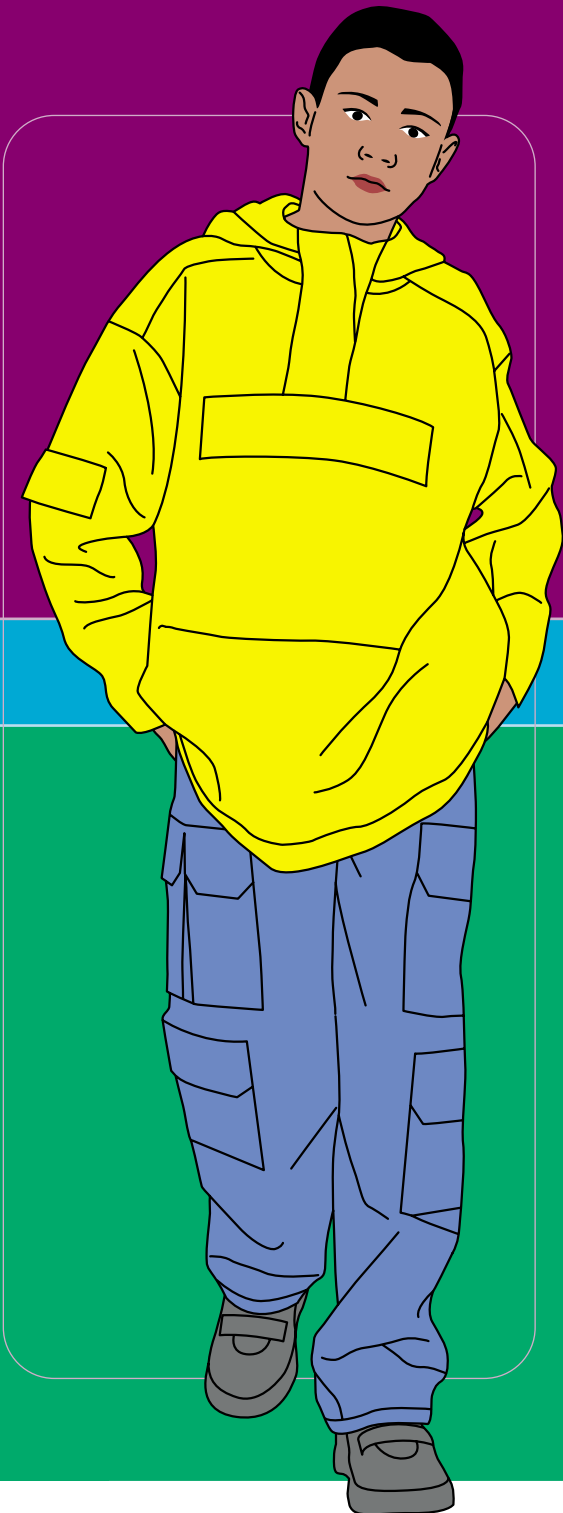




Someone to turn to?



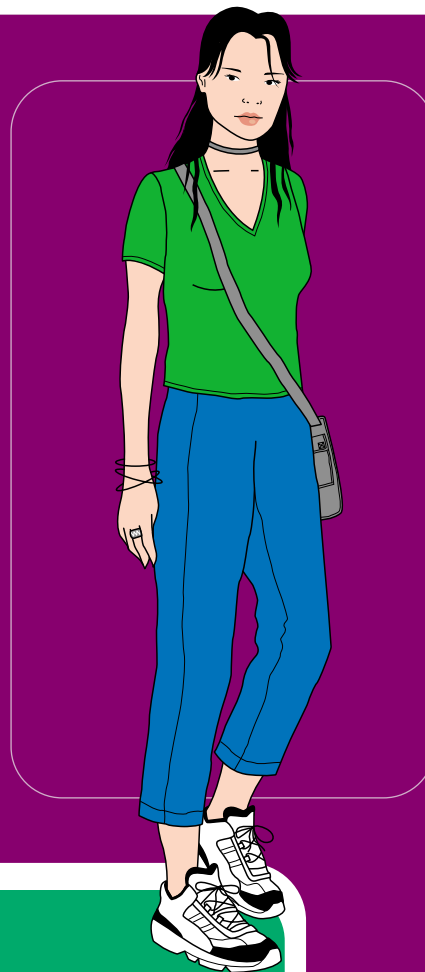
Who can children and young people trust when they are worried and need to talk?

