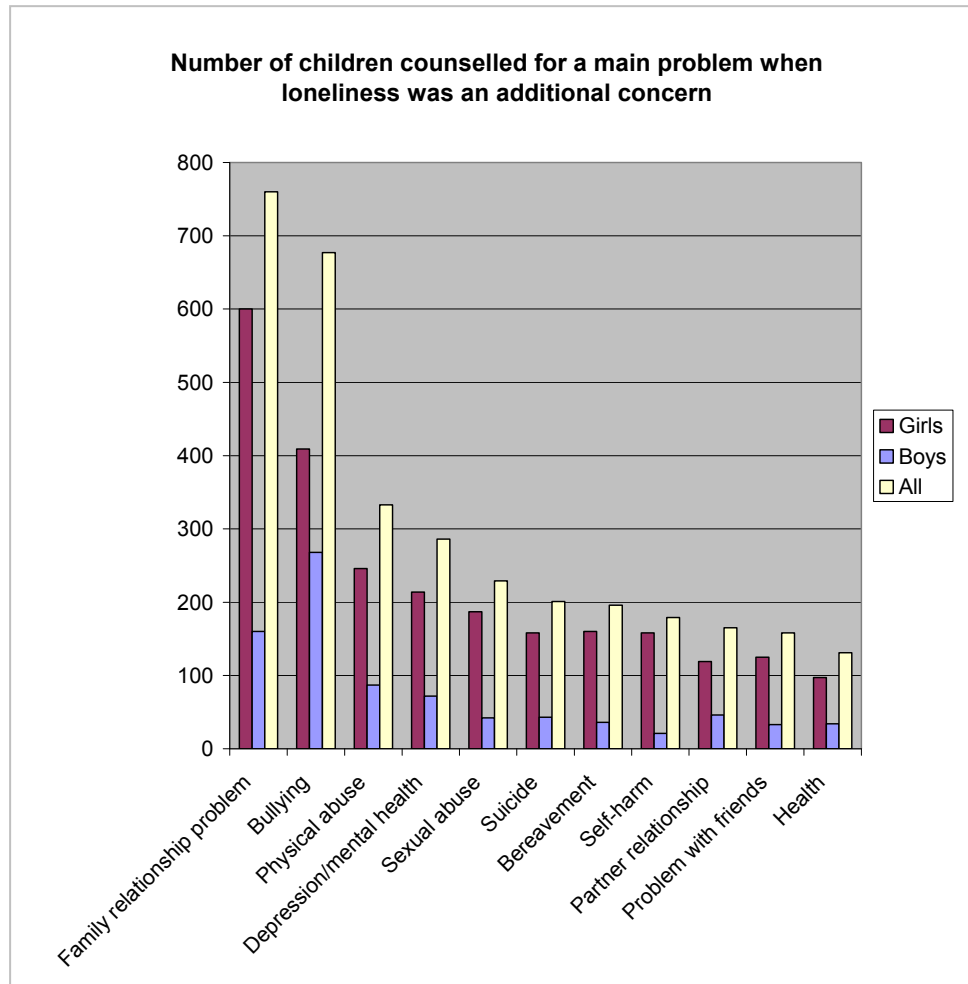
The seeming disparity between boys and girls counselled about loneliness who talked about self-harm as an additional problem should be noted. Two per cent of boys counselled about loneliness, who mentioned an additional concern, discussed self-harm, compared with 9 per cent of girls.

It therefore seems that girls may be more likely than boys to engage in self-harm to deal with the painful emotions of loneliness. This is in keeping with research by Fox and Hawton (2004) that shows that self-harm is more prevalent in females than in males.

2.6 Calls about other main problems with loneliness as an additional problem

During 2008/09, there were 4,399 calls about other main problems where loneliness was present as an additional problem. The amount each problem was talked about, when loneliness was mentioned as an additional problem, is shown in figure 7.

Figure 7



Family relationships and bullying were the top issues where loneliness was additionally mentioned. The fact that loneliness was also frequently mentioned when callers rang about bullying demonstrates the extremely harmful effects of being bullied in terms of loneliness. Bullying was followed by physical abuse, depression/mental health problems, sexual abuse and suicide.

The prominence of depression and mental health problems, suicide, bereavement and self-harm as shown in figure 7 should be noted, and will be discussed in the next section.

2.7 Main problems for all children counselled by ChildLine in 2008/09

Figure 8 gives a summary of the main problems for all children counselled by ChildLine in 2008/09.

Figure 8

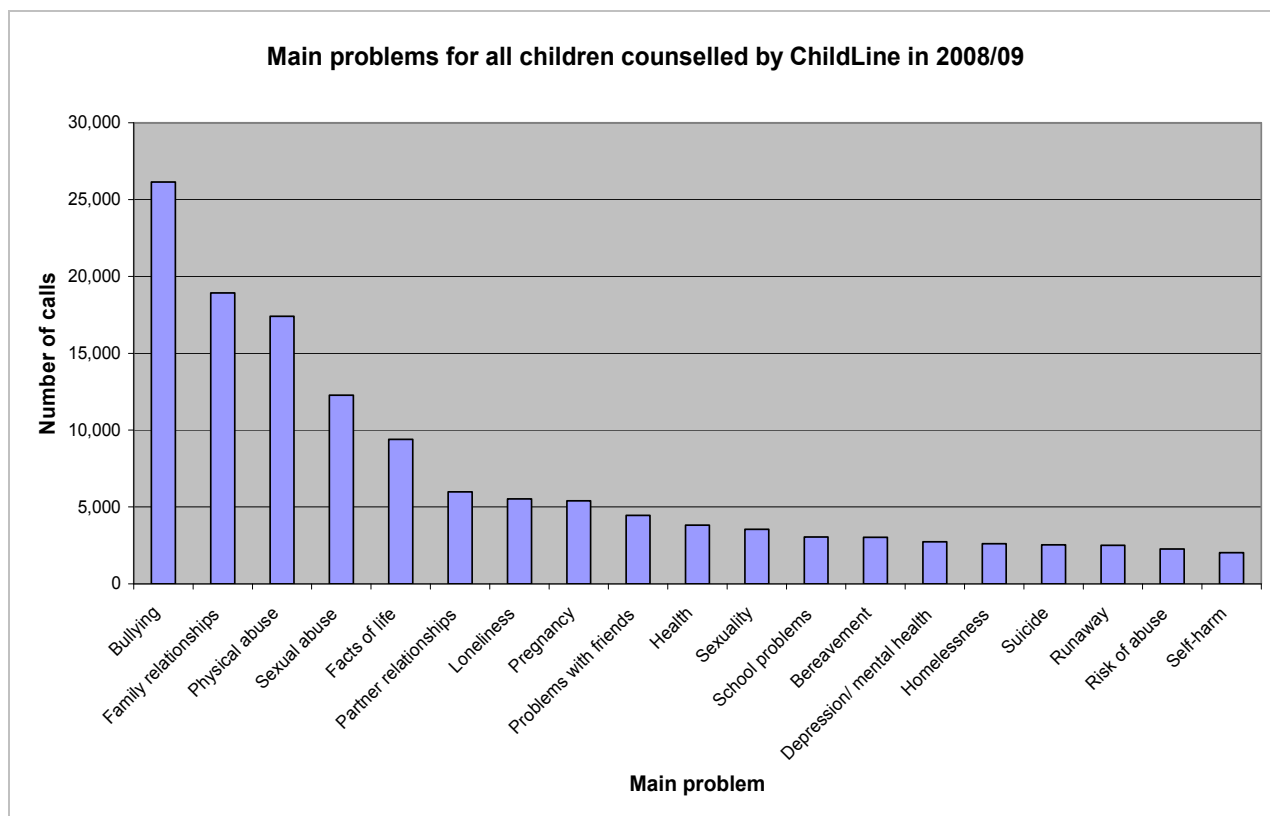


Figure 8, showing main problems for children counselled by ChildLine, can be compared with figure 7, showing the main problems where loneliness was involved. Depression, mental health, suicide, bereavement and self-harm all feature much more significantly in the lives of the children who phoned because they were lonely. This is confirmed by table 2 below.

