NSPCC

Hurting inside

NSPCC report on the learning from the NSPCC helpline and ChildLine on neglect

EVERY CHILDHOOD IS WORTH FIGHTING FOR
Introduction

Through its helplines, the NSPCC hears from concerned adults and unhappy children every day and night of the week about neglect, both physical and emotional.

Neglect is the child protection concern that affects more children in the UK than any other issue. We know from our own research with social work and health professionals that it’s the biggest issue they deal with too. Neglect is the main reason why people contact the NSPCC helpline.

Looking at the data from our two national helplines (the NSPCC helpline for any adult to seek advice or report concerns for a child and ChildLine, the phone and online service for young people), we can identify trends in terms of how neglect is recognised, reported and understood. We hope the analysis of this data is useful to those working with children and families and setting policy.

From our analysis it has become clear that:

- Neglect is the top reason why people contact the NSPCC Helpline but is one of the least counselled concerns by ChildLine;
- Children seldom contact us to say they are being neglected but they do talk about the impact that their parents’ behaviour has on their lives.
- Professionals need to feel more confident and supported when they suspect child neglect, and not delay in reporting their concerns.

Our data also shows that the general public are significantly more aware of neglect or feel more compelled to report it when a child is under the age of 11, accounting for 84 per cent of concerns about neglect (where the age is known). We are encouraged that younger children are protected in this way, but we are concerned that there is less awareness that older children are also at risk from neglect, even though they may be better at hiding it. We must encourage more adults to be curious about the conditions of young people over 11 if they have any instinctive concerns. We must find ways to help them spot the signs of neglect, which may be being purposely hidden.

Our data from ChildLine highlights that younger children are very much unaware of their parents or guardians treating them in a neglectful way. Children contacting us to say that the care they were receiving from their parents or guardian was inadequate or harmful, made up less than 1 per cent of the nearly 300,000 ChildLine counselling sessions with young people in 2014/15. But in a large proportion of our counselling sessions, children told us about situations which our counsellors recognised as neglectful.

For everyone with a professional responsibility for child welfare, what is most significant is that in only a quarter of ChildLine counselling sessions about neglect, the young person had previously spoken to a social worker or teacher. It is therefore important that children are aware of trusted adults outside of the family home, and that those adults know how to take action on their behalf. It also forms the cornerstone of the NSPCC’s Speak out, Stay safe programme (formerly known as the ChildLine School Service), which aims to help 5–11 year olds to recognise the signs of abuse and neglect, and importantly to talk to a trusted adult. We aim to deliver this programme in every primary school across the UK by 2016.

This report sits alongside a range of new evidence from the NSPCC about neglect. Through our services, we work directly with children and families across the UK, carrying out research and evaluations to make sure that the approaches we’re taking are the right ones. So new information on the NSPCC’s impact and evidence hub includes learning on what services work in tackling neglect and why. We’ll also be sharing research on what teachers, doctors, nurses and our local communities can do to play their part in stopping child neglect.

I hope the following report into the data and trends we are seeing from our two national helplines gives you more insight into this issue, or helps you to consider how we might be able to work more closely with you. We are always extremely keen to discover ways to ensure the NSPCC helpline and ChildLine are as relevant to your work as possible.

John Cameron
Head of Helplines
NSPCC
It’s just after 7pm on a weekday in June and a call is taken by the NSPCC helpline. The following is a summary of that call. The names and identifying details have been changed to protect the identity of the child and referrer.

Jan and Carly

Jan is an early years worker who contacted the NSPCC helpline with concerns about Carly, a three-year-old girl who attended the nursery where she worked.

When Carly first joined the nursery, it took her a long time to settle in – she seemed to have little knowledge of social niceties, such as sitting at a table to eat a meal. Jan had noticed that Carly’s hair was always matted, her teeth were decayed and generally she seemed uncared for. Carly often wore the same clothes for a number of days; they were dirty, well-worn and sometimes smelt of urine. She had been wearing the same shoes for a year and these were now too small and in poor repair.