Introduction:

Childhood is sometimes seen as a carefree time of life. Anxiety, on the other hand, is more commonly associated with adulthood. But though some children and young people enjoy a worry-free existence¹, others don't. A survey conducted by the NSPCC revealed that for some young people growing up is blighted by anxiety around a range of issues.

How much do children and young people worry?

The survey reveals a broad consensus among children and young people that growing up is a tough experience. Just over two-thirds (68%) think this, with a third (34%) going as far as to say that they are always worrying about something. A significant minority of children and young people – more than one in ten (11%) – are extremely worried.



Methodology

A nationally representative sample of 750 11-16 year olds and 500 parents of 11-16 year olds from England, Wales and Northern Ireland were interviewed for this survey. The study was conducted in November 2003 by Prescient Limited on behalf of the NSPCC.

2 One in three children and young people are always worrying about something



Worries? What Worries?

The top worries affecting children and young people include being attacked on the street (69%) and parents divorcing (50%). But parents' relationships with each other is just one cause for concern. More than a quarter (28%) of children and young people worry about being badly treated at home.

Being bullied (49%) and being made to try things such as smoking and drinking (51%) also rank high on children and young people's list of worries.

Despite these concerns, the figures indicate that many children are not able to talk about their problems. Nearly half (47%) of all children and young people say they worry about not having someone to share their worries with.

WORRIES Children and young people were asked to indicate which of the following issues worried them

Top answers include:

• Exams	82%
• Falling out with my friends	77%
• Having too much homework	73%
• The health of my family	70%
• Being attacked on the street	69%
• My health	64%
• My appearance	63%
• Not having enough money to do the things I want	61%
• Arguments with parents	59%
• Death	58%
• People I know taking drugs	56%
• Other people expecting me to try things that I don't want to do (eg, drinking, smoking)	51%
• Divorce of parents	50%
• Problems with a teacher at school	50%
• Being bullied	49%
• Arguments that my parents have with each other	49%
• No-one to talk to about the things that worry me	47%
• Not having a boyfriend/girlfriend	42%
• Not having enough friends	40%
• Not being cool enough	39%
• Being badly treated at home	28%

“I know that the best thing is for my parents to split up and I wish they would hurry up and do it because all the arguing is driving me mad because I’m stuck in the middle. Talking about it to Jane [school counsellor] made me realise that it’s not my problem it’s theirs and they have to sort out their own relationship, I can’t do it for them.”

Sarah, 17, who underwent counselling because her schoolwork was being affected by her parents’ failing relationship

“Speak out, find someone at school if you’re at school. There’s bound to be one teacher or one youth leader or at least one person who you feel you could speak to and if it’s not at school then find a relative, some adult you can trust.”

Advice given by Sarah, 44, mother of a girl who was abused



More than two-thirds of children and young people worry about being attacked on the street



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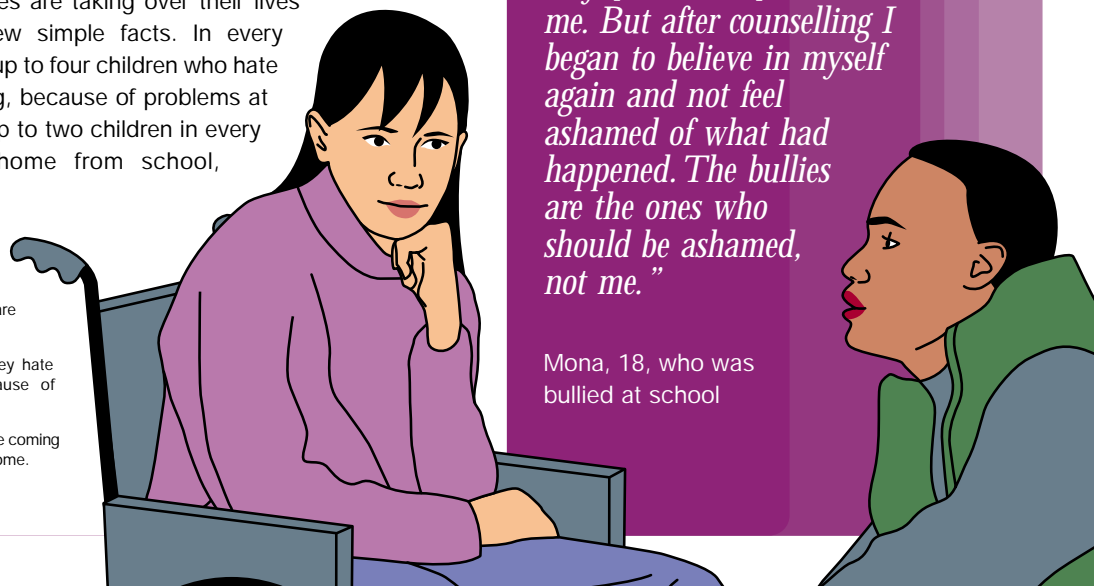
Home life and school life

The worries of children and young people vary enormously. But the extent to which those worries are taking over their lives can be demonstrated by a few simple facts. In every classroom, there are likely to be up to four children who hate leaving the house in the morning, because of problems at school². There are likely to be up to two children in every classroom who hate going home from school, because of problems at home³.

