

## What boys talk about to ChildLine

“Boys at school strangle, punch and kick me. I feel lonely and angry with the teachers who seem to do nothing and I feel suicidal.” (Boy, aged 15)

“I have spent most of my childhood being bullied by people at school. I was physically and mentally abused by the other children. I feel I have no friends and everyone is laughing at me.” (Boy, aged 18)

“I have no support. No one listens to me.” (Boy, aged 16)

“I’m just so depressed and low, sometimes I just feel really worthless.” (Boy, aged 16)

“When boys call it is the absolute last resort. They have tried absolutely everything.”  
(ChildLine counsellor)

“I think they’re surprised that someone’s there and someone is listening to them.” (ChildLine counsellor)

### Key findings

- Between 2002/03 and 2007/08, the annual number of boys counselled by ChildLine more than doubled, rising from 24,823 to 58,311.
- Over the past five years, the boy-to-girl ratio of callers has increased, changing from one boy for every four girl callers to one boy for every two girl callers.
- Bullying was the single biggest reason for boys calling ChildLine in 2007/08, making up 22 per cent of boys’ calls or 12,568 calls.
- Family relationship problems constituted the largest additional reason for boys calling ChildLine. Twenty-two per cent of calls mentioned family relationship problems as a main or additional concern.
- In 2007/08, 4,780 boys rang ChildLine to disclose sexual abuse. Of these, 1,803 rang to report that they had been raped. The most common perpetrator of sexual abuse was their father.
- Boys’ calls about sexuality have more than tripled in the last five years, increasing from 980 per year in 2002/03 to 3,510 calls in 2007/08.
- Boys’ calls about loneliness, sadness and isolation have increased more than fivefold, from 334 in 2002/03 to 1,817 in 2007/08.
- The number of homeless boys has doubled in the last five years, with 1,002 homeless boys ringing ChildLine in 2007/08. In addition, 697 boys had run away from home.
- Of the boys who gave this information, nearly half (46 per cent) said they had not told anyone about their problem before calling ChildLine.

## 1. Introduction

It may be asked why this casenote focuses specifically on calls received by ChildLine from boys? Importantly, since its launch, ChildLine has been used as a source of help and protection by far more girls than boys. It might be tempting to conclude from this that boys need help less often than girls and can cope better with their own problems. But statistics show that, on the contrary, boys' problems have a greater tendency to produce tragic outcomes: suicide is the second most common way for young males between 15 and 34 to die (only just outstripped by road accidents as the most common way) and a far more common cause than death from disease (ONS, 2007).

So why does distress become such a lethal element in boys' lives? Is there a causative link between the reluctance to use a resource like ChildLine and the suicide rate? The traditional answer is that boys find it far harder than girls to talk about their emotions and to express feelings of helplessness and despair. Recognising the need to deal with this reluctance, ChildLine has used admired role models, like the Arsenal football team, to spread the message to boys that it is quite acceptable to ask for help in dealing with a problem.

ChildLine's efforts to reach out to boys seem to have been effective. In 2003 ChildLine published its report *Boys Allowed: What boys and young men tell ChildLine about their lives*. This report examined the most frequently occurring issues that boys called ChildLine about in 2002/03. It found that, at the time that the report was written, four times as many girls talked to ChildLine as boys. Five years later our most recent figures show that ratio has changed. Now the proportion of boys calling has risen to a ratio of one boy for every two girls.

Mindful of the need to reach boys and young men, in recent years ChildLine has undertaken a number of initiatives that will engage this audience and highlight the importance of seeking help. These activities include awareness raising and mass communication campaigns; targeted advertising and editorials in magazines for boys; partnerships with television drama (Dubplate Drama, Channel 4); and work with sporting associations, including Premier Rugby.

Given the stereotype that men and boys find it very difficult to admit, even to themselves, that they have emotional difficulties, it is interesting to see the rise (up more than fivefold) in the number of calls relating to feelings of loneliness, sadness and isolation, and concerns about sexuality (up more than threefold).

In 2002/03, bullying, physical abuse and family relationship problems were the main reasons for boys calling. Five years on, this casenote examines what boys call about now and how it has changed over the past five years. It compares the numbers of calls on different topics, the different ages of boys calling across the range of topics and the links between different issues that boys experience. The most prominent issues are analysed in further detail and the views of ChildLine counsellors are included to provide their unique insight into the nature of the calls that they receive from boys.

For information about the methodology used in this casenote see appendix 1.

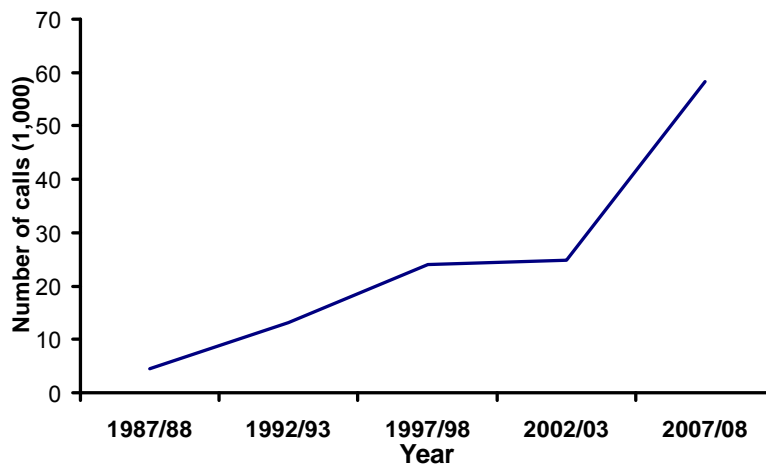
## 2. Statistics

### 2.1 Amount of boys' calls

This casenote reports what boys told ChildLine between April 2007 and March 2008.