When assisting Carly with toileting, Jan had observed that her bottom was red and sore – she had approached Carly’s mum about this, but her mum didn’t seem interested and brushed Jan off saying that Carly was “fine”. Indeed, Carly did seem fine and, despite her physical appearance, appeared to be quite happy.

Jan had noticed the smell of alcohol on Carly’s mum when she came to the nursery. Although she did not appear drunk, Jan was concerned because Carly’s mum was driving. This, coupled with other physical signs of what she thought could be neglect, prompted Jan to call the NSPCC.

Fact:

- Along with Jan, a number of staff had voiced their concerns with the nursery manager but, as far as Jan knew, nothing had been done.
- Jan had not told anyone else that she was contacting the NSPCC – yet we had not received any other calls with concerns about Carly.
- Jan’s concerns had been going on for a year before she called the NSPCC.
- None of this information had been previously shared with children’s services.

Research shows that children suffering from neglect are unlikely to receive help from agencies quickly and many professionals lack confidence in identifying and responding to child neglect compared with other types of abuse.

The pervasive and long-term cumulative impact of neglect on children is well documented. At best, neglect may cause irreversible impairment to a child’s development; at worst it can prove fatal. With this in mind, the NSPCC encourages timely and decisive action.

While the signs of neglect can seem obvious, in isolation the symptoms can be harder to spot, and even harder for people to feel justified in reporting: a head teacher may be aware that the child’s school attendance is poor; a health visitor may notice that a child has repeated bouts of head lice, a housing officer may be aware that the family has some financial difficulties; a neighbour may hear the child crying for hours without comfort. A simple, trivial snapshot by one person at one time could be unknowingly indicative of a more systematic problem for the child.

In this report we aim to provide key facts about the contacts the NSPCC’s national helplines receive about neglect. Through sharing what children tell ChildLine, we hope to give a better understanding of the issues faced by children and young people who are being neglected. We also aim to help overcome some of the barriers and delays in reporting concerns about neglect by explaining what happens when someone calls the NSPCC helpline, and illustrating how that call can make a difference.
Key facts from our helplines about neglect

What are the NSPCC’s national helplines?

**NSPCC helpline:**
0808 800 5000  
help@nspcc.org.uk  
www.nspcc.org.uk/helpline

The NSPCC helpline receives over 60,000 contacts from adults every year and is a 24/7 service whereby anyone can call to seek advice or to report concerns for a child by phone, email, text or online form. It is run by child protection professionals, including social workers, teachers and health specialists.

**ChildLine**
0800 11 11  
www.childLine.org.uk

ChildLine delivers nearly 300,000 counselling sessions to children and young people every year. It is a national service that helps children work through a wide range of issues and signposts to additional sources of help. In 2014/15, the issues children talked to ChildLine counsellors about were: family relationships; low self-esteem/unhappiness; abuse and bullying.

**Contacts**

Neglect is the top reason why people contact the NSPCC helpline – this has been the case since 2006. In 2014/15, the helpline received the highest number of contacts about neglect to date - 17,602 (3,019 advice calls/14,583 referrals). Neglect contacts represented 32 per cent of all contacts to the helpline. Overall there was a 3 per cent increase in contacts and a 9 per cent increase in neglect referrals when compared with the previous year.

In complete contrast, neglect is one of the least counselled concerns for ChildLine, where children contacted us specifically to talk about inadequate or harmful care. In 2014/15, there were just 1,016 counselling sessions with children and young people about neglect – a 15 per cent decrease compared with the previous year.

When a child describes their life to ChildLine they rarely recognise that what they are experiencing is neglect, therefore this abuse type is often determined by counsellors who are trained to identify when a child is being neglected. This is why it is imperative that professionals working with children and young people recognise and act upon signs of neglect, as children are less likely to speak out themselves. As is evidenced by the fact that in nearly a third of ChildLine counselling with young people about neglect, the young person had not told anyone else before.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>NSPCC helpline</th>
<th>ChildLine</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014/15</td>
<td>17,602</td>
<td>1,016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013/14</td>
<td>17,089</td>
<td>1,198</td>
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**Referrals**

The NSPCC helpline makes referrals on behalf of the public (including children) and professionals if it is believed or suspected that a child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm or, where appropriate, there is an identified unmet need for a child. The greater the levels of perceived, or identified risk, the more urgent the action taken.

