

Old heads on young shoulders



Helping children and young people whose family circumstances force them into adult roles



About ChildLine and the NSPCC

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

Throughout this report, the names, ages and identifying details of children and young people have been altered in order to protect their anonymity.

ChildLine
45 Folgate Street
London E1 6GL
Tel: 020 7650 3200
Fax: 020 7650 3201

www.childline.org.uk

ChildLine registered charity number 1003758

Designed by Chrissan Moldrich and edited by JD Carpentieri
Photos: Larry Bray Photography 07860 800180

© NSPCC March 2006

ISBN 0 9524948 9 2

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

www.nspcc.org.uk or visit www.nspcc.org.uk/inform, the UK's only free, online, specialised child protection resource

NSPCC registered charity number 216401



Introduction

In February 2006, ChildLine joined the NSPCC as a dedicated service. By combining the two organisations' resources and expertise, we will be able to protect, help and support even more children. Among the children most in need of that protection, help and support are those whose family circumstances lead them to assume adult roles and responsibilities earlier than they should have to – children who are forced to develop old heads on young shoulders.

This report looks at why children who call ChildLine are forced to take on adult roles, how this affects them, and what can be done to help. In particular, it looks at the positive effects of confidential, child-centred approaches to helping children and young people.

Why children are forced to develop old heads on young shoulders

Analysis of ChildLine's caller statistics from 2004/05 indicates that there are five key reasons why children who call ChildLine take on too much responsibility at too young an age:

- the ill health or disability of one or both parents
- parental drug or alcohol misuse

- separation and divorce
- domestic violence
- bereavement.

The severity of these problems can differ widely, but for many of the children who call ChildLine, there is a need to take responsibility for things that, by common consensus, children should not have to worry about: tending to their parents' health (often missing school to do so), preparing meals for younger brothers and sisters because one or both parents is too incapacitated by alcohol or drugs, and even earning the money necessary to put food on the table. Many of the children performing these tasks also strive to keep up the appearance of a 'normal' childhood to the outside world. This desire to keep up appearances often results from a strong urge to protect their parents from trouble and to keep the family from being broken up – even if a chaotic home life is causing untold problems for the children themselves.

Many of the children who speak to ChildLine about the adult roles they must take on communicate an impressive understanding of the complexity of factors that can contribute to their parents' inability to care for them as

they should. Even young children often possess a sophisticated understanding of how multiple issues interact and compound the difficulties they, their parents and their families are experiencing. For example, many young people talk about factors such as bereavement, unemployment or divorce leading to parental substance abuse or depression, which then lead to poor parenting and to young people having to adopt adult roles.

This report relates the stories of these young people, showing how a confidential, child-centred service such as ChildLine is able to help them, but at the same time flagging up situations where much more needs to be done. In looking at what these children tell us and how we help them, this report will highlight both the resilience and vulnerability of children and young people, while also exploring how ChildLine and other agencies can improve their lives.

How ChildLine statistics are gathered and how they can be useful to researchers

Calls to ChildLine are unsolicited communications from children and young people. Because the calls are shaped by and reflect each child's own needs, they provide a unique, first-hand account of children's experiences and concerns. In many cases, the issues children talk about are ones which they feel unable to raise directly or satisfactorily with family members, friends or child welfare professionals.

The content of ChildLine counselling conversations is captured through written records. When a counsellor speaks to a

child, the counsellor notes down the child's main reason for calling (physical abuse at home, for example), any additional concerns the child raises over the course of the conversation (such as parental alcohol addiction, which may be fuelling the abuse), any 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.

Parental ill health and/or disability

In 2004/05, 1,177 children talked to ChildLine about the physical health problems of someone close to them, and an additional 675 spoke about the mental health problems of a person they were close to. Many children in both categories emphasised the responsibilities that this ill health imposed on them. Young carers were particularly burdened by adult duties.

Young carers

Young carers, defined by The Children's Society as 'children and young

people who look after someone in their family who has an illness, a disability, a mental health problem, or a substance misuse problem', are the most widely

recognised group of children with adult responsibilities.¹ The 2001 census estimates that there are 175,000 young carers in the UK. However, this figure is likely to be low, because it does not take into account parents' alcohol or drug problems. Perhaps more significantly, the form was filled in by parents on behalf of children under 16, and some of these parents would

'I want to get my life back and stop feeling responsible for my parents all the time.'

Gareth, 14

have been unlikely to state the full extent of their children's caring role.²

Research has shown that being a young carer has serious consequences for children, including role reversal, social exclusion, educational underachievement, and gender reinforcement in girls, who often find themselves forced to become the family's housekeeper or 'surrogate mum', to the detriment of their academic, social and private lives, and possibly their mental and physical well-being.³ Often, negative outcomes of having too much responsibility at too young an age appear not in isolation, but as part of a bundle of inter-related problems. For instance, gender reinforcement might lead to educational underachievement, which fuels social exclusion, which keeps the carer in the home, where her gender role becomes even more tightly codified.