Table 2

Ranking for key issues for children counselled by ChildLine overall and for loneliness as an additional problem

Problem or concern	Ranking of main problem for all children counselled by ChildLine	Ranking of main problem for children counselled with loneliness as an additional problem
Depression and mental health	14 th	4 th
Suicide	16 th	6 th
Bereavement	13 th	7 th
Self-harm	19 th	8 th

In both table 2 and figure 8, we can see that depression and mental health problems, suicide, bereavement and self-harm are ranked between the 13th and 19th most frequent main problems children are counselled about by ChildLine.

However, when we look at the ranking of the same problems combined with loneliness as an additional problem, we can see they are ranked significantly higher. The same problems are between the fourth and eighth most common problems.

We can conclude from this that there is a strong link between loneliness and depression/mental health problems, suicide, bereavement and self-harm. The fact that problems as serious, and in many cases as dangerous, as these are linked to loneliness highlights the devastating nature of loneliness for many children counselled by ChildLine.

3. Loneliness – findings from research

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 upholds that all children have a right to participate fully in family life. However, many of the young people who phone ChildLine are experiencing loneliness to the extent that it hampers their social development and ability to participate in both family life and in the wider community.

A recent UNICEF overview (Adamson, 2007) of child wellbeing in the richest developed countries ranked the UK at the bottom of the other 21 nations reviewed. The UK was especially poor in the areas of family and peer relations. The report described how relationships with family and friends matter a great deal to children “in the here and now” and are also important for long-term emotional and psychological development. The experience of ChildLine confirms the links between these problematic relationships and feelings of loneliness.

A report by the Children’s Society (Layard and Dunn, 2009) also found widespread unease about children’s experiences of growing up, including evidence of increased emotional distress. They highlighted the importance of people caring for each other and of children in society being loved. They also found that young people thought that friendship was one of the most important elements of a good childhood. Similarly, they found that being unpopular has a major negative effect on children’s wellbeing. Sadly, for callers to ChildLine about loneliness, love and friendship were strikingly absent from their lives. This led ChildLine counsellors to comment that many children “find it very hard to forge friendships” and “don’t feel confident enough to make real friendships”.

Similarly, a survey of 7,000 children in England by the Children’s Society (Rees et al, 2010) emphasised the importance of family relationships in childhood wellbeing. They found that happiness in the family was the aspect most strongly associated with overall wellbeing. Children calling ChildLine about loneliness also mentioned family relationship problems as the problems most commonly associated with loneliness.

Rees et al also found bullying to have a strong association with lower wellbeing. This was reiterated by those children calling ChildLine about loneliness who also cited bullying as a serious problem in relation to loneliness. Additionally, Rees et al highlighted the lower wellbeing of some disabled children and of those in care.

Disabled children and those in care who phoned ChildLine expressed their vulnerability to feelings of loneliness.

The Young Foundation (2009) reported that many people, including those who are young, were suffering because of the absence of people they could turn to for help and support. They described how a growing body of evidence pointed to the psychological and physical harm that loneliness could bring. This is certainly borne out by the young people who contact ChildLine who overwhelmingly report that they feel desperately lonely and have no one else to whom they feel they can turn.

Qualter and Munn (2002) pointed to different kinds of isolation. They suggested two types of loneliness: social and emotional. Social loneliness was described as the absence of a social network, ie the lack of a network of social relationships in which the person is part of a group of friends who share interests and activities. Emotional loneliness was described as the lack of a close intimate attachment to another person. Interestingly, they suggested that loneliness could either be an absence of people, or an inability to relate to the people with whom they do have contact. It is a problem if children lack significant people in their lives, and equally so if they cannot relate to people who are part of their worlds.

It is evident that many children counselled by ChildLine in relation to loneliness lack a network of social relationships or a group of friends, even though most are attending school and are therefore surrounded by their peers. This indicates that it may be the inability of children to relate to people around them that is the problem, rather than the absence of people.

The impact of loneliness described by Qualter and Munn (2002) included an “internalising style” characterised by apprehensiveness, timidity, social withdrawal, submissiveness and isolation. They argued that the child’s reduced contact with their own peer group lessened their self-confidence, increased feelings of inadequacy and their overall ability to cope with the daunting task of making friends. They argued that, unfortunately, it required confidence to prevent or overcome loneliness. For many of the children counselled by ChildLine about loneliness, lack of confidence is an issue that they often mention.

Cheng and Furnham (2002) reported that the effects of loneliness on children can be so serious that they could have dangerous negative repercussions, such as suicide or alcoholism. Suicidal feelings featured prominently for children counselled by ChildLine about loneliness.

Cheng and Furnham also emphasised the importance of friendships, suggesting that it is one of the predictors of happiness. They argued that peer friendship was positively correlated with happiness and negatively correlated with loneliness.

For many children counselled about loneliness, the absence of friends is one of their primary concerns. Interestingly, Cheng and Furnham found that doing well in school could encourage a pupil’s general happiness and reduce loneliness. For children counselled by ChildLine, school problems are the fifth problem most commonly associated with loneliness.

Some groups can be particularly vulnerable to loneliness. Sim and Bowes (2005) found that differences, including disability and the stigma attached could make social interaction difficult. Knight et al (2007) highlighted another group that can be particularly vulnerable to loneliness and isolation. They explored the experiences of looked after children, examined the feelings of rejection, the stigma these children experienced and how this could lead them to lose trust in others and become lonely.

The sense of loneliness was linked not only to being removed from their birth families, but also to undergoing frequent moves between foster, residential and parental homes. They highlighted the effect of ostracism and rejection by their family before going into care, and the negative effect it could have on their self-esteem. They also explored the general emotional vulnerability that could be caused. ChildLine callers who are in care expressed acute loneliness, often being without the caring support of their family or others.

School problems, friendships, disability and the experiences of looked after children and their links to loneliness are explored later in this casenote.

4. Issues associated with calls to ChildLine about loneliness

4.1 Family relationship problems

In 2008/09, ChildLine counselled 1,266 young people about family relationship problems and loneliness, with loneliness as either the main or an additional problem. These calls consisted of 993 girls and 273 boys. This was the largest category of calls about loneliness and almost one and a half times more than the next highest category of bullying and loneliness.

The most common category of family relationship problem discussed with ChildLine counsellors was difficulties in relationships with parents. For many callers who were lonely, not being able to communicate with and effectively relate to their parents, and facing more deeply rooted conflicts with parents, caused or compounded their feelings of loneliness.

James, aged 17, told ChildLine:

"I feel really lonely at the moment and I can't talk to anyone. I'm not close with my parents and since I left school I've lost touch with most of my friends. I feel like I'm rubbish in life. There's something wrong with me but I don't know what. My dad's violent towards me and my 11-year-old sister. He hits us badly. Sometimes I am worried by my thoughts. I'm scared of my parents. When I turn 18, I want to move out."