During this period, 58,311 boys were counselled by ChildLine, representing a third of all callers counselled by ChildLine during that time.

Figure 1



Over the past five years, since the publication of *Boys Allowed*, the number of boys counselled has more than doubled, rising from 24,823 to 58,311.

Girls counselled have only increased by just under a third in the same period. It is of interest to note the extent of this difference in increases between boys and girls.

This casenote will examine the issues making up this large increase in boys' calls and why girls still call more than boys.

## 2.2 Main problems that boys and girls discussed during calls to ChildLine in 2007/08

Figure 2

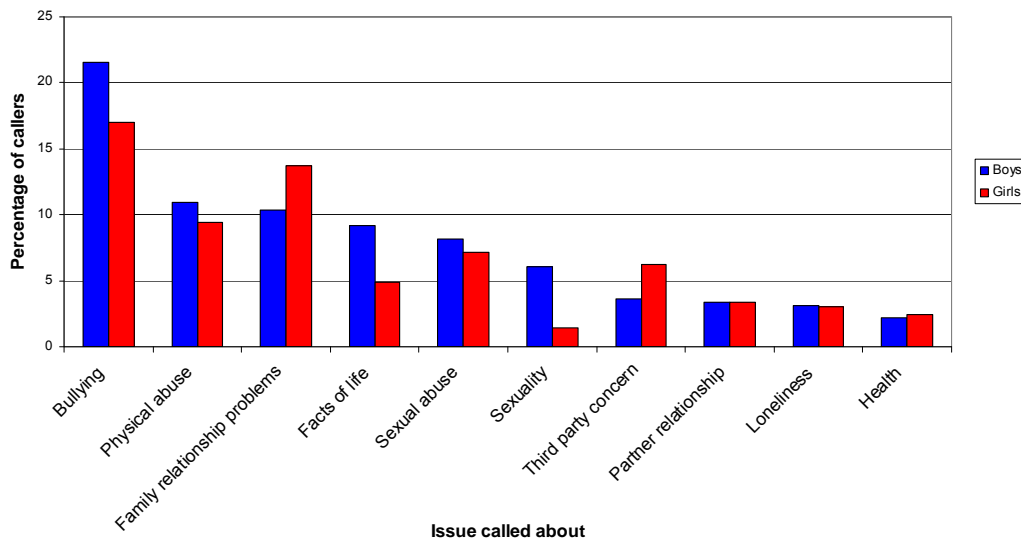


Figure 2 gives the proportion of boys' and girls' calls about different issues, rather than the number of calls. Overall, boys called proportionately more about bullying, the facts of life and sexuality than girls.

It should, however, be noted that there are still more girl callers than boy callers about these issues as there are more girl callers overall. Girls called proportionately more about family relationship problems.

For those boys calling ChildLine, the issue that caused most concern was bullying (22 per cent of calls). This issue received twice as many calls as for those related to physical abuse, the next highest category with 11 per cent of calls.

Family relationships problems (10 per cent of calls) and the facts of life (9 per cent) were the next most frequently cited issues. These issues are examined in further detail in the next section of this casenote.

For girls, bullying was also the most cited issue (17 per cent of calls). This was followed by family relationships problems (14 per cent), physical abuse (9 per cent) and sexual abuse (7 per cent).

## 2.3 Increase in boys' calls during 2002/03 and 2007/08 (main problems called about)

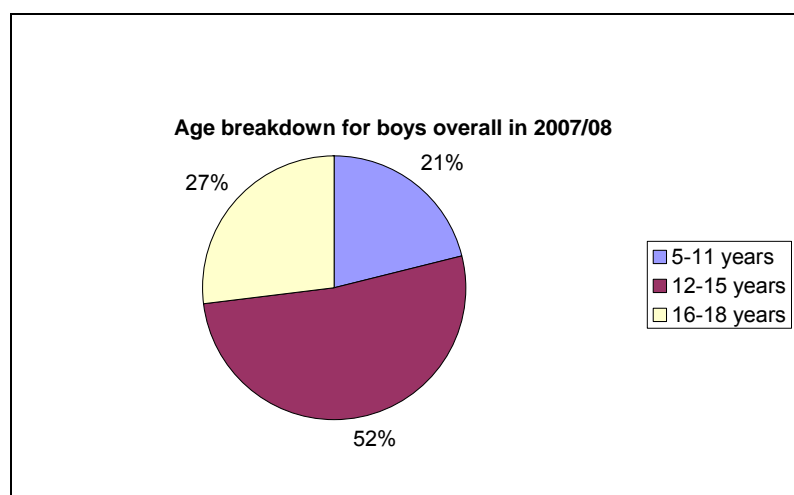
Figure 3

Issue	Percentage of calls increase in past five years
Loneliness	444%
Sexuality	258%
Facts of life	206%
Bullying	148%
Sexual abuse	121%
Family relationship problems	128%
Physical abuse	61%
<b>(Boys calling overall)</b>	<b>(135)</b>

Figure 3 shows that, overall, between 2002/03 and 2007/08 there was an increase in boys' calls of 135 per cent. Of particular note was a much greater increase in calls about loneliness (444 per cent), sexuality (258 per cent), and the facts of life (206 per cent). These issues are to be discussed in greater detail later in this casenote.