Becoming your father's mother

Such was the case for Mandy, a 15-year-old who told ChildLine that, because her mother was disabled and her stepfather and brother saw housekeeping and caring for others as 'women's work', she was forced to act as a surrogate mother: cleaning, shopping and cooking for the family while also tending to her disabled mum. Her responsibilities and the attendant stress had led to her being signed off at school, being prescribed anti-depressants, and self-harming. When Mandy first called ChildLine she said that her life did not feel like it was her own – that she existed only to take care of others. Like many children bearing adult responsibilities, she felt that she was being forced to choose between her own happiness and development and her perceived responsibilities to her loved ones. While she did not feel capable of challenging her stepfather and brother about her role in the family and their lack of support, she was able to ask ChildLine for ongoing counselling to help her deal with these issues.

Another girl, 15-year-old Lynne, told ChildLine that since her mother had been diagnosed with lung cancer several months before, her relationship with her father had deteriorated and her role in the house had



changed. 'He's taking his sadness out on me,' she told ChildLine. 'He wants me to become my mum, to take on her job.' It was not just housework that her father was demanding. 'He says I can't go to college now – I've got to get full-time work and help pay the bills.'

Children on the edge

While traditional gender roles tend to be reinforced when there are boys and girls in a household, with girls taking on the domestic duties, calls to ChildLine indicate that in households without girls, young males take on whatever tasks need to be done to keep the household running.

One such child was 15-year-old Lee, who was being raised by his grandmother and grandfather. A year before Lee called ChildLine, his grandmother's health had begun to deteriorate, but she refused to seek help from outside the family. Unfortunately for Lee, his grandfather was an alcoholic who either could not or would not look after her himself. Because of this, it fell to this young boy to run the household, with duties that included helping his grandmother with her toilet. Not surprisingly for a teenage boy, this was a task that made him feel very uncomfortable. To help him figure out what was best for him, ChildLine arranged for him to call regularly, so that he could speak to the same counsellor once a week.

As Lee talked to ChildLine over the following months, it became apparent that he was



living what could be called a 'just enough' life. His grandmother was *just well enough* to be able to reject outside help; his grandfather was *just functional enough* to remain loving (albeit ineffectual); and Lee was attending school *just frequently enough* to avoid undue attention, even if his work was suffering greatly. On any single measure, his life was just barely good enough not to require help – but when all the semi-dysfunctional aspects of his life were added together, he clearly needed support.

We saw earlier that Mandy reacted to her burden of responsibilities by becoming depressed and self-harming. Lee, true to his gender, had a more typically male response, externalising his stress through heavy drinking, fighting, and getting into trouble with the law. To those around him, he seemed irresponsible, a 'bad kid'; they did not know that this seemingly wild child was in truth bearing more burdens than any young person should ever be asked to handle.

Guilt

In addition to the stresses of running his household and caring for his grandmother, Lee also had to deal with the guilt he felt at not wanting to help her with her toilet. Guilt is a constant theme for young carers, and a number of callers have told ChildLine how guilty they feel about their own age-normal behaviour – arguing with siblings, for example – as this was causing their already ill parents more problems. Normal childish or teenage behaviour is more serious when a parent or carer is in poor health, and young people in these circumstances have fewer outlets for typical emotions or behaviour. As one boy, 14-year-old George, told ChildLine, since his father, who is his sole carer, had been diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome, 'I have too much to cope with. I feel guilty about it, but I resent my dad for not doing more to help me when I have to do so much to help him.'

Even young children share the emotion. Ten-year-old Gus told ChildLine that his mother

often has seizures that require him to tend to her. 'It makes me feel shaky and scared when Mum has a fit,' he said. 'I stroke her head and tell her she's okay, but all the time I'm afraid she won't be.' Gus said he felt that the stress and worry from these situations was causing him to lash out at others, which made him feel guilty. 'When I get in fights I feel like I'm the cause of all Mum's problems because she gets stressed and then sometimes she has a fit.'

'Mum's been saying things that make no sense, but I'm scared that if I tell anyone they'll take her away.' Dean, 14

While Gus and other children erroneously blame themselves for their parents' problems, others find that their parents actually are blaming them. Twelve-year-old Anna, whose mother was in the hospital for kidney stones, said that her mother told her the stones were

Anna's fault, 'for stressing her out'. In other cases, distressed callers with chronically ill parents have told ChildLine about being told 'you're killing me' during arguments with their parents. When a parent has a disabling ailment and the child is a *de facto* carer, these words can have a powerful effect.

Mental health

Just as children living with a physically unwell parent can find the responsibilities overwhelming, so can those living with a parent who has mental health problems. As one caller, 15-year-old Kelly, told ChildLine: 'My mum's problems are getting to be too much for me.' Her mother, she said, was prescribed medication for manic depression and schizophrenia, but refused to take it. 'I'm overwhelmed,' said Kelly. 'I'm pressurised to be in charge of the house and to keep everything together. I want to leave home, but I can't, because my brother and sister need someone to take care of them.'