In addition to arguments with parents, some callers about loneliness also had conflicts with their siblings.

Anil, aged 11, told ChildLine:

"I don't have any confidence and don't have many friends. I argue with my sister and mum. I get angry and hit a pillow when angry. I am worried I might hit someone else."

Sometimes, it is not direct conflict with family members that leads to loneliness, but rather the caller feels left out or that their sibling is favoured. This can be a very troubling and extremely tough experience for a young person who does not feel valued in the family.

David, aged 15, told ChildLine:

"I am gay and my parents are judging me and I feel that they favour my brother. I feel very alone."

Another form of isolation experienced by callers in relation to family relationship problems is being left at home alone. This can be an intimidating experience for many children and young people, and can make them feel very vulnerable. Parents working long hours may add to their children's loneliness.

Kasia, aged 11, phoned ChildLine and said:

"I want to talk. I am lonely and my mum doesn't come home until later."

One ChildLine counsellor described an example of someone she had counselled:

"The child's mum and dad are at work a lot...and she just wanted to tell them how well she'd done at school. Often callers just want you to give them that bit of praise and reassurance when there's no one else who does."

Another ChildLine counsellor explained:

"A lot of the time children don't want to bother their family with how they're feeling because they think they've got enough problems. They can then become really withdrawn and lonely."

Parental divorce or separation can also be a lonely experience for many young people. It can be hard for them to choose with whom to live, and they can end up missing the parent with whom they have less contact. The absence of either parent due to divorce or separation can be deeply upsetting for a young person.

Both parents play an important role in a child's development and the absence of one, especially if they were close before the separation, can make a young person feel especially lonely.

Jacob, aged 17, told ChildLine:

"I feel really down. My parents split up four years ago and I live with my mum. My brother lives with my dad. I have very little self-confidence and get upset easily. I only meet my dad occasionally."

During a parental break up there may be conflict and arguments between the parents. This can be hard for the children to deal with. Additionally, even though the divorce or separation is a result of their parent's relationship breaking down, the child may blame themselves for the break-up.

Some children, whose parents were separating, called ChildLine and described how no one understood what they were going through and the difficult feelings they were experiencing. This can add to their sense of being alone.

Andrea, aged 17, told ChildLine:

"I am upset. My parents are splitting up and arguing all the time. I feel lonely; no one understands."

Janet, aged 14, told ChildLine:

"My parents are getting divorced. Dad has moved out and has a new partner. I feel he has left me, not just my mum. My friends don't understand what I am going through."

4.2 Bullying

Bullying is the largest category for children counselled by ChildLine. A survey commissioned by ChildLine (Oliver and Candappa, 2003) describes how half of primary school children and more than one-in-four secondary school students said they had been bullied. In relation to loneliness, 871 young people were counselled about loneliness and bullying (with loneliness as either a main or an additional problem) during 2008/09. This consisted of 527 girls and 344 boys.

The ChildLine casenote *Children talking to ChildLine about bullying* (2008) found that name calling was the most common type of bullying, followed by physical bullying. For many children and young people, being bullied, either physically or verbally, can be a painful experience that makes them feel distressed, sad and alone.

Children who are being bullied may be socially ostracised and the bullies will exert power to isolate them. They may feel utterly powerless, not know what to do and feel unable to seek help. The young person may have exhausted all avenues for help to make the bullying stop but it has continued. This can make them feel even more lonely and isolated. ChildLine offers a place for the young person to turn to.

One ChildLine counsellor said:

"One of the effects of bullying is to cause isolation and loneliness."

Sarah, who did not give her age, told ChildLine:

"I am being bullied by some girls at school. They tease me and blame me for everything and there is nobody that backs me up. I have no friends because everybody has paired up and I have no one because my friends moved away recently. I feel like nothing. I told my teachers but they don't make the bullies stop, it just gets worse. My parents don't listen and tell me to ignore the bullies. It all makes me think I shouldn't have been born."

Part of the problem for callers who are bullied is not just the bullies themselves. It is also that being bullied can prevent other people from befriending them. Additionally, part of the bullying can be to exclude the caller from activities and friendship groups, which can make the situation worse. Bullying destroys young people's confidence and this can then make it even harder for them to make friends.

One ChildLine counsellor said:

"Bullying, by its nature, sets out to exclude someone and make them feel absolutely worthless. It's not always picked up as bullying, but they're absolutely excluded and have no one to talk to."

Another counsellor said:

"I recently had a call from a girl who was obviously very lonely and said, 'I feel completely alone'...She took me through a typical school day and...she didn't talk to anyone and nobody talked to her. It was bullying in terms of exclusion rather than actively verbally or physically assaulting her."

Josh, who did not give his age, told ChildLine:

"I have no friends and never have. I am being bullied at school, which means I have no friends. I have no confidence. I will talk to my parents about this."

Bullying can also lead to self-harm, depression and suicidal thoughts.

4.3 Child abuse and neglect

Table 3

Type of abuse mentioned with loneliness as a main or additional problem in 2008/09

Type of abuse	Number of girls counselled	Number of boys counselled	Number of children counselled
Physical	291	109	400
Sexual	228	49	277
Emotional	79	26	105
Neglect	78	27	105
Total for abuse and neglect	676	211	887

During 2008/09, ChildLine counselled 887 children about loneliness and abuse or neglect. This is 9 per cent of those counselled about loneliness.

In 2008/09, physical abuse and sexual abuse were the most common types of abuse talked about in connection with loneliness. Feelings of loneliness can be particularly acute when the abuse is perpetrated by someone close to the child, such as a parent, family member or someone who should be trusted.

The breakdown of a relationship due to abuse can leave the victim in an increasingly vulnerable and very harmful position. The abused child may feel very confused by and ambivalent about the abuser. They may not know who they can tell about the abuse, leaving them even more lonely and isolated.

Jane, aged 18, who experienced physical abuse, told ChildLine:

"I left home at 15 after lots of physical abuse by my family. Now I feel alone and find it difficult to make friends."

The number of girls counselled about sexual abuse and loneliness was over four times greater than the number of boys, representing a larger disparity between boys and girls than for loneliness callers overall. It highlights how significant an issue loneliness and sexual abuse is for girls. It seems girls who have been sexually abused and call ChildLine are particularly vulnerable to feeling lonely. The loneliness can be linked to not feeling they can tell anyone about the sexual abuse they experience.

Jade, aged 14, who experienced sexual abuse, told ChildLine:

"I have problems at home; my mum doesn't listen to me. My uncle raped me when I was 10. My mum still sees him and talks to him. I feel invisible. I feel unloved and like no one cares. I don't understand why I am still being punished. My mum says she still sees her brother 'cos he's the only family she has left. I feel left out and hurt when they all go out."

Those experiencing emotional abuse can feel extremely lonely. Nick, aged 16, who experienced emotional abuse, told ChildLine:

"I feel lonely and trapped. It's just me against the world. Nobody cares about me. I'm lost, confused and hollow. It's scary for me. My mum tries to control me; if I don't do things her way she shouts at me. I hate it. I hate myself. I hate everything about me, the way I look. I want to die. I'm an idiot. People tell me I am an idiot; my own family. I don't get on with them."