83 per cent of contacts to the NSPCC helpline about neglect (14,583) resulted in a referral to an external agency, such as children’s services or the police. Due to more than one child sometimes being the subject of a referral, the actual number of children referred was far higher, 26,275.

ChildLine make referrals when a ChildLine supervisor judges the child to be in a life-threatening situation, facing significant harm, or where the child themselves has requested direct help.

In 2014/15 ChildLine made 53 referrals to external agencies about neglect – this nearly doubled when compared with 2013/14 and represented 2 per cent of all ChildLine referrals.
Profile of contacts

The NSPCC helpline categorises who contacts the helpline to report concerns. Where known, 67 per cent of contacts about neglect were from the general public (see table below). Just 2 per cent of contacts were from professionals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who contacted the NSPCC helpline about neglect</th>
<th>% of all neglect contacts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent/Carer</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Social/key workers and teachers were the top two categories who children had previously spoken to about their neglect before contacting ChildLine – this represented 22 per cent of neglect counselling sessions.

It is encouraging that these young people recognised they were being neglected and knew a trusted adult to turn to for help. However, all too often young people tell us that despite speaking out, they felt they did not get the help or support they needed, as in the case of Ruby, a 13-year-old girl who called ChildLine saying:

"My mum is not giving me proper food at home and I never see her. All I have had today is an energy drink. Even the food that we do have is mouldy and mum hides the good food from me.

We have arguments all the time over silly things – last time she banged me on the side of my head.

I have run away before and I am thinking about running away again – I don’t have any other family in this country I can turn to. I just don’t want to be at home. I am not happy, I don’t like it there and I feel unwell both emotionally and physically.

I have told people about the neglect and physical abuse at home but they are not doing anything about it – I don’t think anyone believes me."

The NSPCC helpline also sometimes hear from professionals working with children, who despite raising their concerns in their workplace, are not supported by employers nor are they confident that safeguarding procedures have been properly followed.

One such case was a teaching assistant who worked with children with special needs. She contacted the NSPCC helpline about her child protection and neglect concerns for a child she worked with and considered to be very vulnerable. She had raised her concerns with a senior member of staff but it appeared they had not followed child protection procedures. The caller was so concerned she decided to contact the NSPCC herself, but made it clear she wished to remain anonymous as she feared that if the school found out she had contacted the NSPCC, it would result in her losing contact with the child and could possibly lose her job.

67 % of contacts about neglect were from the general public
Age and gender

Both the NSPCC helpline and ChildLine record the age of the child (where known).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>No of children referred by the NSPCC helpline due to neglect</th>
<th>% of all children referred due to neglect, where age known</th>
<th>No of counselling sessions by ChildLine about neglect</th>
<th>% of all counselling sessions about neglect, where age known</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11 and under</td>
<td>19,251</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12–15</td>
<td>2,947</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>449</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16–18</td>
<td>839</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total age known</td>
<td>23,037</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>859</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NSPCC helpline data relating to referrals

We can see that where adults are reporting concerns about a child neglect, the vast majority of contacts (84%) are about children aged 11 and under. In fact, over half (59%) of the 19,251 children aged 11 and under referred by the NSPCC helpline were aged 5 or younger.

Contrastingly, 52 per cent of ChildLine counselling sessions with young people about neglect were aged 12–15 with the most common age being 12 or 13.

These statistics show that adults are more likely to recognise and report their concerns about neglect for younger children; however, 70 per cent of ChildLine counselling sessions about neglect were with children and young people over the age of 12.

We can draw a worrying conclusion here that the public are failing to recognise when an older child is suffering from neglect. This can be due to an older child finding ways to disguise the situation. They are old enough to be able to recognise that the care they are receiving at home is not the norm, evidenced by a rise in ChildLine counselling sessions about neglect from older children, and they feel embarrassed or shamed. Many adults may not realise that neglect can be just as harmful for older children as it is for younger children.