The tensions being experienced by ChildLine callers are often immense, as they find themselves split between the need to live their own lives and develop into young adults, but also to take care of a parent. In some cases, the conflicting needs are almost impossible to reconcile, as 14-year-old Dean relayed when telling ChildLine about the effects of his

mother's paranoia. 'She's been saying things that make no sense and shouting at the neighbours. She thinks people are out to get

her. I'm afraid to leave her alone, so I don't have a life any more, but I'm also scared that if I tell anyone they'll take her away.'

Parental incapacity due to drink or drugs

According to Home Office estimates, 920,000 children live in homes where at least one parent has an alcohol problem. A further 250,000 young people are estimated to live with parents who misuse drugs.⁴

As numerous researchers have noted, when one or both carers has a substance abuse problem, that substance becomes, in effect, an unwanted and overwhelmingly demanding member of the family: 'the elephant in the living room'.⁵ Parental alcohol and drug abuse has a huge impact on families in general and children in particular, and young people speak to ChildLine about a wide range of resultant problems, including anxiety, social stigma, violence and parental absence. Of particular concern is the apparent link between alcohol abuse and physical violence: of the 3,442 children who spoke to ChildLine in 2004/05 about a significant other's alcohol problem, fully 44 per cent (1,510) had called primarily to speak of the physical abuse they were suffering. This trend was also apparent in a recent study of calls to ChildLine Scotland in which children talked about the health problems of significant others in their lives.⁶ This research found that in 40 per cent of cases where children talked about parental alcohol problems, physical abuse had been their main reason for calling. Unfortunately for the children who call ChildLine, alcohol and abuse often seem to go hand in hand.

This is also true for drugs. For the 1,600 children who spoke to ChildLine in 2004/05 about a significant other's drug use, 29 per cent (464) had called primarily to speak about the physical abuse they were suffering.

Most children who speak to ChildLine about alcohol or drugs in the family do not mention substance abuse immediately, or as their main reason for calling. Instead, children call about the impact these problems are having on their lives, such as physical abuse or domestic violence, revealing only later in the call that these problems are fuelled by their parents' alcohol or drug problems. As discussed above, these children tend to demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of factors that contribute to alcohol and drug abuse, such as unemployment or stress, and can often tell ChildLine when the substance problem started, what they thought the cause was, and the effects on their family.

Self-sacrifice

Children whose parents abuse alcohol do not tend to have just one problem; they have a collection of them, reinforcing each other. One such child was Anita, a 12-year-old with an alcoholic father. In addition to parental alcohol abuse, Anita had experienced domestic violence, abandonment and neglect at home, and was acting up and being bullied at school. Despite her young age, she showed a powerful grasp of how these problems, causes and effects were inter-related facets of one often overwhelming whole.

'I'm getting abused by my dad,' she told ChildLine on her first call. 'When he gets home from work he's had alcohol and hits me. Today he hit me when I dropped a bit of eggshell in his breakfast. He's been like this since Mum left last year. She had a good reason to go – he hit her too.'

'Sometimes my nan gives me gifts, but I have to break them straight away, otherwise Mum sells them for heroin.' Abby, 11

'I look after my little brother, who has Down's syndrome,' she continued. My dad isn't so harsh on him. Other kids pick on him, though – they pick on me too at school. They call me spazza and say, "Your dad's a psycho and your mum left because she doesn't love you."'

This 12-year-old's complicated and challenging home life militated against a normal social existence. Teased and isolated at school, she told ChildLine that she lacked mates, and even asked the counsellor if she could call him her friend.

Like other callers faced with too much pressure and not enough support at home, Anita said that she sometimes lashed out at school. She said that her responsibilities had become too big a burden, and that she was not sure if she could control her anger and frustration any more. Anita told ChildLine that she 'was going to pack a bag and run away with my brother'. While her sense of self-sacrifice would not surprise ChildLine counsellors, who hear responsible young people like this on a regular basis, it is still worth noting and applauding. Like Dean, the 14-year-old whose mother suffered severe mental health problems (cited on page 5) Anita did not consider abandoning her role as a young carer; she just wanted to escape the abuse she was receiving from her father. Even on her own, she planned to look after her brother.

After talking to ChildLine for 45 minutes, Anita agreed that, instead of running away, she would call again the next day and speak to the same counsellor. This would allow her to talk more about her problems and what she could do about them. She ended the call because her dad was due home, saying to the counsellor, 'Bye, friend. Thank you.'