Neglect can also be a serious problem for children, making them feel uncared for and alone. Carla, aged 12, who experienced neglect, told ChildLine:

"I get left alone when my mum goes to work. My mum leaves at 6.30am and sometimes only comes home around 7.30pm. Sometimes, I am also left on my own at weekends. Mum says she has to work to be able to get what we need. We argue a lot."

4.4 Depression and mental health

In 2008/09, ChildLine counselled 388 young people (286 girls and 102 boys) about depression and mental health problems, with loneliness as either the main or an additional problem.

Michael, aged 17, told ChildLine:

"I feel like I've got no one; I'm all alone. I'm down and depressed. I just hate myself."

For some, the depression can be interlinked with the loneliness. The loneliness may be causing the depression. Additionally, however, there is the sense that the depression is adding to the loneliness, in terms of affecting the young person's confidence and making it harder to make friends.

One ChildLine counsellor said:

"I think depression's quite a common problem...and it does lead to loneliness... especially if loneliness is sometimes linked to other issues."

Sanjay, aged 15, told ChildLine:

"I feel very depressed. I feel useless and that life's not worth living any more. I am not suicidal; I just feel completely useless. I want to have the confidence to make friends and have a girlfriend."

Loneliness can be particularly harmful when a caller is depressed or has mental health problems but does not feel there is anyone they can share this with.

Jacob, who did not give his age, told ChildLine:

"I'm very depressed. I don't know how to feel happy any more. Everything has gone bad and no one wants to listen to me."

4.5 School problems

In 2008/09, ChildLine counselled 377 young people about loneliness and school problems, with loneliness as either a main or an additional problem. This consisted of 286 girls and 91 boys.

Children counselled about loneliness with school problems as an additional problem were on average older than children counselled about loneliness overall, with a higher percentage in the 12 to 15 and 16 to 18 age groups.

Breaking this down further, the most frequent age given by children counselled for loneliness and school problems was 16 (21 per cent). This compares to only 15 per cent of overall children counselled about loneliness being age 16, suggesting that the age of 16 is a particularly lonely time for ChildLine callers in relation to school. This may be a result of exam pressures or the fact that it can be a time of transition to college or sixth form.

Schools are often a place where young people learn to make friends. However, for some young people who phone ChildLine, school can be a lonely place where making friends is a problem.

Lucy told ChildLine:

"I want to talk about being alone at play time. I've been feeling like this for two months. I need to have friends but other people have taken them away from me at break time, so I'm alone."

As already mentioned, a common period when ChildLine callers feel especially lonely at school is at times of transition. This can be transition from primary to secondary school, or starting a new school due to moving house or experiencing problems at the old school. It could even be the transition to college or into a more adult life because of leaving school.

One ChildLine counsellor commented:

“Moving school is a very big thing in a child’s life and often it goes with moving house as well. They’ve left all their friends behind. They might have arrived mid-term and everybody has paired off with their own friends and all the teams are organised and there they are, they’re thinking, ‘Where do I fit into this?’ ‘How can I fit into this?’”

Sally, aged 11, told ChildLine:

“I am in year 7. My friends from primary school went to another school. I am unhappy that I don’t have any friends.”

Jenny, aged 18, told ChildLine:

“I’ve been at college since September. People have made friendships but no one talks to me. I am thinking of dropping out of my course, as there is lots of group work. I think people are ashamed to talk to me and look down on me.”

Elsbeth, aged 11, told ChildLine:

“I started a new school last November. The other girls ignore me. I just want someone to talk to. I can’t go on school trips, as my parents would worry. My mum and dad are splitting up. This is good and bad for me. My mum always cries and feels sad.”

This demonstrates how children who are experiencing loneliness may also face multiple difficulties or challenges in their lives – in this case, changing school, possible bullying and family breakdown as parents separate. All of these problems may compound the sense of loneliness.

4.6 Bereavement

In 2008/09, ChildLine counselled 367 children (282 girls and 85 boys) about loneliness and bereavement, with loneliness as either a main or an additional problem.

Bereavement was the seventh highest ranked problem with loneliness as an additional problem. However, it was only ranked 13th in the overall number of children counselled by ChildLine during the same time period. This establishes the strong link between bereavement and feelings of isolation.

More callers about loneliness and bereavement were in the 12 to 15 age group than for loneliness callers on average. This suggests that the ages of 12 to 15 can be a particularly difficult ages in terms of loneliness for those who have experienced the death of somebody close.

One ChildLine counsellor said:

“Death can make a child feel really, really lonely. Especially if it’s someone that they have become very dependent on for things, such as emotional support.”

Jackie, aged 12, told ChildLine:

"I feel sad and lonely. My dad died when I was eight and now I live with Aunty as my mum takes drugs. I feel shy and have no confidence."

James, aged 18, told ChildLine:

"I am lonely and living alone with my pets. I am going to visit Mum tomorrow for the weekend. My grandmother died and she was important in my life."

Jessica, aged seven, told ChildLine:

"My mum died three weeks ago and I really missed her today because I have broken my arm and want my mum to hold my hand. I feel lonely."

In other situations, several people may have died in a young person's life. The cumulative effect of these deaths can be traumatic for a young person and may add to feelings of loneliness. It seems both the actual missing of the person or people who have died, combined with the difficult feelings of grief associated with bereavement, mean that such events can have particularly devastating consequences.

Emma, aged seven, told ChildLine:

"I feel sad and lonely. Why do people have to die? Four people have died in five weeks, including my cousin, my nana and my mother's baby when she had an operation. I feel people keep leaving me."

Sometimes, the needs of children who are experiencing bereavement are overlooked by adults in the family and by professionals. The young people can sometimes not want to draw attention to their own grief due to fear of upsetting their parent/s.

One counsellor expressed the belief that:

"They feel as if they'll only cause more problems if they draw attention to the fact they are struggling to cope with the loss. If their mother or father lost their partner, they don't want to make it worse for the surviving person by not being able to manage their own grief."

4.7 Problems with friends

ChildLine counselled 319 young people (246 girls and 73 boys) in 2008/09 about loneliness and problems with friends, with loneliness as either a main or an additional problem.

There is a higher percentage of children aged between 12 and 15 who were counselled about loneliness and problems with friends than for children counselled about loneliness overall. This suggests that these ages are a particularly problematic time for loneliness and problems with friends.

Obviously, for most children, friends are a great source of pleasure. Yet for some of those who called ChildLine, making and keeping friends, or the absence of friends, can be a painful experience.

Part of the problem can be a lack of confidence, which makes it hard to make friends and can add to the sense of loneliness. Not having friends to spend time with and to share thoughts and feelings with can make life very hard. The loneliness that is caused by not having friends can be acute.

Ravinder, aged 16, phoned ChildLine and took a long time to speak. Eventually, he told the counsellor:

"I have no confidence. I find it hard to talk to people and make friends. This makes me feel bad. I find school hard. Class work is OK but I sit alone. I would love to have friends and go out with them."

The ChildLine counsellor expressed support, reassuring him that he was showing signs of wanting to change things for the better, and went on to discuss how he could develop friendships. In a situation like this, a counsellor may discuss approaches to making friends and try to boost the young person's confidence.

For some callers, being perceived as different, either in appearance or behaviour, can make it hard to make friends, adding to their loneliness and sadness.

Hussain, aged 17, said:

"I feel miserable about life in general; I have low self-esteem and not very much confidence. I have some friends but people say I am geeky and odd. I feel anxious around people."