¹ 18% of children and young people say they are never worried about anything.

² 10% of children and young people say they hate leaving the house in the morning because of problems at school.

³ 5% of children and young people say they hate coming back from school because of problems at home.



“After being bullied for so long I began to believe what they [the bullies] said to me. But after counselling I began to believe in myself again and not feel ashamed of what had happened. The bullies are the ones who should be ashamed, not me.”

Mona, 18, who was bullied at school



Sex, drugs and pregnancy

Children and young people were also asked to spontaneously describe their worries. Drugs, sex and pregnancy were among the top answers given.

A sizeable number of children and young people – just over one in eight (12%) – are worried by drugs. This equates to more than half a million 11-16 year olds in this country⁴.

A similar number of children and young people – more than 400,000 – worry about sex and pregnancy. Girls appear to bear the brunt of this anxiety, with most of those worrying about sex and pregnancy being girls⁵.

But it is not just sex and pregnancy that preoccupy girls more than boys. The whole world of personal relationships seems to be a more dominant factor in the lives of girls. Twice as many girls as boys worry about relationships with the opposite sex and friendships⁶.

The social class divide

Just as the different sexes are likely to worry about different things, so are the different classes. Middle class children and young people from classes A and B⁷ are more likely to worry about school, exams, image and having enough money than children from the other social classes⁸. Paradoxically, middle class children are three times more likely to worry about having enough money than working class children and young people⁹.

Children and young people from the C1 and C2 social classes have their own set of concerns. They are more likely to be affected by worries such as bullying, drugs, sex, pregnancy and relationships with the opposite sex¹⁰.

“Dear Mum, I’ve learnt that sometimes people put on pretend faces. Also, I’ve learnt that all the bad feelings I keep inside me, that if I don’t let them out then I get pains.”

Lucy, 11, who went through emotional difficulties after her parents split up

⁴ England, Wales and Northern Ireland

⁵ 13% of girls say they worry about sex and pregnancy and 7% of boys say they worry about these issues.

⁶ 18% of girls say they worry about relationships with the opposite sex, compared with 9% of boys. 17% of girls say they worry about friendships, compared with 9% of boys.

⁷ Professional and managerial classes.

⁸ Worries of children and young people from classes A and B: School (27%), exams (26%), image (16%) and having enough money (13%). Percentage of children and young people from classes C1, C2, D and E who worry about these issues: School (19%), exams (17%), image (10%) and having enough money (5%).

⁹ Thirteen per cent of children and young people from classes A and B say they worry about not having enough money compared with 4% of children and young people from classes D and E (semi and unskilled workers).

¹⁰ Worries of children and young people from classes C1 and C2: Bullying (14%), drugs (13%), sex and pregnancy (13%) and relationships with the opposite sex (15%). Percentage of children and young people from classes A and B worrying about these issues: Bullying (9%), drugs (9%), sex and pregnancy (8%) and relationships with the opposite sex (9%).

¹¹ 27% of parents think their children worry about school and 21% of children and young people say they do. 16% of parents think their children worry about exams and 18% of children and young people say they do. 12% of parents think their children worry about bullying and 13% of children and young people say they do.

¹² 4% of children and young people say they worry about clothes and fashion. 13% of parents think their children worry about clothes and fashion.

¹³ 12% of children and young people say they worry about drugs. 8% of parents think their children worry about drugs.

4 One in ten children and young people worry about sex and pregnancy – most of them are girls



How well do parents know their children?

The survey suggests a somewhat distorted parental view of what children and young people worry about. Though parents are aware that their children worry about school, exams and bullying¹¹, they are less in tune with other worries.

Parents over-estimate – by three times – the extent to which their children are preoccupied by trivial concerns about clothes and fashion¹². Conversely, they under-estimate the extent to which their children worry about drugs¹³.



A problem shared is a problem halved?