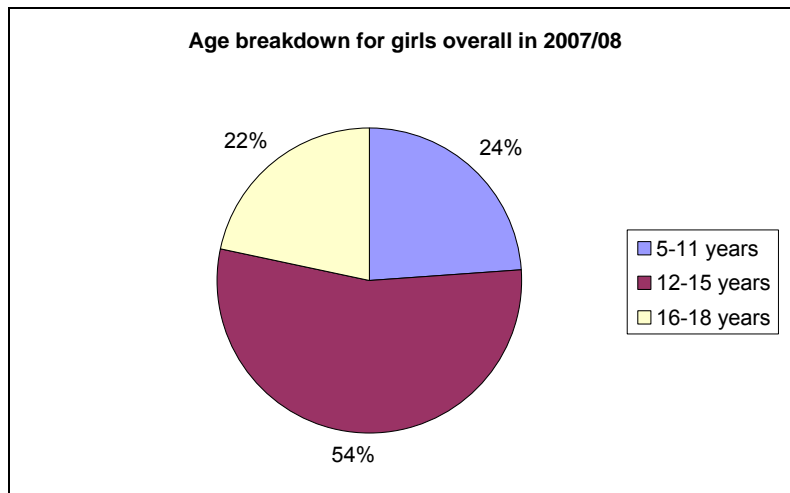
## 2.4 Age breakdown of calls in 2007/08

Figure 4



Of the boys who called ChildLine in 2007/08, 72 per cent (41,744) gave their ages. The majority of these (52 per cent) were between 12 and 15 years old. Just over a quarter (27 per cent) were between 16 and 18 years old. The remaining 21 per cent were between five and 11 years old.

Figure 5



Of the girls who called ChildLine in 2007/08, 78 per cent (91,361) gave their ages. Girl callers were on average younger than boys, with a higher percentage of girls aged between five and 11 years old (24 per cent) and between 12 and 15 years old (54 per cent) than for boys.

## 2.5 Additional problems that boys called about during 2007/08

As well as the main reason for children and young people calling ChildLine, there are often other additional problems that they talk about. Family relationship problems were the most common additional problems for boys by a considerable amount, mentioned in 7,073 calls (12 per cent of boys' calls). This was followed by physical abuse, school problems and bullying (all mentioned in 3 per cent of boys' calls) and emotional abuse (2 per cent of boys' calls).

The top additional problems were similar for girls.

## 3. Key issues

### 3.1 The amount of boy callers – findings from research

There have always been more girl callers to ChildLine than boys. This is true of many helplines, which are often used more by women and girls than by men and boys. But, as previously described, over the last five years ChildLine's ratios have changed. At the time of the publication of *Boys Allowed*, there was one boy counselled to every four girls. Now, there is one boy counselled to every two girls.

In questioning this disparity between boys and girls, it is important to recognise that it is not just helplines that experience greater use by girls. Boys reluctance to seek professional help and support is well recorded in the literature (Featherstone and Evans, 2004; Baginsky, 2004).

Why is it that boys are less willing to use such services? Even in this age of the “new man”, it seems that asking for help may be perceived as weakness. Literature suggests that the dominant norms of masculinity do affect boys’ willingness to talk about their feelings and emotions. Swain (2003), for instance, suggests concepts of masculinity are characterised by toughness and physical prowess. Along similar lines, Pattman et al (2002) suggested from their study of London schools that boys often felt they could not tell other boys about anxieties and problems at home or about being bullied. Some boys felt they could not discuss personal issues for fear of appearing effeminate.

The ChildLine in Scotland *Boys Aloud Project Report* (2006) found that there was a perception among the teenage boys who took part that the ChildLine service was for younger children and “not for them”. Additionally, Harland’s (1997, 2000) research with young working class males in Belfast also confirmed the significance of masculinity on their help-seeking and coping behaviour. Indeed, he also identified how this behaviour was further impacted by growing up in “the Troubles”, with young boys feeling under pressure to be tough and hard.

Cox, A. J. (2006) emphasised the need for boys to understand their own feelings, with most struggling to find the words they need to define their feelings and thoughts. He described social pressures on boys that discourage self-expression in males and the tendency for males to perceive communication as functional rather than expressive. This was echoed by the findings of a ChildLine in Scotland research study (Gallagher, 2007), which suggested masculine norms meant boys might be embarrassed or find it difficult to talk to ChildLine about their feelings.

It seems that these cultural influences are contributing factors to fewer boys using services like ChildLine. However, it is important to recognise that the more than doubling in boys’ calls to ChildLine over the past five years shows a large increase in boys expressing themselves through telephone counselling services.