One counsellor commented:

"Finance is another thing. They may get bullied because they're not wearing the right gear. Sometimes they can't afford it."

Having few or no friends is a very difficult experience for a child or young person. Some ChildLine callers are left with no one to share their day-to-day experiences or even their worries with.

Katherine, aged 16, told ChildLine:

"I am really self-conscious. There are loads of things I am worried about. No one cares. I have no friends."

She felt that she had no one to share her worries with:

"I feel lost. I just want someone to talk to. I am worried about my mum who is having a hard time. I get lonely and am tired of 'two-faced' people at school. I've started a new school. I was bullied in my last school and thought this school would be different."

For some callers, the problem was not the lack of friends but the influence of their friends. Some friendship groups encouraged risk-taking behaviour, such as underage drinking and taking illegal drugs.

Friendship groups, such as “Emos”² and “Goths”³, can provide a sense of group identity and enable the young person to feel part of a group, but they can also be quite isolating, as their values can be quite opposed to those of mainstream society and their families.

Unfortunately, some friendship groups can also encourage harmful practices like self-harm, which can add to the isolation. One ChildLine counsellor said:

“They will openly have cuts on their arms – though not serious self-harm necessarily. It’s just to be part of the group.”

Another counsellor commented that:

“Within the first, like, two minutes of the call, they’ll say ‘I’m an Emo’ or ‘I’m a Goth’. They’re creating this little cult for themselves. But because of this outsider cult, they’re rejected by everybody. It doesn’t help that that particular cult thrives on exclusion.”

Ruth, aged 14, called ChildLine and said:

“I am an Emo. Do you hate me for that? Are you against Emos? I haven’t been to school much. I have been excluded due to being an Emo and wearing makeup and nail polish. I have recently been beaten up. I’ve got a black eye and 10 stitches in my neck. I am worried about being fat. I drank vodka, wine and lager this evening and smoked weed. I feel like I want to die. I also self-harm.”

When a friendship group encourages self-harm, it can be particularly problematic, as the problem can become ingrained and part of the group’s identity.

One counsellor commented that:

“This gang member wanted to detach himself from the whole gang...but said: ‘This is what I need to do because of the area that I live in, if I’m not in a gang then I’m even more at risk’... ‘I’ve got all these people around me, I’m part of this big gang, but it’s the loneliest place in the world’.”

Additionally, the isolation felt by the geographical location of some of the children was also described by counsellors as a factor in friendships. One counsellor said:

“One of the boys I counsel is from a rural area, it’s a guy who...has no friends because his...home is in the middle of nowhere; he’s miles from his friends. He can’t have friends over because his parents are very strict and they don’t allow him to go out and see his friends.”

² “Someone who is emotional and likes depressing music, feels the world is against them and often commits self-harm.” (Definition from NSPCC young people’s participation group)

³ “A person who likes the darker side of things. Goths are typically seen as morbid, wearing black clothes almost all of the time and wearing makeup regardless of sex.” (Definition from NSPCC young people’s participation group)

ChildLine case study – the experience of Carrie, aged 16*

Carrie's first serious relationship has ended. She says she just cannot cope with how sad and lonely she feels. Some of her first words to ChildLine were:
"I've never felt so bad in my entire life."

Each day brings the ordeal of seeing her oldest friend, Kaz. They no longer talk now because Kaz is seeing her ex-boyfriend. Carrie is so upset that she struggles to eat or sleep.

"My feelings come like giant waves and it seems there's no one there for me. The two people who do know how I feel won't help me because they feel guilty. I can't go on feeling like this. I can't see the point of getting out of bed in the morning."

She tells the counsellor that she is self-harming and it is starting to scare her. Cutting her arm is the only thing that helps her feel calm and stops her from feeling so sad.

Carrie is worried that her friends are getting sick of hearing about her problems and she does not think they will react well if she tells them about her self-harm.

Slowly, the ChildLine counsellor builds a plan with Carrie to make tomorrow more bearable than today. "You don't have to go on feeling like this by yourself, Carrie. If you let us try to help, you might gradually feel better."

**This sample case draws on what children tell ChildLine, but does not describe a specific case.*

4.8 Health and disability

During 2008/09, ChildLine counselled 224 girls and 103 boys were about loneliness and health or disability, with loneliness as either a main or an additional problem.

For some young people who are feeling lonely, health problems can add to the feeling of isolation as they feel there is no one they can share their health problems with.

Isobel, aged 17, told ChildLine:

"I feel lonely. I am in a hostel and I'm the only girl there with five boys...I feel awkward, embarrassed and shy. I have no one to talk to. The boys went out to get wasted and I'm left by myself. I have a big stomach pain, this is caused by, you know, I can't say but, you know, women's problems. I hate being a woman."

She was crying on the phone:

"Help, I'm in pain. I have no money to buy towels. I am covered in blood down below. I have had bad depression in the past and I have tried to jump off a bridge. I have also tried to hang myself."

Other children feel that they are getting no support with their health problem, which can add to their feelings of loneliness.

Michelle, aged 15, told ChildLine:

"I have a medical problem and see a GP. I've already had hospital treatment and take medication. I recently had an operation to check for cancer but I didn't have it. I have lots of pain. My main problem is that no one takes me seriously, no one listens to me and I have no support. My mum thinks I enjoy the attention and thinks I am exaggerating."

For some, having a disability can be part of the loneliness. Physical disabilities can mean limited opportunities to meet friends and engage in activities, and accessing transport services can be particularly difficult. This can make a young person isolated. Young people can be especially lonely if the disability impairs communication.

Communication barriers can lead to loneliness for many young people, especially if they cannot communicate even with their own family. This can lead to them being at the periphery of family life. They can also find mixing with their peers hard.

Nigel, aged 16, who had a speech impediment, phoned ChildLine. He said:

"I am lonely and worried about moving from school to college in September."

One ChildLine counsellor commented:

"You might have a speech impediment or you might be slightly deaf...I feel it's often the bullying thing – they'll just pick on anything they want in order to separate you."

Frank, aged 16, called ChildLine. He was extremely shy and introverted:

"I have autism and low self-confidence. I find talking hard. I have no friends; I would love to have friends. My parents are supportive. I want to talk to them about improving my confidence."

Disabled people can also be stigmatised and this can add to their isolation.

ChildLine case study – the experience of Ewan, aged 10*

“I called ChildLine a year ago. I thought it was going to be another of those conversations that goes wonky, like most of mine do. The counsellor understood me though. I told the counsellor that I hated it at my boarding school. The counsellor helped me write a letter to my parents.

“I rang again when Mum and Dad wrote back to say it was best that I stay at school over the summer because that was their busiest time at work. I lost my temper and smashed some windows in the school. I cut all my hands and the matron had to make the call to ChildLine for me.

“I have special needs. I have this knack of making everyone fed up with me and I have fights with them. I can’t really explain why. I try to fit in but I can’t. The longest I have had a friend is three weeks. I have no friends at school. This makes me really lonely. My parents also fight a lot.

“Sometimes it’s not fair because I also get picked on because of my special needs. I don’t know what to do and then I feel myself getting hot and I can hear my heart beating hard. Then I lose my temper.

“ChildLine can’t do magic but they did help me get out of the boarding school and get a helper called Debbie when I went back to my old school. No one was pleased to see me again so having Debbie there as a sort of grown-up friend is cool. It was not that I thought my old school was great but I was used to it. I like things to stay the same. Debbie helps me understand what’s going on and find ways of not losing my temper. She helped me see that I get teased and bullied just because I will lose my temper. I have started to walk away from those people now.