Responsibilities

As Anita's story illustrates, children in these circumstances often step into the adult role, either because they are actively forced to by their parents or because necessity dictates that they look after siblings who are also experiencing neglect. Apart from performing

commonplace chores such as cooking or cleaning, some children report that they spend money they earn from part-time jobs on purchasing food for themselves or their siblings. One 12-year-old boy told ChildLine that because his mother was often drunk, he frequently had to make dinner for himself and his little brother. On top of this, he was worried about the family finances: as his mum's alcoholism escalated, she had begun buying drink with what had previously been earmarked as the family's food money. Some children have even told their counsellors that, in order to provide for themselves or siblings, they have had to resort to shoplifting or begging food from neighbours or friends. Others clearly lack the guidance required to stick to routines that will benefit them in the long run, such as having good attendance at school or doing their homework. Even when they want to, they may find that the chaos of home makes it impossible to do so.



Despite the often overwhelming nature of these problems, children who speak to ChildLine demonstrate remarkable resilience in the face of the disruption, distress and danger associated with parental misuse of alcohol and drugs, and continue to profess love for and loyalty to their parents. A Joseph Rowntree Foundation study into the lives of children living with parents who had substance abuse problems highlighted this sense of love and loyalty, noting that children often recognise that their fragile or wayward parents 'cared *about* them even when they did not care *for* them'.⁷ This is a sentiment that ChildLine hears time and time again, and while the knowledge that they are loved



helps young people to cope with their responsibilities, it also adds to the complexity of their situations. Children will almost always choose love and loyalty over what many others would argue are their long-term best interests. And almost all the children that ChildLine talks to about these issues fear the consequences of talking to Social Services or a teacher about what is going on in their lives. For example, the ChildLine Scotland study mentioned on page 6 found that, out of the 9,363 calls from children who talked about parental health issues such as alcohol, drugs, and depression, only one per cent of children had spoken to statutory services. Children with adult roles want their problems to be solved, but are desperately afraid of getting their parents into trouble, or of causing the break-up of their families.

Someone to turn to

Studies have noted that, for children of parents with substance problems, informal relationships with extended family, neighbours and friends are very important – but that in most circumstances such support suffers from being neither as reliable nor as unconditional as a healthy parent-child relationship.⁸ The emotional support and practical advice that services such as ChildLine offer can be essential to children living with adult responsibilities. Young people can call any time, on any terms, to talk about any problems they have. They can disclose their problems at their own pace, and can also set up regular calls with a specific counsellor – calling each Monday evening when their parents are in the pub, for instance, to talk about how they are doing.

Separation and divorce

Despite the decreasing marriage rate since the 1970s and the increase in the rate of cohabitation (which has inevitably contributed to decreased opportunities for divorce), the divorce rate remains high in the UK, with more than 169,000 in 2004.⁹ England and Wales accounted for 153,399 of these, and of that number, 82,017 divorcing couples had children. All told, 149,275 children under 16 in England and Wales experienced divorce in 2004. It is not known how many experienced parental separation during that time, but figures show that, at any given time, one in every four children has parents who are separated or divorced.¹⁰

The effects on these children differ. As one 10-year-old boy told ChildLine following his mother's separation from his physically abusive father, 'Since Dad's left the atmosphere has changed. I have a closer relationship with Mum and I'm more relaxed.' This same boy went on to tell ChildLine that the separation was not without its problems, largely due to his fear of his father: 'My parents are in court next week for a divorce hearing. Mum has said we're not to see Dad. I don't want to be alone with him – he's never touched me, my brother

or my sister, but I'm still scared of him.' A young girl, aged eight, echoed these sentiments: 'The courts have said I've got to see my dad but I don't want to. I'm nervous and I want him to leave me alone. Nobody asked what I want.' Other children find themselves longing desperately to have their families back together, with attendant effects on their school and personal lives. 'I can't concentrate on my schoolwork any more,' one 13-year-old boy told ChildLine. 'My teachers have noticed that I'm really unhappy.'

Taking count

In 2004/05, ChildLine counselled 1,041 children who said that parental divorce or separation was their main reason for wanting to speak to a counsellor. An additional 3,253 called for other reasons, but said that divorce or separation was also an issue in their lives. On the whole, calls to ChildLine on this topic touched on three main issues: children having to decide, often under duress, which parent to live with; children feeling responsible for their parents' unhappiness and distress; and children suffering from anxiety because of being under-informed about what was happening to their family.

Domestic violence

In 2004/05, 1,626 children spoke to ChildLine about domestic violence. Many of these children said they were living in a nearly constant state of frustration, sadness and fear, often with their education and social life brutally disrupted. As one 14-year-old girl said, the violence in her house had forced her to leave, with dire consequences: 'I've been staying in and out of friends' houses for nearly two weeks, and I've run out of places to go. I'm homeless. The police say they can't do anything about it. Social Services said to go home and there was nothing at all they could do. I don't

know how long I can go on like this.'

A key theme running through calls about domestic violence is that, even when parents think their children are not aware of it, they often are. 'They think we don't know what's going on,' 10-year-old Jack said, 'but we do. And we're scared.' Another key theme is children believing that the violence is somehow their fault. For example, one 12-year-old boy told ChildLine: 'Dad sometimes hits Mum when he's angry. I think it might be my fault because I never get things right.'