There could be a variety of reasons for this change in calls. In addition to the proactive attempts to engage boys through ChildLine’s publicity and promotion, counsellors also suggest that notions of masculinity are starting to change in the wider society, which is encouraging boys to call.

Additionally, ChildLine counsellors also receive training on working specifically with boys. This training helps explore issues like the differences in boys’ and girls’ communication styles, the ways boys discuss their problems and the different approaches used by boys to express their emotions. This training helps counsellors engage with boys during counselling calls and may encourage those boys who do phone ChildLine to call back and increase their use of the service as they need it.

In 2003, ChildLine launched a six-month campaign entitled Boys Allowed, to challenge some of the negative stereotypes that may prevent boys and young men from seeking help when they need it. The campaign wanted to reassure boys and young men that there are places to turn to when they have a problem, and that it is acceptable to ask for help. It is in the five years since this campaign that there has been a more than doubling of boys’ calls. While this increase in calls cannot be directly attributed to this campaign, it seems fair to assume that this campaign has had a positive influence.



Since 2003, this campaign has been progressed through other activities, including the *Don't Hide It* and *Better Out Than In* campaigns between 2006 and 2008. These were targeted directly at children and young people and exceeded all expectations in terms of building young people's awareness. Parts of these campaigns used online and digital communications, to which boys may particularly relate.

### 3.2 Bullying

Since ChildLine opened in 1986, through drawing attention to the problem of bullying it has played an important role in challenging the notion that it is just a "normal part of growing up". The many thousands of calls ChildLine has received reveal that for children and young people who are targeted by bullying, it can seriously injure them physically and mentally, and damage their life prospects.

Each year there are cases of children who have taken their own lives, rather than continuing to endure what can feel to them to be a torturous experience. Many ChildLine counsellors say that calls about bullying are among the most difficult they deal with, because very often young people will already have tried to solve the problem in every practical way open to them.

For the last seven years, bullying has been numerically the biggest single problem children have called ChildLine about. It was the most common reason for boys calling in 2002/03 as described in *Boys Allowed* and is still the largest category for boys who have called.

In 2007/08, 12,568 calls from boys were due to bullying (22 per cent of boys' calls). This high level of reported bullying is supported by other research, for instance a survey undertaken by ChildLine in 2003 found that half of primary school children and more than one in four secondary school students said they had been bullied. The number of boys calling ChildLine about bullying in 2007/08 is nearly two-and-a-half times the figure five years ago and the biggest numerical increase for any category over this period.

Compared with the overall breakdown of boys' calls, those boys calling about bullying were younger than average, with just over a third (34 per cent) being in the 5–11 age group (compared with 21 per cent being in this age group for boys' calls overall).

This is in keeping with the findings of recent research undertaken across Europe including the UK (Analitis et al, 2009), which found that younger children were more susceptible to bullying.

Fears about the violence suffered by young people are reflected in the calls ChildLine receives. Where the type of bullying was given, the most frequent type of bullying boys talked about in 2007/08 was physical bullying, having been reported by 40 per cent of boy callers.

One 15-year-old boy told ChildLine: "Boys at school strangle, punch and kick me. I feel lonely and angry with the teachers who seem to do nothing and I feel suicidal."

The next highest category for bullying was name calling and teasing, making up just over a third (36 per cent) of boys' calls. Additionally, homophobic bullying made up 3 per cent and sexual bullying made up 2 per cent of the calls from boys about bullying.



One 14-year-old boy told ChildLine: "I am gay and being bullied at school for that. I don't want to go back to school."

For all children, the main location where bullying takes place is school. Although not all callers gave a location for the bullying, 78 per cent of boys who did give one reported that the bullying happened in school. A further 6 per cent said it happened on the way home or after school and 17 per cent said it happened out of school.

Bullying that occurs in the community can be inescapable. One boy aged 12 told ChildLine: "I am very upset about being bullied at school and out of school. It's worse out of school. I am scared to tell anyone about the bullying because they would hit me more. I would prefer to talk to my mum as I am scared about my dad finding out."

There is no question that bullying can have life-long effects, not least because it damages young people's capacity to learn.

One 16-year-old boy told ChildLine: "I don't want to go to school because I have been bullied for five years and it's getting worse. I can't concentrate at school. I want to talk to my mum but I think she may not take it seriously."

For many boys, telling ChildLine about bullying is a last resort because they have nowhere else to turn. The emotional damage it creates can be very serious.

An 18-year-old boy told ChildLine: "I have spent most of my childhood being bullied by people at school. I was physically and mentally abused by the other children. I feel I have no friends and everyone is laughing at me."

It is crucial that schools recognise that for many young people, bullying is not a transitory experience. Twenty-eight per cent of boys who gave this information said that the bullying had been going on for between a month and a year. For another 15 per cent, the bullying had been going on for one to five years. Persistent bullying can destroy a child's school career.

Long-term bullying sometimes continues despite all schools now being required to have effective anti-bullying strategies in place. Sometimes schools can respond to complaints from young people and their families by trivialising the problem. This is one reason why children's suffering can be unrelenting, and why ChildLine counsellors find it so difficult to explore solutions with them.

