

Barriers to children seeking help

An NSPCC factsheet

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Our factsheet explains why children and young people may want to seek help and what prevents them from asking for it. We offer advice to organisations on how to encourage children to ask for help and support.

Why might children and young people want to seek help?

Children and young people can face many difficulties and concerns, including schoolwork, death or ill-health of a family member, parental conflict, falling out with friends, or abuse at the hands of someone else.

Many will seek help because they know where to go and believe that it will make a difference. Others may receive support due to the severity of their needs, e.g. because they have attempted suicide.¹ However, there are many reasons why children do not seek the help or support they need.

References

1. Garvey, B. et al (2009) [Help-seeking behaviour in young adults](#). London: NFP Synergy.

What stops children and young people seeking help?

Many children and young people are reluctant to seek help because they feel that they do not have anyone that they can turn to for support. They may have sought help in the past and had a negative experience, which makes them unlikely to do so again.

In an NSPCC study of child maltreatment, only a quarter of the people who had experienced sexual abuse as a child had told anyone at the time.² Being unable to tell someone that you are being abused can be very stressful and may leave a vulnerable child at risk of continuing or further abuse.

Young people may not seek help because they feel that they will not be believed. They may feel too embarrassed to talk to an adult about a private or personal problem, or they may be worried that they will not be taken seriously by parents and/or professionals. A report by the Mental Health Foundation

into self-harm among young people found that many suffered ridicule or hostility from the professionals they had turned to for help.³

Children and young people are often reluctant to admit that they have a problem. They may be worried about confidentiality and lack trust in both the people around them (including parents) and in the services provided to help them.

It can often be difficult for young people to find situations where they can talk about their experiences. They may be scared of the consequences of asking for help; worried that they will be causing trouble and making the situation worse. They may be particularly worried about formal procedures and find it easier to talk informally.

References

2. Cawson, P. et al.(2000) **Child maltreatment in the United Kingdom: a study of the prevalence of child abuse and neglect**. London: NSPCC.
3. Mental Health Foundation and Camelot Foundation (2006) **Truth hurts: report of the national inquiry into self-harm among young people (PDF)**. London: Mental Health Foundation.

What are the barriers for specific groups of children and young people?

Specific cultural or gender issues can make young people reluctant to seek help.

Boys, for example, are often more reluctant to seek help than girls. The recurrent theme in calls from boys to ChildLine is their reluctance to admit they have a problem. This can mean that they wait a long time before seeking help.^{4,5} Girls are more likely to talk to their friends about problems, whereas boys are more likely to be worried about showing their feelings.

There are particular issues for vulnerable groups of children. Any child may have difficulty finding the right words to explain a problem or concern but for a child who has communication difficulties the problem may be compounded by the communication systems available to them; such systems sometimes lack the language necessary to enable children to express what is worrying them.⁶

Children who are more isolated are less likely to have the social networks in place to enable them to talk to a friend, e.g. children in residential care are much more likely to keep things to themselves than children living at home.⁷

References

4. ChildLine (2003) Boys allowed: what boys and young men tell ChildLine about their lives. London: ChildLine.
 5. NSPCC (2009) **What boys talk about to ChildLine**. London: NSPCC.
 6. National Working Group on Child Protection and Disability (2003) **It doesn't happen to disabled children: child protection and disabled children**. London: NSPCC.
 7. Fuller, Roger et al (2000) **Young people and welfare: negotiating pathways (PDF)** . [Swindon]: Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).
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How can I encourage children and young people to seek help and support?

The NFP Synergy report⁸ makes a number of recommendations for organisations working with children and young people:

- never forget what it's like to need help - make it easier for young people to take up the offer of help
- help to tackle the myths about those who seek help - seeking help is not a sign of weakness; encourage parents to promote help-seeking
- help to tackle the myths about young people - be positive about young people
- listen to the people you help - improve services with feedback from service users
- shout about your work - lack of awareness is a significant barrier to young people seeking help
- see the whole person - engage with young people both in terms of their strengths and their weaknesses
- provide a forum for young people to talk about their lives
- build trust - treat young people with respect
- empower young people to find their own solutions
- advertise the benefits of seeking help - provide evidence in the form of data
- help young people to help each other - equip young people with the skills and tools to support their friends/peers and family members

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- think about communication - don't be too bland, don't try too hard to be cool
- consider the role of new technologies - these should be complementary to other ways of supporting young people.

References

8. Garvey, B. et al.(2009) **Help-seeking behaviour in young adults**. London: NFP Synergy.

Contact the NSPCC Information Service with any questions about child protection or related topics:

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