“Since I called them, ChildLine has gone online and I have had one-to-one online chats a few times and put messages on the message board. I had some nice messages from other kids after I talked about the special needs thing. I am not the only one with problems.

“I am still stuck with my miserable parents but school has got better. I have decided to stick with it because I’ve made up my mind to go to university.”

**This sample case draws on what children tell ChildLine, but does not describe a specific case.*

4.9 Self-harm and suicide

In 2008/09, ChildLine counselled 285 children (255 girls and 30 boys) about loneliness and self-harm, with loneliness as either a main or an additional problem. During that time, 240 children (190 girls and 50 boys) also talked about loneliness and suicide, with loneliness as either a main or an additional problem. Overall, 5 per cent of callers experiencing loneliness also experienced suicidal feelings or self-harm.

Significantly, there were eight and a half times as many girls counselled about loneliness and self-harm as boys. There were also almost four times as many girls as boys counselled about suicide and loneliness (for loneliness as either a main or an additional problem). This demonstrates the significance of self-harm and suicide for girls calling about loneliness. This high rate of loneliness and self-harm, and loneliness and suicide, is in keeping with calls overall to ChildLine. These calls show that six times the number of girls call about self-harm as boys, and that four times as many girls call about suicide as boys.

Self-harm was the eighth highest ranked concern where loneliness was given as an additional problem, while suicide was the sixth highest. However, self-harm ranked 19th in overall calls to ChildLine and suicide ranked 16th. This shows that suicide and self-harm are clearly connected with feelings of loneliness.

For some children counselled by ChildLine, feelings of loneliness can reach such a point that they become unbearable. These negative feelings can result in the young people self-harming or even considering or committing suicide. Sadly, it can be a negative cycle, as enacting self-harm or attempting suicide can make the young person feel even more lonely and isolated.

Janet, aged 16, who was experiencing loneliness, told ChildLine:

"I am upset. I've lost my friends and family. I feel like no one cares. I don't want to be here any more, nothing has any meaning. I live in a bedsit with my boyfriend. I left home because my dad hit me when he was angry. No one speaks to me any more. My friends side with my boyfriend. I am having problems with him, too. He keeps messing with my head. I spoke to someone at a local clinic and they gave me ChildLine's number. I stopped going to college due to problems and self-harming."

Maria, aged 12, told ChildLine:

"I am feeling low. I feel like ending my life. I've been writing goodbye letters to people close to me. I've been self-harming for over a year. I live with my mum and sister but don't talk to them much. I have friends at school but they don't live very near. I feel lonely and isolated."

One counsellor commented that:

"This girl had tried to commit suicide on a number of occasions. When the other young people had got to know this, they avoided her and this isolated her further."

4.10 Looked after children

In 2008/09, ChildLine counselled 164 children (136 girls and 28 boys) about loneliness and being looked after. "Looked after children" means all children and young people who are looked after by a local authority. For many callers, being looked after can be a sad and lonely experience. This can be exacerbated by missing loved ones who they are unable to live with.

Zoe, aged 12, told ChildLine:

"I'm relieved because I'm going back to live with my aunty. I have been in care for four weeks. I was lonely. I was going to hurt myself if I didn't go back. I was going to commit suicide. I had gone into foster care because I had been hit by my aunty and had a black eye."

For many callers, the lonely experience of being in care is made worse by the continual moving around of placements, and of the instability of placements. This can make it harder to make friends and develop relationships with people in the care homes, increasing the sense of loneliness.

One ChildLine counsellor expressed the opinion that:

"In terms of loneliness, being in care is important, especially for those young people who find themselves getting moved about. I spoke to a little girl the other day and she'd been moved six times in the last year."

Charles, aged 18, said:

"I would like to talk. I am on my way to stay with my aunt and cousins. I've been in care all over the place so not settled anywhere. I'm looking forward to seeing my family. My mum abandoned me when I was three and I never knew my dad. I used to get really angry but I am over that now."

Sophie, aged 17, told ChildLine:

"I've been in care for two years with my younger sister. Care is OK. But now there are new staff and I don't know how to talk to them."

As well as many children and young people in care having experienced abuse or neglect prior to coming into the care system, many have also had negative experiences within the care system. These negative experiences, combined with frequently moving placements, can make it hard for some young people in care to form attachments.

Some callers who are in care tell ChildLine they find it hard to trust people. This mistrust can make it hard to develop relationships, which can lead to increased feelings of loneliness.

One ChildLine counsellor said:

"One caller said 'What's the point of getting close to people when they're just going to move me in two weeks?' And so often these young people do not seem to know where they're going. No information is given to them."

Emily, aged 14, told ChildLine:

“I’m having flashbacks and nightmares about my dad who is in jail. Because of our relationship, I no longer trust anyone, including my foster parents who I don’t talk to. I go to school but I don’t get close to anyone as I have to move around too much. My foster parents want to adopt me but I don’t want anyone to care for me as I’ll make them hate me. I don’t want to repeat things that happened with my dad. He touched me and I was scared. Who would want to be friends with someone who doesn’t have a family?”

4.11 The role of ChildLine – who children told before contacting ChildLine

ChildLine is an opportunity for young people to talk safely and confidentially about the problems they are experiencing. Counsellors take them seriously and work with them in partnership, respecting the fact that the child made the courageous decision to contact ChildLine.

Of the 639 instances where young people called about loneliness as a main problem and said if they had told someone about their problem before, 35 per cent had told no one. This is shown in figure 9 and emphasises the central importance of ChildLine as a resource for those children who are feeling isolated.

The fact that young people had told no one before shows just how isolated they were. It is frightening for young people to feel so lonely that they cannot cope and that there is no one they can turn to.