### 3.3 Physical abuse

Physical abuse is the second most frequent reason for boys calling ChildLine, with 6,403 boys (11 per cent) calling about it in 2007/08. This distinguishes boy callers from girls, since physical abuse is only the third most common reason for girls calling, with more girls calling about family relationship problems. Boys' calls about physical abuse have increased by just over half (61 per cent) in the past five years

Boys are clearly vulnerable to physical abuse at home. In 2002/03, at the publication of *Boys Allowed*, physical abuse was also the second highest reason for boys calling. This high prevalence of physical abuse calls is in keeping with the NSPCC maltreatment study (Cawson, 2000), which states that a quarter of children experienced one or more forms of physical violence during childhood. Some physical

abuse may be even higher than the ChildLine figures suggest, as physical abuse by peers may be categorised under the category of physical bullying instead.

Compared with the overall breakdown of calls from boys, those calling about physical abuse were younger than average, with over a third (36 per cent) being in the 5 to 11 age group, compared with 21 per cent on average. Given that young boys are far easier targets, this demonstrates the capacity of parents to take advantage of their vulnerability. The most common perpetrator of physical abuse was their father, with 2,494 boys who experienced physical abuse (39 per cent) describing their father as the perpetrator. The second most common perpetrator was their mother, as described by 1,765 boys (28 per cent).

This is in contrast with girl callers reporting physical abuse, who were more often physically abused by their mother (37 per cent) rather than their father (25 per cent). It can therefore be concluded that the children who call ChildLine are most commonly physically abused by the parent of the same gender.

Of those boys who gave a timescale, it is reassuring to report that 16 per cent of the boys who rang about physical abuse said it had been going on for less than a week. That these boys are calling at this early stage is very encouraging. However, 9 per cent of those who called about physical abuse and told ChildLine how long it had been going on for had been experiencing physical abuse for between a month and a year. Another 15 per cent had been experiencing physical abuse for between a year and five years. For these boys it has become a habitual experience.

One 14-year-old caller said: "My dad hit me with a belt as punishment. This happens once or twice a month and leaves marks for days. I try to talk to Mum but she doesn't help or listen."

The abuse may occur not only from parents but also from siblings.

One 13-year-old boy told ChildLine: "I don't want to live at home any more as my mother hits me and my brother beats me up. I think my mother encourages this and treats us differently."

ChildLine can be the only source of help children dare to seek out when cruelty is occurring in the home, at the hands of a family member. They can be terrified of the repercussions of telling someone, and that they will be responsible for a catastrophe befalling themselves and the rest of the family if they ask for help.

For example, one boy told the ChildLine counsellor: "My dad keeps beating me up for no reason. My mum has left and I am scared I will be fostered if I say anything."

The relationship between children experiencing physical abuse and those experiencing physical punishment is also of interest. Research from Northern Ireland (Bunting et al, 2008) highlights that physical abuse rarely occurs in families who do not use physical discipline.

### **3.4 Family relationship problems**

Family relationship problems are the third most common reason for boys calling ChildLine, with 6,016 boys (10 per cent) calling about serious emotional stress within

the family. This is more than double the amount five years ago, when *Boys Allowed* was published. If we accept the fact that girls find it easier to describe their feelings than boys, it is not surprising that girls still call proportionately more about these emotional relationship problems (14 per cent of girls' calls). But it is significant that a far higher number of boys are now prepared to call ChildLine to discuss their distress, without feeling that this is "unmanly".

As well as family relationships being the third biggest reason for boys calling, it is also the most common additional reason for boys calling, with 12 per cent of all boys' calls mentioning family relationship problems as an additional concern. In total, just under a quarter (22 per cent) of boys' calls (13,089 calls) mentioned family relationship problems as either a main or an additional concern. This may show that problems in family relationships may underlie many of the other problems boys call ChildLine about.

Teenage years are notoriously stressful for both young people and their parents, as boundaries are often tested. Rebellion is a part of the process whereby teenagers obtain the independence they will need in adult life. But for these tensions to reach the point where the teenager seeks help from ChildLine, they must have caused significant distress.

Of the boys who described the type of family relationship problem they were experiencing, almost three quarters (71 per cent) described it as conflict with parents. This demonstrates the importance for boys of that relationship.

Other research in the UK has shown that the quality of continuing relationships with parents through adolescence is of major importance for psychological and social wellbeing and for boys there is a particular emphasis on the link with fathers (Flouri and Buchanan 2003; Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman, 2002).

One 13-year-old boy said: "My dad's always yelling at me. He treats me unfairly, forcing me to do chores and not allowing me to do things I want to do."

### **3.5 The facts of life**

Calls about the facts of life include calls about sex, reproduction, contraception and issues around growing up. Five years ago, the facts of life were the fifth biggest reason for boys calling. However, an increase in the number of these calls means it has overtaken sexual abuse to become the fourth most common reason, with 5,362 boys (9 per cent) calling about the facts of life in 2007/08. Facts of life calls are now over three times more frequent than they were five years ago.

It is now also the case that a higher proportion of boys (9 per cent) call about the facts of life than girls (5 per cent). Five years ago, the proportion of boys and girls calling about the facts of life was the same.

Those boys calling about the facts of life were older than average age, with just over a third (36 per cent) being in the 16–18 age group, compared with 27 per cent of boy callers on average. Only 13 per cent were in the age category 5–11, compared with 21 per cent of boy callers on average. As boys develop physically, emotionally and sexually they become more aware of their own sexuality, and ask ChildLine more questions about the facts of life.