Choice under duress

Many callers told ChildLine that they were being forced to choose which parent to live with, often being given only days or even hours to make the decision. In some cases, children find this decision relatively straightforward, but are mature enough to realise that the aftermath of the decision will be more complicated. For example, 14-year-old Becky told ChildLine that she had made up her mind about which parent to stay with, but knew that her decision would cause arguments between them, and between herself and the parent she did not choose. At her own suggestion, she planned to call ChildLine back after telling her parents, so her counsellor could help her to work out how to deal with the repercussions.

Other children find themselves in more dangerous dilemmas. When 13-year-old Robbie rang, he told ChildLine that his dad had presented him with an ultimatum: Robbie must decide whether to live with his mum or his dad. Being forced into such a decision is bad enough, but in this case it had a particularly vicious twist. His father had told him that if he chose to live with his mother, he would refuse to see Robbie ever again.

And that was only the start of it. Robbie's father had suffered two heart attacks in recent

years, and Robbie was desperately worried that, if he did not give in to his father's demands, this would somehow lead to a third and potentially fatal attack. While being emotionally blackmailed by his father, Robbie was at the same time taking on personal responsibility for his health – indeed, for his continued survival.

As Robbie talked to ChildLine, it also became clear that his father was extremely abusive. Robbie said that his dad often hit him, and had threatened to punch Robbie if he saw his mother. What had prompted his call was a series of slaps, followed by his dad spitting on him. His father, who was unemployed, had also recently beaten Robbie for accepting a jumper as a gift from a friend. His father, unhappy at his own lack of income, had said that no son of his would bring shame on his family by accepting gifts from others, not even friends. Despite this abuse, Robbie felt that he had to protect his father's health by staying with him, rather than living with his mum.

Watching out for mum

Even in the difficult situations they found themselves in, the two young people above showed a tremendous sense of responsibility towards the well-being of their parents. This responsibility for the happiness of one's parent is a recurrent theme in calls to ChildLine, with

many children saying that the choices they make for themselves are tightly constrained by the needs of their parents, particularly in cases where one parent has hurt the other. Children speak of staying in every night 'because Mum will be lonely if I don't – she doesn't have someone else like Dad does.' Or teenagers tell ChildLine that they feel physical responsibility for their mother's safety. When a 13-year-old boy becomes 'the man of the house', he can take the role very literally, seeking to provide both emotional and physical protection for his mother, at the expense of his own development.

In many cases, whether because there is only one adult in the household or because both parents are working, normal childhood behaviour is not even possible. ChildLine speaks to many children as young as 11 or 12 who cannot play after school or visit friends because they have to race home to look after their younger siblings while their parents work. For these 'perpetual babysitters', childhood is a wearying – and often worrying – routine of school and responsibility, with limited opportunities simply to be a child. Many of these young babysitters admit to ChildLine that they sometimes get frightened or worried about their responsibilities, but say that they do not want to tell their parent

(usually the mother), as 'she has enough to worry about already.'

Mum's the word from mum and dad

Many parents do try to protect their children during and after a separation, and some even encourage their children to call ChildLine, so that they can talk about their problems and worries with an objective third party.

Unfortunately, other parents go too far when seeking to protect their children, by trying to hide all information from them. According to ChildLine's callers, being kept completely in the dark only adds to the anxieties. Children whose parents are going through a separation or divorce will inevitably worry; trying to protect them from 'adult' truths often leads to them taking on adult stresses. 'I'm worried Mum's not keeping me up to date with the

case,' one 12-year-old boy said. 'I'm having stomach-aches now and the doctor thinks they're caused by the stress. I just need to know what's going on. I'll run away if I have to live with Dad.'

'They think we don't know what's going on, but we do. And we're scared.'

Jack, 10

The break-up of a family is always traumatic for children; the additional uncertainty of having no idea what will happen next makes it even more so. A case in point is 11-year-old Jamie, who told ChildLine that his parents were in a fierce custody battle, with both unwilling to talk to him about the



possible outcomes. 'They're always nasty to each other,' he said. 'I'm not sure what to think.' In order to get more information about what would happen to him, Jamie had even taken it upon himself to call his father's solicitor. His ChildLine counsellor, noting that Jamie was 'doing a lot of the work that the adults should be doing', helped him get in touch with a children's advocacy organisation.

Evident in many calls is children's desire for information about change, however worrying or painful that information may be. Parents and carers who believe they are managing to hide imminent and substantial changes to

family life from young people will usually be wrong, and may even be making things worse by ensuring that their children have to fill in the missing pieces themselves. ChildLine's records are full of children sharing incomplete information they have overheard or seen, and their sometimes misguided worries based on that information. Few if any callers have said that they do not want to know the truth. However, some have told ChildLine that their parents have taken out their own frustrations and anger on them. For example, one 16-year-old girl told ChildLine that her father had said that the break-up of her parents' marriage was her fault, 'for being too stroppy'.