As part of this survey, children and young people were asked to describe the barriers they faced in talking about their problems. The results reveal a strong streak of self-deprecation. More than one in four (27%) children and young people think that their worries are not as important as other people's worries.

Selflessness and embarrassment also define children and young people's attitudes to their concerns. Nearly one in five (18%) say that they don't tell anyone about their problems as they don't want them to worry. Nearly one in five (18%) children and young people also say they would be too embarrassed to talk about their worries. Again, a difference between the sexes is evident with boys being more likely than girls to give all these reasons for not talking¹⁴.

Clear communication?

A sizeable proportion of children and young people – one in seven (15%) – say they can't talk to their parents about their worries. Children and young people who worry a lot are especially likely to find it difficult to discuss their worries with their parents¹⁵.

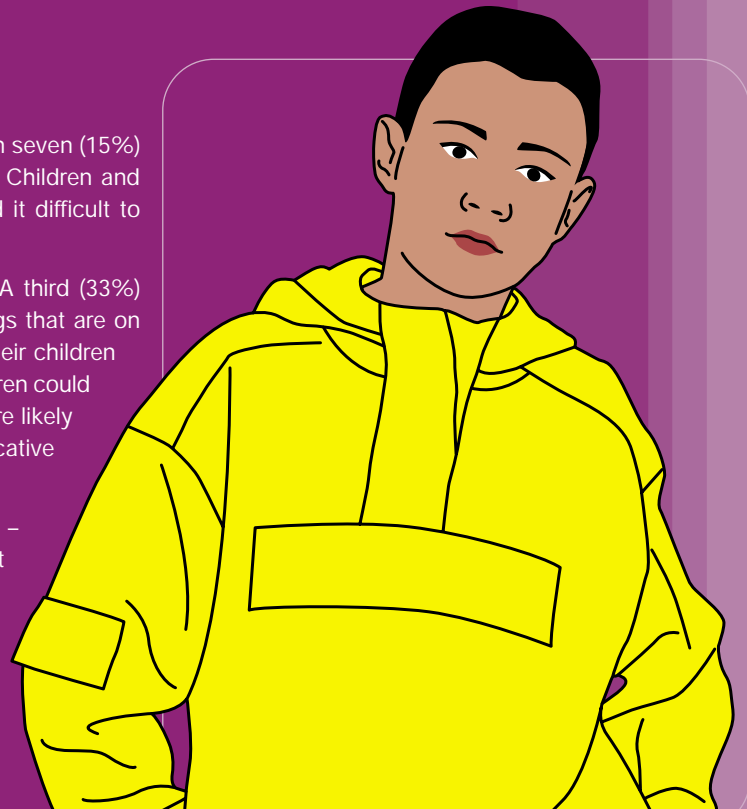
Many children and young people wish it were different. A third (33%) wish that they could talk to their parents about more things that are on their mind. But parents aren't necessarily aware of how their children feel. Nearly three-quarters (72%) of parents think their children could talk to them about the things on their mind. Mums are more likely than dads to feel that they have an open and communicative relationship with their children¹⁶.

On a wider point though, many children and young people – two out of five (43%) – sign up to a common belief that parents don't understand what they have to cope with. A similar number (41%) feel that they are put under a lot of pressure by their parents.

¹⁴ 31% of boys say their worries aren't as important as other people's worries, compared with 23% of girls. 22% of boys say they would be too embarrassed to talk about their worries, compared with 15% of girls. 19% of boys say they don't want to tell anyone their problems as they don't want them to worry, compared with 16% of girls.

¹⁵ Children and young people who worry a lot are 6% less likely than the average child to talk to their parents about their worries.

¹⁶ 65% of mums think they can talk to their children about anything, compared with 57% of dads.



A quarter of children and young people would be least likely to turn to their dad if something was worrying them

5



Why children and young people can't talk to their parents about their worries

Children and young people give a broad range of reasons about why they can't talk to their parents about worries. About a quarter of children and young people say they wouldn't talk to their parents about their worries because they would be told off (28%) or made to feel stupid (23%).

Sadly, for one in seven (15%) children and young people, the fear of not being believed acts as a potent barrier to telling. Even more alarming, more than one in sixteen (6%) – over a quarter of a million – children and young people feel that telling would lead to their family being broken up. In some cases, this may be because serious harm or abuse is taking place, though it can't be assumed to be a factor in every case.

Top confidantes

The survey certainly does show that children and young people face some issues in discussing their worries with their parents. But it would be wrong to paint a picture that is universally gloomy.