There are two serious questions to ask about the significant increase in boys' calls about the facts of life. First, pornography is widely available to children via the internet. Many children obtain their knowledge about sex this way and much of this information is inaccurate. Is this being counter-balanced by effective sex education received by children and young people at school? In the UK, a 2007 survey of over 20,000 young people by the UK Youth Parliament found 40 per cent thought their sex and relationships education in school was either poor or very poor. Hopefully, the introduction of statutory sex education from 2011 will improve this situation.

Second, are young people now experiencing more peer pressure than they did five years ago to engage in sex, and do they therefore feel unsure physically and emotionally how to meet this challenge? Many boys phone ChildLine asking for information about sex, often because they are too embarrassed to get the information from elsewhere.

For instance, one boy aged 16 phoned ChildLine asking: "How do I have sex because my girlfriend wants to have sex? I don't want to ask my friends as they would laugh at me."

Similarly, another boy, who did not give his age, told ChildLine: "My girlfriend sent me a text this evening asking me for sex. I'm worried because it's my first time and I'm worried she won't enjoy it."

Clearly a lack of knowledge by boys about their own personal development can have serious repercussions.

One 16-year-old boy said: "My girlfriend has told me today she's pregnant. I want to talk to ChildLine about contraception and having sex without protection."

### 3.6 Sexual abuse

Sexual abuse is one of the most difficult forms of abuse for a child to disclose to anyone. They feel defiled, ashamed and they are very often threatened by their abuser to force them to keep silent. When the abuse happens, not from a stranger, but from someone who is part of their family circle, or is a friend of the family or a teacher, children feel there can be nobody to turn to for help. They can be concerned if anyone will believe them. Sixty-five per cent of boys who reported sexual abuse described it being perpetrated by a family member and a further 26 per cent by someone known to them.

Nevertheless, sexual abuse is the fifth largest reason for boys calling, with 4,780 calls (8 per cent) in 2007/08. The NSPCC maltreatment study (Cawson, 2000) found that 72 per cent of sexually abused children did not tell anyone about the abuse at the time.

Similarly, BBC's ChildWatch survey in 1986 found many people had kept silent about their experiences of sexual abuse and this was one reason ChildLine was invented and launched. The fact that these boy callers did tell ChildLine about the abuse was a major step forward for the child.

There has been a more than doubling of the number of boys' calls reporting sexual abuse over the last five years. It is promising that, for a quarter of boys who told ChildLine how long the abuse had been going on for, it had been for less than a week.

This is very encouraging as the young person has taken action and rung ChildLine early on. However, unfortunately for just under a quarter (23 per cent) of boys who called, the abuse had been going for between a month and a year.

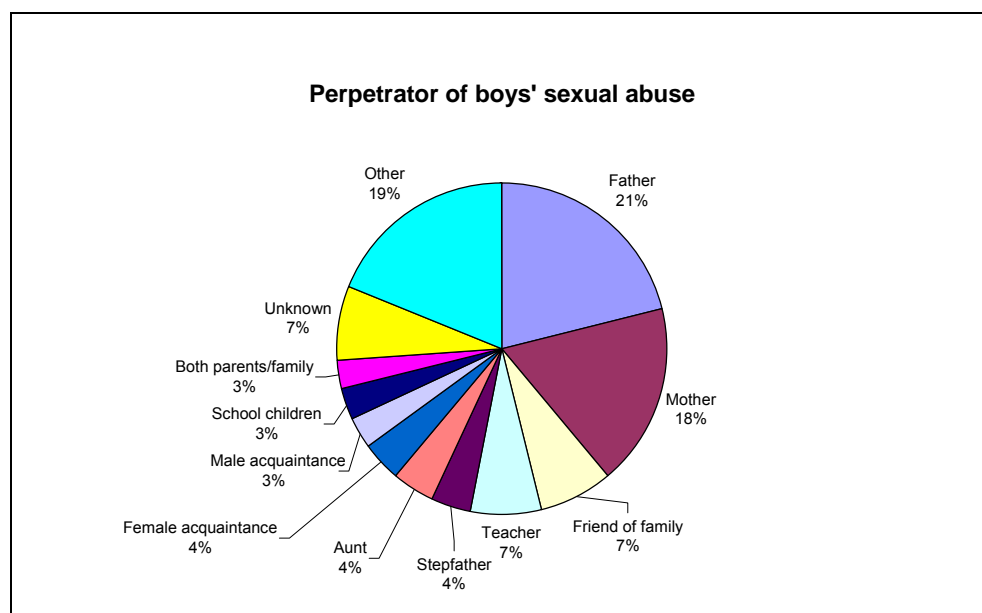
The most common type of sexual abuse that boys call about is being the victim of rape<sup>1</sup>, mentioned by over a third (38 per cent) of boys who called about sexual abuse (1,803 boys) in 2007/08. More than a third of all rapes recorded by the police in England and Wales are committed against children under 16 years of age (Home Office, 2006/07), so this high prevalence of calls related to rape is in line with government statistics.

For many boys, experiences of rape have long term, devastating consequences.