Bereavement

In 2004/05, more than 5,000 children spoke to ChildLine about bereavement, with 1,905 saying it was their main reason for calling the helpline and a further 3,148 mentioning it as an additional reason for calling.

According to research carried out at the University of Surrey, one in five bereaved children is likely to develop a psychiatric disorder at some point in life.¹¹

Most, however, suffer a range of less intense but still daunting problems such as depressive symptoms, fears, angry outbursts and developmental regressions. Interestingly, parents report fewer problems for their bereaved children than the children themselves do, possibly indicating that children hide their grief from their parents. Young people's unwillingness to talk about or exhibit their grief would appear to be supported by Joseph Rowntree Foundation research showing that high numbers of bereaved children report never having spoken with anybody about their experiences.¹² This is also borne out by what bereaved children tell ChildLine.

In addition to their own personal grief, children often find themselves wanting or needing to support their surviving parent. After the initial

shock of the death has worn off, the complicated business of getting on with life can often prove too much for the surviving parent, leaving the children to take on adult roles. As one young boy told ChildLine, 'Since Mum died, we're worried about Dad – he doesn't wash, and he's always in the pub. I try to wash and iron like Mum. And I do a paper round so I've got some money for food.'

'I do my best to take care of Dad since Mum died, but it's never enough – he's always angry at me.' Megan, 13

Another boy told ChildLine that since his older brother had died, his parents were finding it impossible to cope. 'They're crying all the time,' he said. 'I think they're going to split up over this.' While he missed his brother desperately, he did not

feel it was okay to grieve for him, as his parents needed his support. 'Is it okay to be angry?' he asked. 'I want to cry, but I need to help my parents.'

Hiding one's problems from a grieving parent extends beyond the apparent confines of bereavement. One 10-year-old boy called ChildLine to say that he was being badly bullied at school. He would not tell his mother about it, though, because, 'Dad died this year and Mum still cries all the time. I don't want her to worry about me.'

Why ChildLine works

ChildLine gives children the chance to speak openly and honestly about their problems, at their own pace and on their own terms. For many children, such control is the key to seeking – and accepting – help. By offering children a service that meets their needs on their terms, ChildLine is able to help them tackle problems in ways they might not otherwise be capable of. For example, a central tenet of the Government's *Every Child Matters* is the pursuit of strategies that help children avoid falling through the cracks between different services,¹³ much as was happening to Lee, the teenager discussed earlier (page 3), who was living with his alcoholic grandfather, caring for his incapacitated grandmother, and dropping behind in school. Each of his various problems might possibly have been considered manageable on its own, but the sum total of his responsibilities was more than any child should be asked to bear. By taking a holistic approach to Lee's welfare, ChildLine was able to make his situation more manageable – partly by giving him time and space to talk openly and honestly about his problems for the first time, but also by acting as an advocate for him when he did contact Social Services.

'On the phone, you feel like you're so much more in control.'

Kirsty, 17

By being there for Lee, and reaching out to him on terms he felt comfortable accepting, ChildLine was able to provide help when it was needed most. But even while providing that help, ChildLine counsellors knew that a lack of funding and resources meant that many other children were missing out on the support they needed. Because ChildLine has now joined the NSPCC as a dedicated service, fewer children will go without help. By combining the two organisations' resources and expertise, more calls will be answered and more children will be helped. But still, it will not be enough. Even the best efforts of the NSPCC, its ChildLine service, and other voluntary organisations cannot provide all the help that is needed.

More needs to be done and, when seeking to determine exactly what that should be, it may be helpful to look at particularly effective aspects of the ChildLine service model:

1. 24/7 service provision

The helpline is always available, allowing children to discuss their problems at their own pace, unrestricted by geography, appointment times or opening hours. This is particularly important for children in communities where face-to-face services are scarce, and for those who, like the children in this report, are living chaotic lives.

2. Name recognition and ease of use

For children to use a service, they need to be comfortable with it. But first, they have to know it exists. ChildLine's very high profile among young people enables even young children to access the support they need directly and independently. ChildLine is also very easy to use, with no complex administrative hurdles to clear when seeking help. All that children need to do is to pick up the phone and dial an easily remembered number. This ease of use is in sharp contrast to the experiences of the child welfare system described by many of the young people who speak to ChildLine.

3. Non-statutory status

Contacting ChildLine is perceived as easier than contacting statutory child welfare services, and research indicates that rates of self-referral are higher when systems allow for confidentiality and flexibility of response.¹⁴ When children call ChildLine, they are in control of what happens and are thus more likely to take the crucial first steps in addressing their problems. Many children have told ChildLine that they are afraid to speak to a teacher or to contact Social Services, because of the potential consequences, such as having their family broken up or being 'taken away'. These

children say that the ability to take a 'gradual steps' approach to seeking help was an essential part of being able to address their problems. As one victim of childhood sexual abuse said, 'There's no way I could have done face-to-face counselling before talking to ChildLine.'