When children and young people were asked who they would be most likely to discuss their worries with, if they had to, mums come out top¹⁷. Friends are a close second¹⁸.

Mums are twice as likely to be the preferred confidante for children and young people as dads¹⁹. A quarter (26%) of children and young people go as far as to say they would be least likely to turn to their dad if something was worrying them.

But children and young people would definitely prefer to talk to their dads over teachers, if something was worrying them. Teachers emerge as the least favourite confidante²⁰.



Why children and young people wouldn't tell their parents their worries

Top answers include:

• They'd over-react	41%
• They'd get upset or worry themselves	30%
• They'd tell me off	28%
• They'd try and take control of the situation	24%
• They'd make me feel stupid	23%
• I'd get into trouble	22%
• They wouldn't believe me	15%
• My family would be broken up	6%

6 One in seven children and young people say they can't talk to their parents about their worries



¹⁷ 68% of children and young people say they would be most likely to talk to their mum if they were worried about something.

¹⁸ 62% of children and young people say they would be most likely to talk to a friend if they were worried about something.

¹⁹ 68% of children and young people say they would be most likely to talk to their mum if they were worried about something and 34% say they would be most likely to talk to their dad.

²⁰ Children and young people were presented with a list containing family members, friends, teachers, professionals working with children and a helpline and asked who they would be least likely to talk to if they were worried about something. Teachers came out top, with 59% of children and young people saying they would be least likely to talk to a teacher if they were worried about something.

²¹ 15% of dads say they can't talk to their children about boyfriends/girlfriends, compared with 8% of mums.

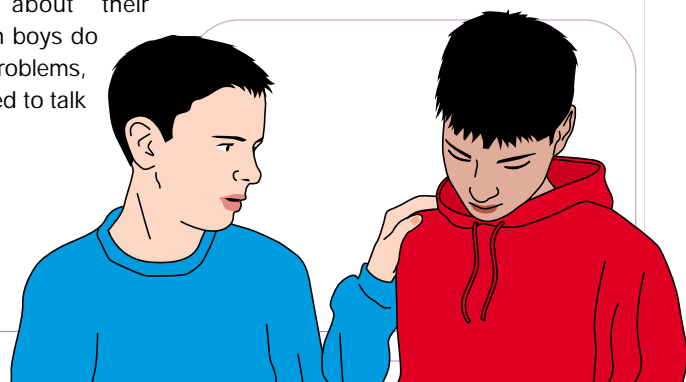
²² 48% of girls say they talk to their parents about their worries, compared with 31% of boys. 40% of children and young people overall say they talk to their parents about their worries.

²³ 44% of boys say they are most likely to talk to their dads, compared with 39% of girls.

Mothers and daughters, fathers and sons

Mums and dads were asked about the issues they talk to their children about. The results show that dads are more likely than mums to abstain from discussing certain topics. Relationships are a prime example, with dads being twice as likely as mums to not talk to their children about boyfriends/girlfriends²¹.

The survey also shows a difference between the way in which boys and girls communicate. Girls are much more likely than boys to talk to their mum and dad about their worries²². But when boys do talk about their problems, they are more inclined to talk to their dads²³.



Friends you can count on?

Though children and young people often do turn to their friends in moments of need, many also have reservations about talking to them. Nearly two out of five (37%) children and young people say they wouldn't tell their friends their worries because they think they would be laughed at.

By speaking out, children and young people don't necessarily want someone to just listen to them – some want a solution. Almost a quarter (22%) say that if their friends didn't know how to help them, that would stop them from sharing their worries with their friends.



Why children and young people wouldn't tell their friends about their worries

Top answers include:

- | | |
|---|-----|
| • They'd make fun of me/laugh at me | 37% |
| • They'd break their promise not to tell anyone | 30% |
| • I might get myself or someone else into trouble | 25% |
| • They wouldn't know how to help me | 22% |
| • It'd make me look uncool | 10% |



A quarter of children and young people wouldn't tell their parents their worries because they think they'd be told off 7

What children and young people really want

When asked, children and young people gave a clear set of criteria that would make them talk about their worries. Being listened to and believed emerged as some of the top things that they looked for in confidantes.

Please note that names and identities of people quoted have been changed to protect the anonymity of individuals. Please also note that the quotes featured are not from children and young people or parents interviewed as part of this research.