One 17-year-old caller said: “I was sexually abused by my relative when I was a child. I have very vivid memories of being raped. I still feel angry and regret it ever happened.”

The next most common category of sexual abuse boys described (27 per cent) was sexual touching, with 1,306 calls.

Figure 6



All but 319 of the boys who called about sexual abuse identified the perpetrator. Figure 6 shows the percentage for each category of perpetrator, with the most common perpetrator (21 per cent) being their fathers, reported in 1,000 calls.

One 10-year-old boy said: “My dad sexually abuses me and hurts me. I feel it’s my own fault for letting it happen.”

<sup>1</sup> Boys phoning ChildLine may not have described the sexual abuse they experienced as rape, but may have used different language. ChildLine counsellors, however, categorise sexual abuse as rape if it fits into the following category; ‘Vaginal/anal penetration or attempted penetration with fingers, penis, objects and/or oral sex or attempted oral sex’.

Another 12-year-old boy said: “My dad has been sexually abusing me for years. It happens when Mum is asleep. I’m used to my dad hitting me and calling me names, but I don’t like the sexual abuse as it hurts. I’ve been told not to tell anyone.”

Of those boys who called, 863 boys who were sexually abused (18 per cent) described the perpetrator as their mother, who was the second most commonly reported perpetrator of sexual abuse for boys. Only 4 per cent of girls described their mother as the perpetrator of sexual abuse.

It seems that male ChildLine callers were more vulnerable to sexual abuse by their mothers than female ChildLine callers. This fits in with the NSPCC maltreatment study (Cawson, 2000), which found a higher proportion of sexual abuse against males was perpetrated by females than for abuse perpetrated against females. Women as abusers are often ignored in public discussions of sexual abuse. However, NSPCC research (Bunting, 2005) found that females do perpetrate sexual offences and are responsible for up to 5 per cent of all sexual offences committed against children.

The next highest categories for perpetrators of boys’ sexual abuse were friends of the family (7 per cent) and teachers (7 per cent). The NSPCC maltreatment study found that the most common category of abuse was by known people outside the family. The next highest category of perpetrators of sexual abuse against boys who called ChildLine were aunt, female acquaintance and stepfather, with all being mentioned in 4 per cent of boys’ sexual abuse calls.

### 3.7 Sexuality

Unfortunately, many children and young people use the word “gay” as an insult. This makes it extremely difficult for a boy to be confident about his own sexuality, and it is therefore not surprising that sexuality<sup>2</sup> is the sixth largest reason for boys calling ChildLine. In 2007/08, 3,510 calls (6 per cent) were about their sexuality. This is over three times the amount calling five years ago, representing a very large increase in these calls and greater proportionately than the doubling of boys’ calls overall. Boys call proportionately more about sexuality than girls, for whom sexuality makes up only 1 per cent of calls.

As they mature, sexuality clearly becomes an issue for the boys who have called ChildLine in this category. Boy callers about sexuality were older than boys overall, with over half (52 per cent) being in the 16–18 age group compared with only 27 per cent being in this age group overall.

For some boys who recognise that they are gay or bisexual, telling others about their sexual orientation can be a painful experience.

One 16-year-old boy said: “I’ve just come out to my friends as gay. I’ve been treated really badly since. I’m just so depressed and low, sometimes I just feel worthless really.”

Another 15-year-old boy told ChildLine: “I have been hiding the fact that I am gay for ages. I started telling people and I have lost lots of friends.”

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<sup>2</sup> Includes sexual identity, gender identity and sexual problems and worries



Other young people are themselves unsure about their sexual orientation, but don't feel they can discuss this with anyone.

One 14-year-old boy said: "I'm not sure if I'm gay or straight or bisexual. I'm worried about my parents' reactions if I tell them about my sexuality. I'm worried what others might think of me."

One 15-year-old boy told ChildLine: "I fancy boys and I find it hard to deal with these feelings. I feel lonely because I can't tell anyone."

Similarly, a 2006 ChildLine in Scotland study found many young people described themselves as confused about the feelings and attractions that they were experiencing and those they thought were right or normal.

### **3.8 Loneliness, sadness and isolation**

Boys calling about loneliness were older than average, with more boys (33 per cent) being in the 16–18 age band compared with boys overall (27 per cent). This suggests that as they reach adolescence, the 16–18 ages are a particularly difficult time for boys in terms of loneliness, sadness and isolation.

In all, 1,817 boy callers (3 per cent) spoke about loneliness, isolation and the sadness that resulted. This is over five times the amount of calls (334) on this subject than ChildLine received from boys five years ago in 2002/03. Three per cent of girls' calls were also about loneliness, sadness and isolation.

It may well be that this is an encouraging sign, in that more boys now feel that it is permissible to admit to these feelings. However, given that families traditionally provided emotional support, and communities have in the past offered companionship and friendship for children and young people, it is very significant that there has been such an increase in these calls. An isolated child is vulnerable to low self-esteem, and even to suicidal thoughts. The ChildLine casenote on suicide (NSPCC, 2009) gives further information on this issue.

Mind (2009) found men were almost half as likely to talk to friends about their problems as women. This approach by young men to dealing with problems may add to their feelings of loneliness and isolation.

