Getting help

What children tell us about accessing services after sexual abuse

NSPCC

EVERY CHILDHOOD IS WORTH FIGHTING FOR
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Introduction

ChildLine (0800 1111, www.childline.org.uk) is a free 24-hour helpline and online service where children and young people can find a safe place to talk. ChildLine plays a key role in providing the first accessible point for children trying to find and get help. Trained volunteer counsellors comfort, advise and protect children and young people.

In 2014-15 ChildLine gave almost 11,400 counselling sessions for sexual abuse and online sexual abuse. This is an 8% increase from 2013-14.

This report focuses on what we can learn from our unique insight into children’s accounts of sexual abuse. The report highlights children and young people’s opinions and wishes about service delivery for intervention following sexual abuse.

Our analysis of the data from ChildLine indicates that:

- children need a clearer understanding of the services available to them. Police, children’s services and CAMHS must improve messaging to children so that children understand their roles and what they can expect from the different agencies.
- relationships between different agencies need to improve. Professionals in education, health and the police all have a role to play in ensuring children who have been sexually abused receive the help, protection and advice they need.
**Key facts from our helplines about sexual abuse**

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

Counselling sessions for children about sexual abuse (including online sexual abuse) saw an increase of 8% from 2013-14.

- ChildLine provided almost 11,400 counselling sessions about sexual abuse including online sexual abuse in 2014-15.
- In one third of counselling sessions where sexual abuse was the main concern, children also talked about mental health issues.
- In one third of counselling sessions about sexual abuse children had not told anyone about the abuse before contacting ChildLine.
- More children are telling us they are reporting their experience to the police. Counselling sessions where children talked about this increased by over 50% compared to 2013-14.

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

The NSPCC helpline is a place adults can contact by phone or online to seek advice or report concerns for a child. It’s a free 24-hour service run by child protection professionals.

- In 2014-15 the NSPCC helpline responded to over 8,800 calls and emails about sexual abuse.
- Contacts to the NSPCC helpline about sexual abuse increased 3% since 2013-14 and 20% since 2012-13.
- Around 1 in 6 (16%) of contacts to the NSPCC helpline related to sexual abuse.
- Around a third of calls and emails about sexual abuse came from parents worried about their own child. Another 43% came from members of the public.
Children and young people unable to speak out about sexual abuse

One third of children had not spoken to anyone else about the abuse before contacting ChildLine. Children and young people frequently talked about how hard it was to tell anyone about the sexual abuse. They often recognised they were in need of support and protection and knew they should tell someone. But young people often just did not know who to turn to. They struggled to find the words to describe what had happened to them and how it had left them feeling.

In addition to the trauma of being abused, not being able to tell someone and receive the appropriate levels of support leaves young people emotionally vulnerable and at possible risk of continuing or further abuse.

Talking about emotional distress

Depression and related mental health problems are common psychological effects for children who are being or have been sexually abused.

In 2014-15 one third of children who called ChildLine about sexual abuse also talked about mental health problems. Symptoms were often triggered by the trauma of the abuse they had experienced.

Young people contacting ChildLine talked about:

- extreme feelings of sadness and crying spells
- feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness, fear and guilt
- increased social anxiety and/or panic attacks
- social withdrawal
- anger, irritability and violent outbursts
- feeling powerless which often led to self-harming coping behaviours
- loss of energy, fatigue and changes in sleeping patterns
- change in appetite sometimes leading to eating disorders.

“I wanted to talk to you about something. I really don’t want to tell anyone else as I want to try and clear my head. I’m feeling quite depressed and am so numb that I’ve started cutting myself. I was sexually abused by my dad for many years and although it’s stopped now I have really nasty dreams about being abused, and wake up in the night with flashbacks.

I told my mum about the abuse and it has been sorted by the police. Telling people was the hardest bit as I felt so ashamed. It was overwhelming trying to remember all the details – everything was just a big blur.

I have been seeing a counsellor and we are supposed to be coming to the end of our meetings. She has tried her best to help me but secretly I am getting worse. I don’t want anyone to know because I don’t want them to think I am an attention seeker. I do everything I can to distract myself or get my feelings out but I just feel stuck. I just don’t understand why I still feel so bad.” – Gender unknown, secondary school age
Children and young people’s perceptions of the services they receive

Barriers to seeking support

Children and young people often don’t have a clear picture of what services there are for them or how they will be treated if they try to ask for help. They may have different expectations of what services realistically can provide.