Figure 9

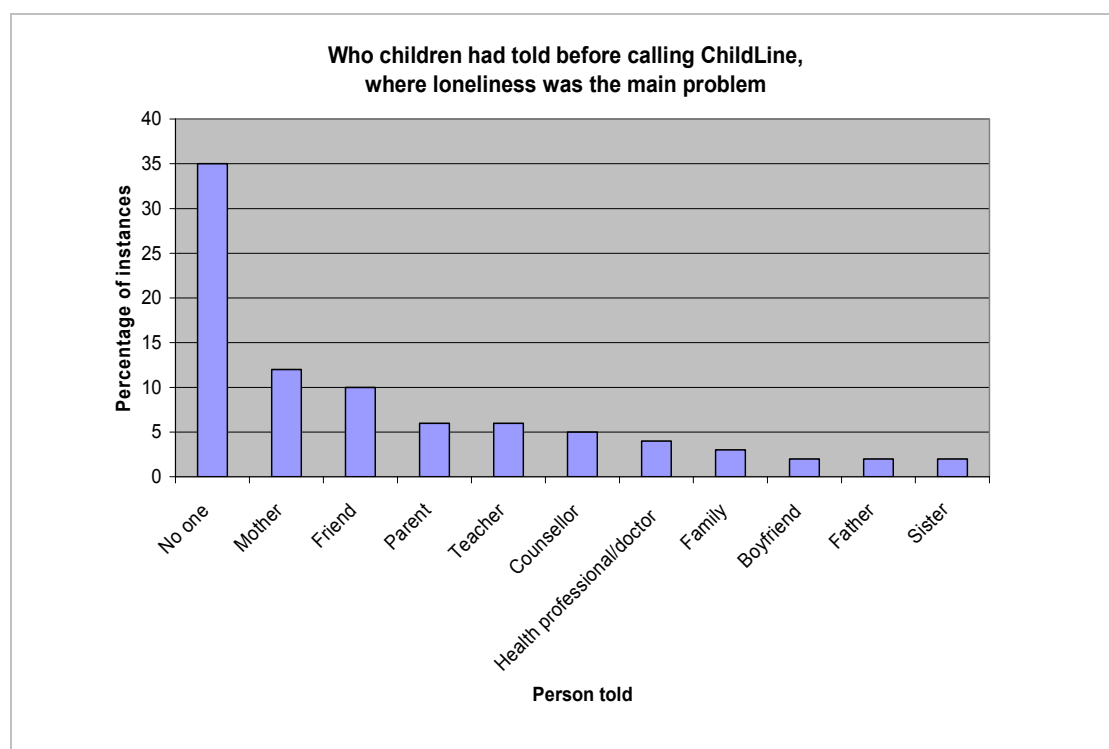


Figure 9 gives the percentages of those children who gave information about who they told, and not of all children counselled. The person most children talked to about their feelings of loneliness was their mother (12 per cent), pointing to the importance of families for those feeling lonely. However, for those who live away from their family or have problematic relationships with their family, this vital support could be lost. The disparity between the frequency the mother and father had been told about these feelings should be noted. Fathers were told in only 2 per cent of cases.

The ChildLine casenote *What boys talk about to ChildLine* (2009) also found that boys were less likely to turn to their father than their mother for help. The casenote found that of those boys who had given this information, only 6 per cent had told their father of their problem before phoning ChildLine.

More analysis needs to be done as to why those feeling lonely and experiencing a wide range of other problems do not turn to their father. The category “parent” and “family” was used in figure 9 when more specific identifying information was not given.

Friends were told in 10 per cent of cases. It is good that friends are seen as a source of support. But why have more children not turned to their friends about loneliness before contacting ChildLine? It may be a lack of friends or it may be that they feel they cannot communicate their loneliness to the friends that they do have.

Friends were followed by parents (gender not specified) and teachers. This demonstrates the importance of teachers being there for children and taking young people’s concerns about loneliness seriously. It is interesting to see the combination of friends, family and professionals who young people turn to for help.

Ideally, every child would have a trusted adult to whom they can turn, and in whom they can confide when feeling lonely, sad or isolated. Since this is not the case, ChildLine acts not simply as a listening ear, but also as the means whereby children and young people can find support, consider positive options and increase their confidence and self-esteem.

ChildLine is a particularly important resource for those who are lonely as, by definition, those who are lonely lack people in their life with whom they can share their problems. It not only provides support and advice to those who are lonely, but can also help with the loneliness itself.

5. ChildLine counsellors’ comments on the types of loneliness

Although not often explicitly referred to by the caller, feeling lonely features in many of the calls to ChildLine. It can be very difficult for a young person to admit or to say “I am lonely”. Claiming to be “just calling for a chat” or “because I’m bored” is easier.

The ChildLine counsellors often commented that there was a scale to the loneliness calls that they took. At one end of the scale, children and young people are phoning ChildLine because they are bored, lonely and need someone to talk to. This may be a natural part of growing up. However, at the other end of the scale, a child or young person may be feeling so desperately lonely that their lives are affected in a debilitating and devastating way.

Some children phone ChildLine when their problems do not appear to be severe. Even though these problems might not be as serious, they give young people a chance to develop a relationship with ChildLine and the calls themselves can offer a chance to express their feelings and gain some valuable support.

At the next level, children are calling ChildLine who are experiencing loneliness to a severe extent. These calls often refer to the effects of bullying, physical and sexual abuse, or school and friendship problems. In these cases, the loneliness has become so acute that the young person's wellbeing is seriously affected.

The final category of calls occurs when the children have reached a crisis point and feel that they have nowhere left to turn. This most extreme form of loneliness is linked with depression and mental health problems, as well as suicide and self-harm. These instances can be very damaging and dangerous to children's lives.

One counsellor said:

"The trouble is that the nature of loneliness is difficult to quantify. It can move from being just lonely to depression. It is a very difficult concept."

If it is difficult for adults to understand and articulate what is meant by loneliness, how much more so must it be for a young child facing a bereavement or a young person who is in care? There is a concern that if children are confused, or cannot understand or express their feelings, they will not try and tell someone.

A factor that must remain at the forefront of our minds is that no matter which category a child might fall into, their condition is unlikely to remain static.

Loneliness and its associated problems, if left undiscovered, may get progressively worse as the child feels more "locked in". The situation then becomes more difficult to solve.

6. Conclusions

- Loneliness is a feature in the lives of a significant number of children and young people. For some, loneliness is a natural part of growing up. For others, loneliness can cause distress and emotional pain and suffering; when it does so, it should be recognised as a serious problem.
- There has been a threefold increase in the number of children counselled about loneliness as a main problem over the past five years. This compares with only a 10 per cent increase in overall calls to ChildLine over this period.
- There has been a more than fivefold increase in the number of boys counselled about loneliness (as their main problem) over the past five years. The number of girls counselled about loneliness has more than doubled over the same period.

- Some counsellors suggested that young people may be lonelier than before. They thought this may be due to a lack of family support, increased family problems and social skills among young people not being encouraged. Children have given us reasons for their increased feelings of loneliness, such as parental divorce and longer parental working hours. Counsellors also suggest that this increase is in part due to children being more willing to talk about loneliness, and about their feelings and emotions in general.
- Callers about loneliness are on average older than ChildLine callers overall. This suggests the particular vulnerability of older children to these feelings and may in part be related to their transition into adulthood.
- Family relationship problems, bullying and physical abuse are the top problems associated with loneliness. Depression and mental health problems, school problems, bereavement, suicide and self-harm are all associated with loneliness.
- Many more girls than boys spoke about self-harm associated with loneliness. This is in keeping with girls overall tending to self-harm more often.
- Loneliness can be difficult for young people to express. It is a complex problem that can often be interwoven with other problems affecting a young person's life.

7. NSPCC recommendations

Issues that affect parents can also have a significant impact on their children's safety and emotional wellbeing. Parents may not always recognise the extent to which children are affected by problems within families, such as bereavement, the impact of witnessing domestic violence, parental alcohol or substance misuse issues, parental mental health problems and parents working long hours. Such problems can contribute to feelings of loneliness, sadness and isolation.

Services must be alert to the impact of these experiences on children and young people so that appropriate interventions can be put into place to support all family members. Parents, carers and families need to be aware of the impact of their behaviour and actions on children, and that their actions can result in their children experiencing loneliness and isolation.

Parents also need to make time to talk and listen to their children and should be aware of the vulnerability of their children to loneliness. They should take the problem of loneliness seriously. If they are concerned, they should follow the advice for parents and carers on dealing with children's loneliness in appendix 1.

Access to confidential listening services and school counselling support

ChildLine offers an important and confidential listening service that children understand and increasingly feel that they can turn to when they are unable to talk to others. It is important that confidential listening services like ChildLine, including the ChildLine Online service, continue to be supported by governments.

In the run-up to the next general election to the Westminster parliament, the NSPCC is calling on the next government to ensure the adequate funding of helpline services for children, and for adults concerned about the safety or welfare of a child at risk.