But we must recognise the impact that long-term neglect can have on young people and not minimise the physical and psychological effects that it can have. We must encourage everyone to be more curious about the circumstances of older children and to follow up on any concerns they may have either with a child’s school or through the NSPCC helpline.

NB: Age was known for 89 per cent of NSPCC helpline referrals and 84 per cent of counselling sessions with ChildLine.
Gender – ChildLine Neglect Counselling

58 per cent of ChildLine counselling about neglect was with girls compared with just 18 per cent with boys.

ChildLine – method of contact

ChildLine has witnessed a significant growth in online counselling over the past few years and in 2014/15, 71 per cent of all counselling was dealt with online. However, in the case of neglect counselling, **60 per cent is by phone**. Neglect is one of the few concerns where more counselling is undertaken by phone. This is largely because neglect is one of the most common reasons for children aged 11 and under to contact us (bullying is the most common). 30% of neglect counselling is with children aged 11 and under. Younger children prefer to contact ChildLine by phone.
What children tell us

The following are the main themes that occur when a child or young person is counselled about neglect.

Parental alcohol and substance misuse and mental health issues

In 39 per cent of contacts to the NSPCC helpline about neglect, the worried adult told us that the child’s parent was misusing alcohol or drugs.

Additionally, parent(s)’ alcohol, substance misuse and/or mental health problems were mentioned in 12 per cent of ChildLine counselling sessions about neglect.

Often young people recognised the relationship between physical neglect and parental alcohol and drug abuse. Frequently, they pinpointed their parents’ preoccupation with alcohol and substance misuse as a contributory factor as to why they were being neglected.

All of our money is being spent on drugs. There is no food in the house most of the time. I have to take money from my mum in secret so that me and my brother can eat. Mum has lots of problems, but I am fed up of her not being a proper mum and having to do everything for myself. It has been like this for a long time. I am worried what will happen to my mum if I tell – she can’t look after herself. I wish I could live somewhere else but I don’t want to be split up from my brother.

(Girl, age 12–15)

Home alone

In 2014/15, there were 2,489 contacts to the NSPCC helpline with concerns about a child being left home alone. In addition, being left home alone was mentioned in 345 ChildLine counselling sessions with children and young people about neglect.

Young people who were left at home alone told ChildLine about feeling scared and vulnerable. Often they neither knew the whereabouts of their parent(s) nor when they were likely to return. This created a great sense of worry and fear for the young person. In some cases, children and young people described being left alone with little food and having nobody to turn to.

Many were left to look after younger siblings and were acting in a parental role. This placed a great deal of responsibility and stress on the young person, and they often reflected on not being able to do things, such as socialise with friends, that other children of the same age did.

For young people in such situations, many found it almost impossible to communicate with parents for fear of the repercussions. They described how their parents reacted aggressively or abusively when they had previously tried to talk to them about being left home alone.

The frequency of being left home alone ranged from every evening, to several days or even weeks at a time.

My mum goes out sometimes and gets back really late. Sometimes she won’t come home at all until the morning. I have to look after myself and my little sister who is only a baby. I do everything for my sister; feed her, bath her and put her to sleep. It’s been happening for a while now. I just wish she would be a mum for once.

(Girl, age 12–15)
Lack of food

Lack of food was mentioned in 42 per cent of neglect counselling sessions with ChildLine – making this the top most commonly mentioned issue relating to neglect. Often this was due to their parent(s) prioritising buying alcohol or drugs.

Children reported not having any food in the house, food was mouldy and/or they were being given an insufficient amount of food.

Those with younger siblings often had to try and scrape together a meal in the absence of their parent(s) and some talked about going without food themselves in order to ensure the younger children ate.

My dad doesn’t feed us. He is never here and I am not allowed to see my mum. Most days I go to school feeling ill because I am not eating or sleeping properly. I often have a headache or bellyache. I wish I could go into care.

(Girl aged 12)

Young people also talked about relying on the kindness of friends’ parents to feed them. In 2014/15, there were over 300 contacts to our helplines from children and young people who were concerned about another child being neglected.