In 2014-15, there were over 1,700 ChildLine counselling sessions where young people mentioned their concerns and difficulties when accessing services and accessing support. This was a 124% increase compared to the previous year.

The most commonly expressed barriers to seeking support included:

• feeling that they will not be believed or taken seriously by parents and/or professionals
• fear that if they told a GP or counsellor (particularly a school counsellor) their parents would be told
• believing there could be an increased risk of being hurt/abused by the perpetrator
• feeling too embarrassed to talk about the sexual aspects of what had happened
• being unsure what would happen as a result of reporting the abuse
• loyalty and feelings towards the perpetrator, most commonly when it was a case of partner abuse, a close family member or sexual exploitation
• not knowing which services were available
• not being able to access services without their parents having to know.

Barriers to finding support for online abuse

Young people were unsure where to report online sexual abuse.

Confidentiality was a major concern. Understanding the point when confidentiality needs to be broken was important to young people. Unclear confidentiality policies are a major deterrent for children to report online abuse.

Young people worried about their parents discovering they had engaged in sexually explicit online activity which had resulted in them becoming victims of blackmail and threats.

ChildLine plays a key role in helping children understand how confidentiality is handled by agencies and assisting young people to report online sexual abuse to the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) via their ThinkUKnow website.

“I have done something really stupid. I have shared nude videos of me with someone online and now they are threatening to post them on the internet. I know I should report it but I don’t know who to tell or what will happen. If I tell the police they will tell my parents and if I report it via the ThinkUKnow website I am not sure what their confidentiality policy is. I want to know what to do. I am so confused as to what my options are.”

- Girl aged 14
Unmet expectations after accessing services

Many young people have been able to speak out about what has happened and agencies have taken child protection action. For some young people, social services has been their lifeline, particularly where the abuser was a parent. Young people expressed how they finally felt like someone cared and were grateful for the support and intervention of statutory agencies, particularly when being placed in to care.

“I was the victim of a serious sexual assault and have been diagnosed with depression as a result of what happened to me. I got so low that I felt I shouldn’t be here. Doctors gave me medication for my depression but it didn’t really help. My parents don’t care about me, and everyone I thought ever loved me has hurt me or turned their back on me. The only person who has shown me any kindness is my social worker. She seems to really care about me and is helping me by putting me into care. Hopefully soon I will have new parents who will look after me properly and love me.”
- Girl aged 13

But many young people who are referred to specialist services feel they don’t understand or aren’t receiving clear explanations of how services will work to help them move on from the abuse.

Children and young people who had been referred to specialist services talked about feelings of unimportance and isolation. They came to ChildLine believing nobody cared or really understood their situation. Areas children struggled to understand or deal with included:

- appointments being rearranged or cancelled
- the lack of urgent response making young people feel like nobody cared about them
- fearing judgment or repercussions
- services and support not being available at the times when they most needed it
- services ending too soon.

When children were referred to social services they often found the process confusing. Some children and young people spoke to ChildLine about their perceptions of other services. Most commonly young people talked about:

- lack of continuity due to social workers “coming and going”
- long gaps of time between things happening
- not being kept informed of progress
- written reports which are confusing often due to the language being used or upsetting due to the content
- conflicting information
- feeling that the focus was on the process rather than the young person
- not feeling they were able to ask questions.

“I have just received my full report from social services today and I am so upset. I thought it would help me understand more about what is happening but it’s just confused me even more. I don’t know who will help with the hurt and upset or who can answer all the questions I have about what is happening. I just don’t know how I am supposed to live my life like this.”
- Young person who had been referred to social services and the police after being sexually abused by their father.
No ‘safe’ picture of counselling

Many young people said talking online to ChildLine rather than face-to-face was easier. They felt they could discuss their thoughts openly and honestly because they could not see or hear the person they were talking to. As with all the issues children and young people contact ChildLine about, over two-thirds of sexual abuse counselling takes place online.

ChildLine plays an important role in helping children and young people understand and feel safe about attending face-to-face counselling.