4. Being cost-free

ChildLine is completely free: only access to a phone is required. This is particularly important for children who are looked after away from home, or excluded from mainstream services.

5. Comprehensiveness

Children often begin a call by discussing one issue, then only gradually disclosing other concerns. For example, a child might call about bullying, but then disclose that she is also experiencing trouble at home, such as parental alcohol misuse. Children are less able to do this when services are targeted at specific problems. Because the telephone helpline is child- rather than problem-centred, children are able to seek help for any and all problems they have, in their own time. If a child wishes to call regularly, she can speak to the same counsellor each time, or to different ones – whichever she prefers.

'There's no way I could have done face-to-face counselling before talking to ChildLine.'

6. Anonymity

Because callers cannot be seen, some are more willing to accept help than they would be if the service was only available face-to-face. Children can say the unsayable to a ChildLine counsellor, and do not have to divulge their true identities. Particularly for those who have suffered abuse, this anonymity and invisibility can be essential.

7. Confidentiality

Most children are unwilling to discuss their problems with professionals. For example, the vast majority of victims of abuse never disclose, and it is also very unusual for a child to disclose to a professional. One of the major disincentives for children to confide problems, especially with professionals, is their fear of confidentiality being broken. Research indicates that children have good reason to suspect that disclosure of abuse will be problematic for them, and several studies have shown that, on the whole, children find child protection processes very distressing. By guaranteeing confidentiality to children and young people (except when a life is in danger or a child is being abused by an authority figure), ChildLine is able to reach out to children, counselling many who would otherwise be too afraid to seek help.

Recommendations

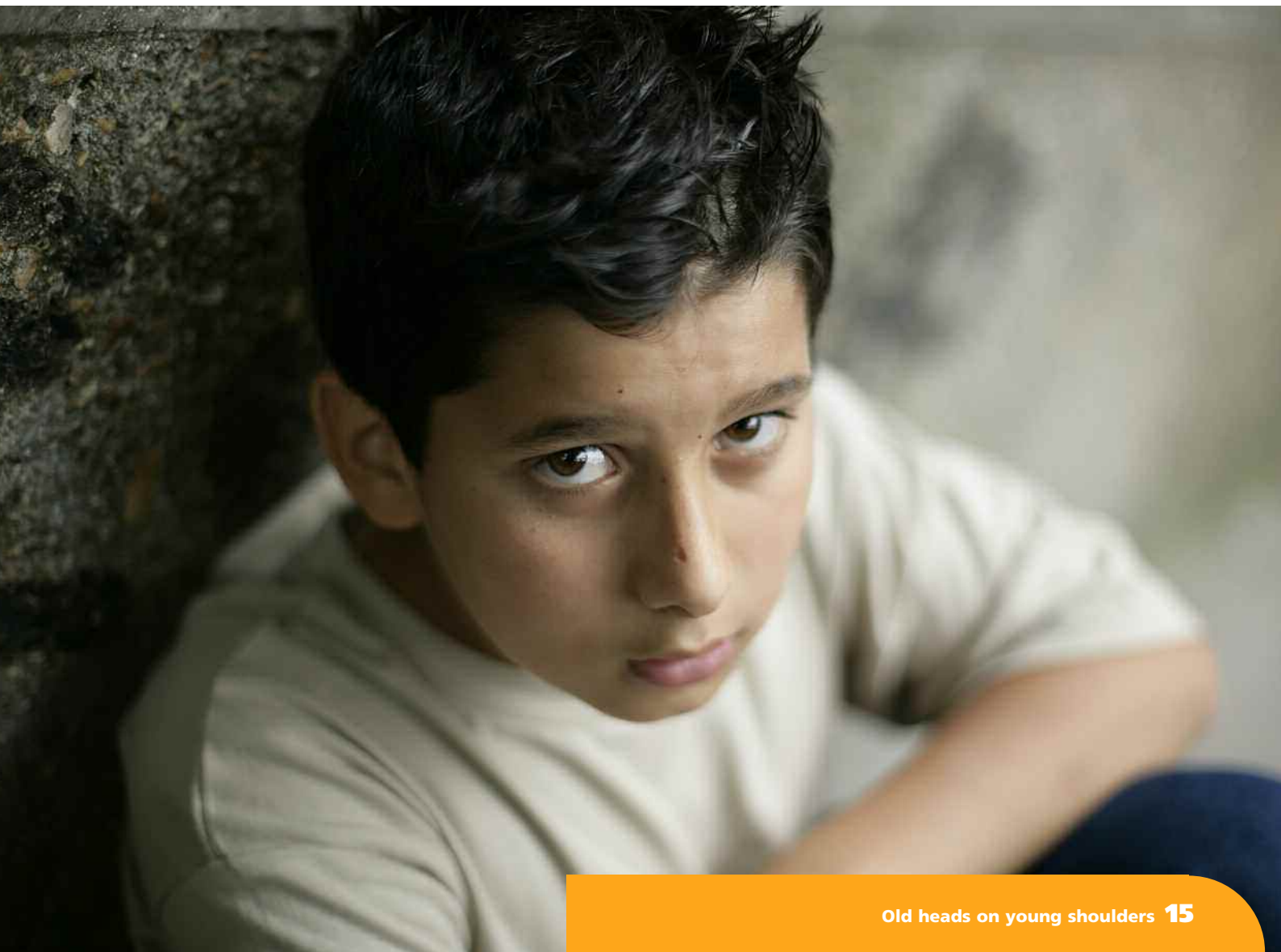
1. National helplines are not well resourced. All children deserve to get whatever help they need, whenever they need it. In order to provide this help, confidential, accessible and responsive services such as ChildLine, the NSPCC Child Protection Helpline, and the online advice centre there4me.com should be made easily available to each and every child and young person who needs them. Consideration should be given to the feasibility of a single portal for social care concerns, and a review of the role and funding of national helplines could contribute to this.
2. More resources are needed from central government to fund services that can help the many children and young people who would otherwise remain invisible, slip through the cracks, or suffer in silence. The Government must ensure services such as ChildLine are adequately funded.
3. The Department for Education and Skills should initiate a check on the extent of the implementation of Lord Laming's recommendation about the development of 24-hour referral lines being available in every local authority area.