What would make children and young people talk to someone about their worries

- | | |
|---|-----|
| They'd listen to me | 66% |
| They've experienced the same thing as me | 55% |
| They'd believe me | 49% |
| They'd know how to sort things out | 44% |
| They wouldn't judge me | 41% |
| They'd keep their word not to tell anyone | 40% |
| They wouldn't tell me off | 35% |
| They wouldn't try and take control | 26% |

A way forward: The NSPCC's perspective

Whatever misgivings children and young people have about discussing their problems, they clearly value talking²⁴. The NSPCC believes that the importance of talking, as a coping strategy, cannot be over-emphasised. It can help a person come to terms with their problems and can enable them to understand the choices they have. Above all, it can guide them to solutions, which is particularly important if they are being badly treated or abused by someone. Talking helps it stop. FULL STOP.

The NSPCC considers that everyone – including parents, family members, friends, professionals, the voluntary and statutory sectors and Government – has a role to play in giving children and young people someone to turn to. But it believes that the Government needs to take leadership by:

- **Making independent counselling available through schools to all children and young people**

The NSPCC believes that independent counselling should be available in every school. The NSPCC feels that this form of counselling should help children and young people deal with any emotional or psychological difficulties they are experiencing, as well as meeting their educational needs. Above all, it should equip children and young people with tools to deal with their problems and help them to develop resilience.

- **Establishing a Children's Commissioner who will champion the views of children and young people**

The post of Children's Commissioner will soon be established in England. The NSPCC believes that this new role cannot be successful unless it is genuinely independent of Government and places the views of children and young people at the heart of everything it sets out to achieve. Genuine consultation with children and young people needs to inform the agenda that the Children's Commissioner sets for him/herself. It also needs to have a tangible impact on the development of policy and services for children and young people across the country.

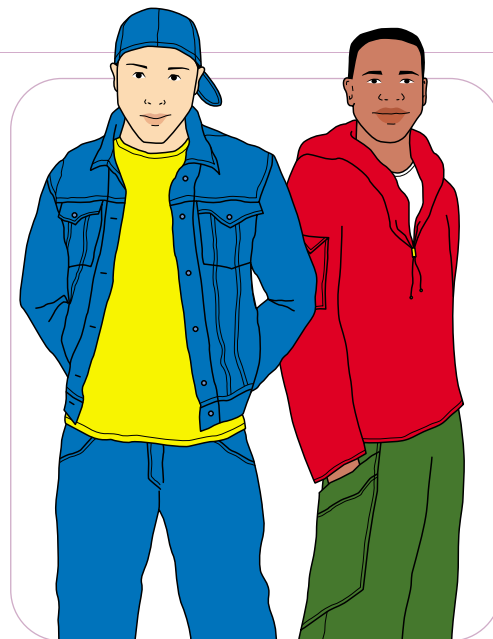
- **Providing vulnerable children with independent advocacy**

The NSPCC is calling upon Government to ensure that children and young people who are 'looked after', (in care or with a foster family), or receiving help from social services, (such as those children who are judged to be at risk of abuse), are entitled to independent advocacy. Independent advocacy would enable them to express their views about the quality of the help they are receiving, to an independent professional who has their best interests at heart.

- **Ensuring that a range of services are available to children and young people**

This survey, along with others, has highlighted how important it is for children and young people to have their confidentiality respected if they are to share their problems. In cases where a child is at risk of serious harm, professionals' first duty is to take action to protect that child. However, in some cases where children and young people are not at risk of serious harm, but are still seeking professional help for their problems, a degree of confidentiality can be offered. The Government needs to ensure that a range of services, reflecting this flexibility, is available to children and young people.

²⁴ Nearly half (47%) of all children and young people interviewed by the NSPCC, they worry about not having someone to share their worries with.



The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) is the UK's leading charity specialising in child protection and the prevention of cruelty to children.

The NSPCC's purpose is to end cruelty to children. Our vision is of a society where all children are loved, valued and able to fulfil their potential.

We seek to achieve cultural, social and political change – influencing legislation, policy, practice, attitudes and behaviours for the benefit of children and young people.

DON'T KEEP IT TO YOURSELF

The NSPCC Child Protection Helpline is a free 24-hour service that provides counselling, information and advice to anyone concerned about a child at risk of abuse.

Please call us any time on **0808 800 5000**

Textphone for people who are deaf or hard of hearing on **0800 056 0566**

Email help@nspcc.org.uk

NSPCC Asian Child Protection Helpline
(Mon-Fri 11am-7pm) **0800 096 7719**

NSPCC Cymru/Wales Child Protection Helpline
(Mon-Fri 10am-6pm) **0808 100 2524**

Children and young people can also call
Childline on **0800 11 11**