Young people who were due to attend counselling feared their nerves would get the better of them and could not imagine themselves walking into a room with a complete stranger and trying to explain what had happened and how they felt about it. One young person told ChildLine, “I am so scared, I am shaking and feel sick at the thought of it.”

Young people would find it helpful if their GP or agency making the referral could explain what to expect when attending a counselling session. All too commonly there seems to be an assumption that young people understand what counselling is and how it works.

Difficulties in talking about abuse with a counsellor

For many young people seeing a counsellor really helped them. Having this positive experience gave them the confidence to contact ChildLine and continue the process after formal counselling ended.

But some young people also told us how hard they found it to open up and how they struggled with trust. They felt they couldn’t be entirely honest with their counsellor about the impact the abuse had on their emotional wellbeing and mental health. Along with confidentiality, being judged or not believed was a major concern.

The feeling of not being able to trust anyone caused young people to hide their true feelings and closed them off to working positively with their counsellor or therapist. This resulted in young people believing the intervention had failed and that they would never overcome their emotional turmoil. This belief was often compounded when the counsellor or therapist evaluated the young person as “better”. In reality the young person had not even begun to share their true feelings.
Difficulties in talking to a school counsellor

Many young people were very reluctant to talk to a school counsellor. They believed that anything they disclosed would be repeated to their parents and teachers. The very visible process of leaving lessons to attend a counselling session during school time was another concern for young people, as being seen by other pupils going into the counselling room often provoked difficult and upsetting questions.

Not feeling prepared when a service ends

For other young people the benefits of receiving counselling were so great they feared the service ending. They talked about feeling nervous, anxious and even afraid and feeling a great sense of loss at the thought of the relationship they had built with their therapist ending. Many described this loss in similar terms as they would a bereavement.

Jessie, aged 15, contacted ChildLine to talk about what happened when she met her counsellor after she had been referred as a result of an attempted overdose.

“Things went really badly at my first session. The counsellor really annoyed me and I felt like she was really going on at me. I got so angry I ended up throwing a chair and walked out. I really didn’t want to go back, but I decided to give it another try and wanted to apologise as I felt quite guilty afterwards. A lot of my anger was due to the fact I did not feel I deserved the support because I felt like I had let myself and everyone else down. I didn’t believe anyone would understand me and felt scared and upset. My counsellor convinced me that she really wanted to help me and we worked together on managing my feelings and dealing with my anger. She never gave up on me and made me realise that talking through how I feel is the best way to overcome what I have gone through.”

“I have been seeing a CAMHS psychiatrist to help me through the sexual abuse I have experienced. During the time I have been seeing him I have hardly self-harmed and my suicidal thoughts have got less and less. I only have one session left and knowing this has made all the negative thoughts and feelings come back. I don’t have any control over what is happening and I feel like I am losing my best friend (CAMHS psychiatrist).” – Gender unknown, aged 16

In around a third of ChildLine counselling sessions children talked about sexual abuse which was no longer happening. This could because they didn’t tell anyone at the time. This tells us that some children need ongoing support to help them move on from sexual abuse.
Reporting to the police

More children are telling us they are reporting their experience to the police. In 2014-15 there were over 1,300 counselling sessions with young people who talked about their experiences of reporting an incident to the police – an increase of over 50% compared to 2013-14.

Many young people who reported sexual abuse to the police despite the understandable fear they had in doing so, said they knew it was the right thing to do. They said they felt well supported and informed.

However, there were occasions where involving the police had not resulted in the outcome the young person had hoped for.

Not being believed left young people feeling angry, upset and in some cases the young person had suicidal thoughts and feelings.

“I have been sexually abused and I informed the police. The police have spoken to the boy concerned but nothing has happened because they said there was not enough evidence to take it further. I am so upset and angry at what I have been through and yet nothing has happened. I am finding it hard to cope and am trying to get counselling but there is a waiting list, which is why I have called ChildLine.” - Girl aged 11

“I was sexually assaulted by a boy at school and reported it to the police. The police said they don’t believe me and that it never happened. It took a lot of courage for me to tell the police because I was worried that they wouldn’t believe me. After I told them I felt so relieved but now I wish I hadn’t. I feel so down I don’t want to be here, I would rather be dead. I haven’t told anyone about my suicidal feelings – I don’t suppose I would be believed.” - Girl aged 15

In some cases the police were unable to get the evidence they needed because the young person felt unable to talk about the trauma they had been through.