Lucy (12) called ChildLine after she had witnessed a number of family disputes at her friend’s house. She had been affected by seeing first-hand the neglect her friend had been subjected to and the impact it had on her friend.

Lucy explained:

“I feel my friend is being neglected by his mum. She leaves him home alone, without any gas/electricity or food. Sometimes he is left until the early hours of the morning because his mum is in the pub. Whenever I have been there and they are having their tea they seem to always have really unhealthy meals and not much of it. My friend has started to self-harm and he cries to me about his home life.”

A child witnessing another child being neglected is very distressing. They often do not know who to tell or what to do to help their friend or relative, often fearing they will make the situation worse.

Other forms of abuse

Children who are being physically neglected often also experience other forms of abuse or neglect. They are usually not having their emotional needs met. This is known as emotional neglect. Physical abuse and emotional abuse are often present when a child is being neglected. Where neglect was a young person’s main concern, 20 per cent talked about also being physically and/or emotionally abused or neglected.

Young people who contacted about neglect and other forms of abuse commonly believed their parent(s) did not love them and talked about the lack of affection shown to them by their parent(s). Sometimes these feelings were as a result of their parent starting a new relationship. Feeling ignored, lonely and rejected because their parent was paying more attention to their new partner was commonly mentioned.

Frequently parents’ alcohol, substance misuse or mental health problems featured where a child was suffering additional forms of abuse. Many young people contacted ChildLine at a point where they just could not cope any longer with what they were experiencing, many stating that the abuse had been going on for years.

Where the young person told ChildLine how long the neglect and abuse had been going on for, 37 per cent said it had been going on for years and was still happening.
### Phoebe’s story

Phoebe, aged 13, contacted ChildLine presenting with mental health issues which seemed to be linked to the emotional abuse and neglect she had experienced over a sustained period of time by her mum.

Phoebe had written to her school about her problems and how she was feeling but had not yet received a reply and was feeling so desperate, she contacted ChildLine requesting a referral to social services.

Throughout the call, Phoebe was upset as she explained how she did not want to live with her family anymore. Things had been really difficult between Phoebe and her mum for years. She told ChildLine how her mum “had never been much of a mother and ignores me most of the time”. She described how she was “hurting inside” and felt like she had never had a family. She was clear with the counsellor that she did not feel safe at home and was experiencing some physical abuse as well.

In order to cope with her emotional pain, she used to cut herself. When her mum discovered Phoebe was self-harming, she did not say or do anything. All Phoebe wanted was for her mum to comfort and reassure her – instead she was ignored.

More recently Phoebe has developed eating disorders, but had not told anyone as “nobody cared”. She used to talk to a teacher about her home life, but stopped when she realised that the teacher was telling her mum everything.

Phoebe was now feeling like she was in crisis and wanted ChildLine to speak to social services on her behalf and tell them everything. Her greatest hope was that she would be allowed to live with another relative.

ChildLine assessed Phoebe’s case and agreed to make a referral on her behalf. As a result of this referral and Phoebe’s courage to speak out, she has now gone to live with another family member where she feels happy and safe. Both Phoebe and her relative are being fully supported by her school and professionals to ensure she receives the support and care she needs.
Mental health and wellbeing

In 20 per cent of ChildLine neglect counselling sessions young people talked about their low self-esteem, unhappiness, mental health issues, eating problems, self-harming behaviours and suicidal thoughts.

The neglect they experienced often translated into young people feeling unwanted, unloved and worthless. For some, their lives seemed so unbearable they turned to self-harming to cope and contemplated suicide as they could not see the point in being around as they could not envisage their lives ever getting better.

One 14-year-old girl called ChildLine and said:

My dad has mental illnesses which makes him have severe mood swings. He is sometimes abusive and aggressive towards me and my brother. Because of his problems, Dad neglects me and my little brother. Dad stays in bed all day and doesn't provide for us. Our house is filthy and I have to take care of my little brother all the time. I have started to harm myself to try and cope. I just feel like running away or ending my life. I have overdosed before, but when Dad found out he just said I was attention seeking. I have told my social worker and family support worker about how I am feeling and that I would like us both to go into care but nobody is listening.