4. All those working with both telephone and online counselling services must be properly checked through an enhanced CRB check.
5. The Government must ensure that schools provide school-based counselling services and peer support schemes, and should place a statutory duty on local authorities to co-ordinate and oversee their development.
6. This report demonstrates the need for services to 'Think Adult, Think Child'. Behind some adults with mental health, substance misuse and/or domestic violence problems, there may be a child who is providing care for them or experiencing difficulties or abuse as a result.

Directors of Children's Services and Health Trusts must ensure full implementation of the National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity

Services Core Standard 5 recommendation that 'All practitioners working with children and families and with parents who are experiencing personal problems, should ensure that the needs of their children are assessed and that appropriate services are delivered to these children and their families.' The evidence from this report underlines the importance of ensuring that children in these circumstances are listened to and respected, without making them feel either that they have betrayed their family, or that they have caused them to split apart.

Further, the reconfiguration of children's services must not result in adults' and children's services failing to work together in the interests of meeting both children's and carers' needs, as both should be working towards achieving the NSF Core Standard 5: Safeguarding and Promoting the Welfare of Children and Young People.



References

- ¹The Children's Society (2005). Young carers and their families (briefing paper for a meeting with the All Party Parliamentary Groups for Children, Parents and Families and Youth Affairs).
- ²Ibid.
- ³Tatum C., Tucker S. (1998). The concealed consequences of caring: an examination of the experiences of young carers in the community. *Youth and Policy*, 61, 12–27.
- ⁴Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (2003). *Hidden Harm*. London: Home Office.
- ⁵Kroll, Bryanna (2004). Living with an elephant: Growing up with parental substance abuse. *Child & Family Social Work*, 9:2, 129–140.
- ⁶Olgivie-White, Sharon, et al. (2005). *Children's concerns about the health and wellbeing of their parents and significant others*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Centre for Research on Families and Relationships.
- ⁷Bancroft, Angus, et al. (2004). *Parental drug and alcohol misuse: Resilience and transition among young people*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- ⁸Cleaver, H. et al. (1999). *Children's Needs – Parenting Capacity: The Impact of Parental Mental Illness, Problem Alcohol and Drug Use, and Domestic Violence and Children's Development*. London: The Stationery Office.
- ⁹National Statistics Online. Households and families: highlights.
<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/CCI/nugget.asp?ID=1044&Pos=&ColRank=1&Rank=160>.
- ¹⁰NCH. 'It's not your fault' website: www.itsnotyourfault.org.
- ¹¹Dowdney, Linda (2000). Annotation: Childhood Bereavement Following Parental Death, *Journal of Child Psychiatry*, 41:7, 819–830.
- ¹²*The impact of bereavement and loss on young people*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2005).
- ¹³HM Treasury (2003). *Every Child Matters*. London: The Stationery Office.
- ¹⁴Vincent, Sharon and Daniel, Brigid (2004). An Analysis of Children and Young People's Calls to ChildLine About Abuse and Neglect: A Study for the Scottish Child Protection Review. *Child Abuse Review*, 13: 158–171.





ChildLine is the UK's free helpline for children and young people.

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



NSPCC 
Cruelty to children must stop. **FULL STOP.**

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

www.nspcc.org.uk

**ChildLine and the NSPCC
joining together for children**

This report has been made possible by

NEXT