Young people talked about not being able to find the words to describe what had happened. They spoke about feeling too embarrassed to discuss the details of their experience. They talked about having mental blanks where they could not recall specific information.

When a young person had been abused by a family member or close friend of the family, many found it more difficult to go into detail about the abuse. This is because they felt a strong sense of wanting to protect the perpetrator. Where a young person had been able to tell the police what had happened, the feeling of guilt was overwhelming and they blamed themselves for what had happened and for causing such distress to their family.
If the police spoke to the perpetrator as part of the police investigation, young people felt even more vulnerable and were worried about further abuse.

Where young people didn’t receive the support they expected from the police some young people didn’t know where else to turn for help and support. This made them feel like nobody cared about what had happened to them.

Feeling that they had received no support from the police in turn caused young people to feel fearful and reluctant to talk to anyone else such as a school counsellor about what they had been through.

“"I have been raped by my father a number of times. I went to the police today and was examined by a police doctor and had to answer questions about the abuse. They made me name body parts and talk about sexual things which were really hard for me. I am feeling so many different emotions since I have spoken about what happened, sad, ashamed, scared, embarrassed but most of all disgusting. I feel as guilty as my dad for not stopping him. I hate myself, I hate my life." - Girl aged 14

Claire’s story

Claire was 14 and had been sexually abused by a family member when she was younger. The sexual abuse went on for a number of years before it stopped.

At the time Claire had been too frightened to tell anyone about what was happening to her. It wasn’t until two years after the abuse had stopped that Claire found the courage to tell a trusted teacher at school who in turn told her mum and the police.

As part of the process, Claire was given a social worker and underwent therapy. Claire didn’t feel that this had been very effective for her. The therapy ended before she had even started to feel any better.

After ending therapy Claire fell into a deep depression and would often wake up crying in the night. She turned to self-harming because she got a sense of relief when she cut herself. But she hated herself afterwards.

Claire was left with self-confidence issues. She hated her appearance and often cried when she looked at her face in the mirror. She felt wracked with guilt and believed that the abuse was her fault because she knew what was happening was wrong. She felt she should have been able to stop it.

Although she recognised how ashamed and scared she had felt at the time, Claire still felt terrible for lying to her mum for so long. Claire felt she couldn’t talk to her mum about her feelings.

Claire now calls ChildLine once a week. She talks to counsellors when she feels the need to self-harm or be calmed down when she has a panic attack. Claire’s weekly call to ChildLine provides her with a place where she can release her emotions in a safe way, help manage her panic attacks and stop herself from self-harming.

“My step brother touched me in my private parts quite a few times. I was too scared to tell anyone in case he hurt me. But then I decided to tell my mum and she contacted the police. The police haven’t done anything about it and I am so upset. He should have been punished for what he has done to me. I have been talking to my school counsellor but I don’t feel safe telling her anything." - Girl aged 9
Learning for service delivery

It’s vital that children who have been sexually abused get the right help so they feel they can talk about what has happened and how it has affected them. There needs to be more effective multi-agency planning that involves victims of sexual abuse. Everyone involved in providing children with help, protection and advice needs to work together to:

- look out for and recognise the signs and symptoms of sexual abuse so that early help can be provided
- provide clear messaging to children and young people about reporting abuse

including that when they report abuse they will be:
- believed
- taken seriously
- kept safe
- identify the support children need
- ensure children and young people get clear information about what services are available and how to access them
- provide clear messaging to children about what they can expect from services and how they will work to help them move on from sexual abuse. This includes:
  - clarity on how agencies handle confidentiality
  - helping children feel safe about attending counselling or therapy.

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 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 sexual abuse, including how to identify child sexual abuse, learning from our sexual abuse services and research findings, please visit our website – www.nspcc.org.uk/sexualabuse

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.

Whether a child tells you they are being abused or you have concerns based on other signs, such as their behaviour, it’s important to act on your concerns. Trust your judgement and don’t wait until you’re certain.

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

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0800 1111
www.ChildLine.org.uk