School

Neglected children often talked about their problems at school. Common issues included not eating at school due to not having any money for school dinners or a packed lunch not being provided. Hunger affected their ability to concentrate in lessons and some talked about drinking lots of water as they found this helped to make them feel fuller.

Lack of money to buy stationery, books or attend school trips was also mentioned, as was school uniforms and shoes needing to be replaced due to being in poor repair and/or not fitting the young person anymore.

Consequently, children experiencing neglect were often bullied at school because of their appearance. Bullying in the form of being isolated or excluded also occurred, as young people being neglected were often too embarrassed to invite friends home due to their poor living conditions. Not being able to develop friendships in this way left them on the periphery of friendship groups and resulted in extreme loneliness.

Young people also talked about missing school for periods of time or being persistently late. This often got them into trouble with the school which was both upsetting and embarrassing for the young person. Reasons explained included; having to look after younger siblings when their parents had left them alone; being responsible for getting their siblings to school; an inability to get themselves up in the mornings due to constant fatigue.

Neglected children and young people strongly felt that their parents did not care about their education, so did not support them going to school or consider the future negative implications that missing school may have for the young person.

Sally aged 11 phoned ChildLine about her home and school life:

My teacher told me to call you because I am not feeling okay – I am upset and embarrassed to talk about things – everything is getting too much. I am always at home alone, Mum is always out at friends' houses until late – she is always stressed and busy. The house is freezing; I have to wear lots of clothes to keep warm – Mum says we can't afford heating. Mum doesn't ever cook a meal – I will do myself toast most nights. I don't have breakfast but I do have free school meals. I am also being bullied at school. I told my teacher and she called Mum and told her, but it made things worse. Mum went mad at me saying she has bigger problems to worry about – this made me feel really stupid.

I am too scared to go to school because of the bullying. Older kids call me horrible names and make me feel bad about myself. They follow me home and throw things at me. I can't tell my teacher again because of how Mum reacted last time. I don't understand what I have done wrong – why am I being treated this way by everyone?

Schools see children every day and so they can play a key role in identifying children who are being neglected and supporting them to get the help and protection they need.
How do neglected young people feel?

ChildLine records the feelings expressed by young people during counselling. In neglect counselling the top five feelings were:

1. Worried
2. Scared
3. Upset/tearful
4. Lonely/isolated/excluded
5. Sad

When children talk to us about how they feel in their situation, they talk about how they know their parent isn’t being a good parent. They feel embarrassed of the situation at home and often say they wish they could go in to care or live with someone else.

They do not feel safe when left alone and, in cases where other forms of abuse are present, they do not feel safe when their parent(s) is at home either.

Many young people whose parent(s) are abusing alcohol or substances adopt a caring role for their parent(s) and siblings. Because of this, they are too frightened to tell anyone what their life is like as they are worried about who would look after their family should they be put into care. In 2014/15 children and young people mentioned that they wanted to go into care in 642 counselling sessions – a 14 per cent increase compared with 2013/14.

Worrying about what will happen if services were to get involved is very common, but young people also want to seek help – leaving them in what seems like for them an impossible situation.

Support

Often no one outside the family knows that a child is being neglected. Neglected children worry about their parent finding out that they have spoken to someone – primarily because they don’t want to get their parents into trouble or fear repercussions at home.

Neglect is the most common reason for child protection action being taken. However some children felt that despite involvement from social services, things at home have not improved. Some children talked about their parent(s) “putting on an act” in front of social workers, which left them feeling like they hadn’t been believed.
What happens when you contact the NSPCC helpline?

The NSPCC helpline is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to give advice, guidance and/or offer reassurance.

Our practitioners have a wealth of experience and come from a variety of backgrounds such as qualified social workers, police officers, probation officers, trained therapeutic counsellors, teachers and mental health nurses to name a few.

Uniquely the helpline offers anonymity to all callers, including professionals. This offers reassurance that when you report your concerns about a child(ren), you can do so without fear of repercussion.