Schools should be aware of the issue of loneliness, both as a stand-alone problem and as an element of wider problems, such as bullying and family relationships. Through curriculum based activities in personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) in England, personal and social education (PSE) in Wales and personal development (PD) in Northern Ireland, children should be encouraged to seek help and advice and to talk about their feelings. Schools can play an important role in helping to identify and alleviate loneliness problems by providing peer mentoring initiatives and buddy systems.

Peer support schemes should be provided alongside school counselling services so that children have a choice about from whom they receive support. ChildLine's CHIPS programme (ChildLine in Partnerships) has supported schools to develop effective peer support programmes over the past 10 years. External evaluation of CHIPS has shown that peer support provides an effective person to turn to in school and makes children feel safer, especially in relation to bullying.

There is a continued need for school counselling to be provided throughout the UK in order to give children and young people access to a trusted adult who can help them if they experience loneliness, sadness or isolation, or any of the issues associated with this, including bullying. These services give children and young people the opportunity to talk about their experiences and receive practical support to develop the skills to help themselves and build self-esteem and resilience⁴.

Children phoning ChildLine about loneliness were on average older than children counselled by ChildLine overall, with a higher proportion in the 16 to 18 age category. Many young people aged 16 to 18 are in further education and employment. It is therefore imperative that these young people are able to access similar support to that provided in schools in other settings. This should be considered as plans develop to raise the age of compulsory education or training beyond 16.

Children and young people who require specialist or more-intensive support

Children in care are disproportionately more likely to call ChildLine about loneliness. This is sometimes a reflection of the difficulty that young people who experience multiple placement moves can have with investing their trust in others, in order to form new relationships; at other times it can be a response to the circumstances that led to them coming into care.

Legislation across the UK allows for children in care in certain circumstances to have access to an independent visitor. Independent visitors are important, because they provide young people in care with an opportunity to develop relationships with adults who choose to spend time with them and who are not professionally employed for this purpose.

⁴ See: Cooper, M. (2004) *Counselling in Schools Project, Glasgow: Evaluation Report*. Glasgow: University of Strathclyde
See also: Fox, C. and Butler, I. (2007) If you don't want to tell anyone else you can tell her: Young people's views on school counselling. In: *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 35(1), pp. 97–114.

Given the frequent changes experienced by children in care and the huge disruption that this can cause, it is crucial to invest time in matching young people with an appropriate independent visitor and to ensure that these placements are properly supported when challenges emerge that could threaten the placement.

There were clear associations between calls to ChildLine about loneliness, sadness and isolation, and calls about suicide and self-harm. This further highlights the need for interventions to identify the early warning signs that children are distressed and for high quality counselling and mental health services for children and young people. These should include:

- Guidance for parents and carers on ways to identify the warning signs that a child is feeling suicidal and is possibly planning suicide. Such advice should be made available via primary healthcare professionals and parenting organisations.
- Professionals being alert to the risk factors associated with suicide.
- Sustainable funding for child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) across all parts of the UK and throughout all tiers of CAMHS.
- Training in suicide awareness and prevention to form part of the competencies of professionals who deal with or work with children and young people.
- Provision of 24-hour suicide helplines, such as Lifeline in Northern Ireland.

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Appendix 1 Tips for parents and carers

Loneliness, sadness and isolation, and associated problems can have a distressing and sometimes devastating impact on children's lives. Some parents and carers may either not be aware of how their children are feeling or may think that the problem is not really important. Some younger children may not be able to express how they are feeling and feel unable to talk to anyone.

Parents and carers need to be able to support their children and make time for them in their modern, busy lifestyles. We advise:

- Keep communication open with your child, whatever their age, letting them know that they can always come to you with any problem.
- Set aside listening times that suit both of you to hear about their day and their friends and any problems they may have.
- Remember children and young people grow in and out of friendships quickly –they may have a “best friend” one day and a new one the next, and there is nothing to worry about unless they are unhappy about the situation. It is tempting to want our children to be popular, but some are happy with just a few friends.
- Everyone needs some privacy, space and solitude – time to reflect, relax, or to enjoy books, games, music and other interests. However, young people also need to interact with others to meet their need to both give and receive attention. This can be done by engaging in a variety of activities with others at school, home and work.
- If your child has a problem with friendships at school, try to provide some outside opportunities where they have a fresh opportunity to make new friends. This might be a football club or a drama club, or something based on your child's interest where they can meet others with a shared interest.
- Friendships outside the home become more important, and especially in the teenage years. Young people may turn to their peer group rather than to their family. Let them know you are still available to listen and spend time with them if they want that.
- Remind your child that friends come and go over the years. If you lose one friend, you can make a new one, and it is unusual for friends from one setting to carry on for years into another – for example, school friends are often left behind when a young person goes to work, college or university. If your child has had difficulties and is feeling lonely, remind them that these are fresh opportunities to start again with a new peer group.
- If your child seems to be isolated within the family home, think about how you can improve this. Having a TV or computer in the bedroom has become very common in many families, but it dramatically cuts down the number of opportunities to chat and socialise, and this can mean that your child loses the habit.
- If you think your child is showing serious worries about loneliness, is feeling very isolated or seems to have no friends, you may want to take some action. The action might be age-related, including talking to your GP or encouraging them to call a helpline like ChildLine or the ChildLine Online service (www.childline.org.uk).

Appendix 2 Methodology

ChildLine recording process

When a child or young person talks to ChildLine, the counsellor makes a note of the age and gender of the caller, the main reason that the caller gives for ringing (eg the caller is lonely) and, where applicable, who the person responsible for or involved in the problem is. Counsellors have no independent way of verifying the age of callers; the ages used in this casenote are based on the ages given by the callers themselves.

Counsellors also note down any additional problems that are discussed by callers subsequently. This information is later transferred onto a database and categorised according to the nature of the problem/s.

Confidentiality

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 the caller may be at serious risk of 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 inputted into the database. Children and young people choose to 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 life-threatening situation. The majority of children do not identify their whereabouts and maintain their own anonymity.

Case records and thematic analysis using NVivo

The information recorded by the ChildLine counsellors about the call they receive is called a case record. If the counsellor thinks that it is likely that the caller will ring ChildLine back, then more detailed information and a summary of the discussion that takes place is also recorded.

In total, 1,000 loneliness, sadness and isolation case records from 2008/09 were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis. Qualitative software package NVivo was used to assist this analysis.

Focus groups

In addition to the thematic analysis, four focus groups across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales with over 30 counsellors were conducted in order to supplement the data with their unique professional insights into issues faced by callers. In addition to these, a consultation was undertaken with young people from NSPCC's participation group, "The Way Forward".

Use of quotes

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.

Diversity

The ethnicity of the caller is not specifically asked for. It is only recorded if it is volunteered by the caller. Therefore, it is not possible to analyse the different calls in terms of ethnicity of the caller at this stage.

The new development of the ChildLine Online service offers a range of opportunities for disabled children and young people to use the service and has ensured that the needs of disabled users are considered from the start, both in terms of content and function. The new technology caters for a range of disabilities, ensuring greater accessibility.

About the information in this casenote

The findings in this casenote are based on detailed analysis of calls to ChildLine from April 2008 to March 2009. 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 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, 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 NSPCC Safeguarding Information and Library Services 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.nspcc.org.uk/casenotes

All names and potentially identifying details have been changed to protect the identity of callers.

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

NSPCC registered charity numbers 216401 and SC037717. CHILDREN 1st
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