You might need advice as to whether or not a situation you are aware of is a safeguarding issue. Our practitioners will analyse and assess the situation and respond in a way that is most appropriate. This could mean providing advice, signposting you to another service or making a referral to another agency.

The impact on the child is at the forefront of the practitioner’s mind when determining how quickly a response is needed to safeguard and to whom the information needs to be shared in order to best support that child’s needs. For example if a child is home alone we will consider contacting the police to carry out a welfare check or if a child is subject to a child protection plan, a call to the allocated social worker or emergency duty service team may be required.

Making that call can and does make a difference. Here is one example (on page 15) of where a telephone engineer, Brad, visited a property during the course of his work and feared that the toddler living there was being neglected and decided to call the NSPCC helpline.
Brad’s story

“I went to a customer’s house to install satellite TV and as soon as the woman opened the door the smell from inside hit me. It was an overwhelming odour of cat urine and it was that bad that I nearly turned the job down.

I followed the woman into the house and I was shocked at the state of the place. There were empty pizza boxes and beer cans on the floor, food with mould growing on it and cat excrement everywhere. The place was full of flies and there was that much rubbish that I was wading through it and I had to clear a space to put my tool box down.

The woman and her partner both looked quite normal, if you had passed them in the street you wouldn’t know that they lived like this.

I had to leave the property to do some work on an exchange box and the smell stuck in the back of my throat. It was that bad that I was delaying going back to the house. When I returned I was working away and all of a sudden a toddler walked into the room. There was no floor space for her to play and she went straight to the sofa to sit with her parents.

They must have left her unsupervised in another room as I hadn’t even realised she was there when I first arrived. From the mess of the place I hadn’t thought for one moment that there were any children in the house. It wasn’t the place for children as it was so unhygienic and when I saw her my heart just sank.

She looked unhappy and was very dishevelled. She had dirt on her bare legs and, as a dad, I knew that the dirt wasn’t mud from playing out or that she’d made a mess with her food; it was a build-up of dirt and she looked like she hadn’t been washed in a while.

I knew I had to do something straight away. I had considered reporting it to someone when I thought it was just the adults there but I thought it was their life and it wasn’t for me to intervene. But knowing they had a young child in that mess was just unthinkable and someone needed to speak up for her. By the look of the place they hadn’t had visitors in a while and I was worried that if I didn’t get the girl help no-one else would see how she was living. I couldn’t have had it on my conscience if I hadn’t done anything.

As soon as I left the house I found the number for the NSPCC’s helpline (0808 800 5000) and called them. They asked me all of the right questions and they acted straight away. It was such a weight off my mind as I wouldn’t have been able to sleep that night if I didn’t know someone was looking into it. It was such a relief to know that that the NSPCC’s helpline were there to help.”

The NSPCC contacted the police who worked with children’s services to remove the toddler as it was not safe for her to live in those conditions. She went to live with her grandmother so she could be cared for until things had changed back at home and it was safe for her to return.
If you are worried about a child:

- Make a careful and factual record of your observations, concerns and any conversations you have had;
- Speak to a senior colleague, if possible someone with child protection expertise;
- Talk to the child and/or the parent about your concern;
- Talk to other professionals who have contact with the child;
- Do not give up – make sure you make your concerns are known and that action is taken;
- Remember the NSPCC helpline numbers;
- If you think a child is in immediate danger, don’t delay – call the police on 999 or call us on 0808 800 5000 straightaway.

For more information and resources about neglect, including how to identify neglect, learning from our neglect services, our Core Info leaflets and research findings, please visit our website – www.nspcc.org.uk/neglect

How to get in touch

You can get in touch with the NSPCC helpline by email or telephone, by submitting an online reporting form, or via Facebook.

In cases of neglect, the helpline may be contacted more than once by a number of different people raising concerns about one family or one particular child. Multiple contacts and multiple signs of neglect can be crucial to unearthing the scale of the problem. Ensuring that contact can be made with ease should go some way in illuminating concerns for our multi-agency colleagues to build a picture to safeguard a child and secure a happier, safer future for them.

NSPCC helpline
0808 800 5000
help@nspcc.org.uk

ChildLine
0800 1111
www.ChildLine.org.uk