One 15-year-old boy caller, who experienced loneliness, among other problems, said: "I am lonely and have no reason to live. I'm living on my own because my dad was putting pressure on me and I had taken a big overdose. I haven't taken anything since, but I sometimes feel suicidal."

Another 15-year-old boy caller said: "I feel incredibly down and used to self-harm. There is no one I can talk to and I am now very stressed about exams and that my girlfriend has cheated on me."

### **3.9 Depression and mental health**

Of the boys who called ChildLine, 798 calls (1 per cent) were recorded as phoning about depression or mental health. This was not as high as calls from girls, where 2 per cent of callers phoned about depression or mental health.



Research (Chrisman et al, 2006) has also found in adolescents the gender ratio for depression is about two females to one male.

Those boys calling about depression and mental health problems were considerably older than boys calling overall. Over half (54 per cent) of callers were in the 16–18 age band compared with only 27 per cent of boys overall in this age band. This concurs with findings from the Association for Professionals in Services for Adolescents (APSA) (Gilbert, P., 2008), which found that between 1 and 3 per cent of pre-adolescent children may suffer depression, but that between 3 to 8 per cent experience depression by late adolescence.

Of particular concern are looked-after children. Ten per cent of boys who called about being in care also mentioned depression or mental health problems.

For instance, one 16-year-old boy said: “I’m in care. I don’t want to be. I have no support, no one listens to me. I feel depressed.”

In comparison, only 1 per cent of all boys counselled by ChildLine talked about depression or mental health problems as an additional concern. Other research has also established high rates of mental health needs in looked-after children (Stanley and Riordan, 2005).

Depression and mental health problems can be linked to other serious problems and outcomes. ChildLine data shows that of the boys calling about depression and mental health problems, 7 per cent mentioned self-harm and 8 per cent mentioned suicide as secondary concerns.

APSA (Gilbert, P., 2008) found similar links, with depression greatly increasing the risk of suicide possibly by as much as a thirty fold increase in adolescence. These figures show the importance of boys accessing help when experiencing depression and mental health problems.

A 14-year-old boy experiencing both depression and self-harm said: “I am depressed and angry because my parents are splitting up. I take out my anger on my younger brother and sister and I have also self-harmed.”

Feelings of depression can also be particularly prominent when bereavement has been experienced. In these circumstances, the adults suffering grief may well be unaware of the children’s reactions, and the children in their turn may wish to protect a vulnerable bereaved parent.

Difficult as it is for grieving parents, it is important to be aware of the suffering children may be struggling to express. One 17-year-old boy said: “I feel like not carrying on and giving up. My father died recently and I have arguments with my mother. I don’t feel myself recently. I have not been eating.”

There is no question that talking and expressing feelings of depression can alleviate the problem. Once again, this is a role that families have traditionally played. But for looked-after children, and for isolated families, it may well be that professional counselling is needed to fill the gap. It is clear that ChildLine is already providing a listening ear for many of these children, and as such, may well be saving lives.

### 3.10 Offending and the caller's own anger

In 2007/08, there were 238 boys' calls about offending<sup>3</sup> and 342 calls about behavioural problems, including anger management and controlling their temper.

As stated previously in this casenote, when boys have difficult experiences in their lives they find it less easy to talk about their problems and express their emotions than compared to girls. This can mean the difficult emotions are bottled up, causing more stress and anxiety. When these feelings are not addressed it can result in other coping tactics, such as violence, offending and expressions of anger.

In addition, some may be living in families where they regularly experience violence, or where crime is a way of life. Research has indicated that where violence is a common occurrence in the home or wider community, such behaviour becomes normalised and this makes it far more likely that young people will adopt it (Day et al, 2007).

Boys can perceive this behaviour as conforming to masculine ideals of strength and toughness. However, callers to ChildLine also recognise the negative consequences for the boys themselves and for those around them. It is also important to recognise that this behaviour is not entirely gender specific. Many boys who experience difficult emotions do not respond in this way and many girls can also respond to their distress by becoming angry or aggressive.

One 18-year-old male caller said: "I am worried I will hurt someone. I have beaten people up and stolen things before, but when stressed and angry I feel like doing it again."

A 17-year-old boy said: "I have bad relationships with all of my family. I also have problems with money and work, which has meant I've started stealing."

Another boy caller aged 16 for whom this is evident said: "I get violent and can't control my temper – like my dad."

### 3.11 Alcohol and drug abuse

When alcohol or drugs are mentioned by callers, the majority talk about their concerns about abuse, particularly alcohol abuse, by their parents. Substance abuse by parents or significant others is dealt with in more detail in section 3.12 of this casenote.

Those boys who called ChildLine and described having problems with drink or drugs themselves often had these problems combined, and often in combination with other problems.

One 14-year-old boy said: "I am involved with drugs and am feeling suicidal. I feel trapped and that everything has got on top of me."

Another 16-year-old boy told ChildLine: "My parents are divorced and I have a drink problem. I don't get on with my mum. I've been moving backward and forward living with both parents and also friends."

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<sup>3</sup> This includes problems or concerns about offending or consequences of offending. Examples include stealing, dealing, theft of cars and shoplifting.

Boys calling about alcohol and drugs are older than boys calling on average. A higher proportion are in the 16–18 age group (46 per cent for alcohol and 34 per cent for drugs) than the 27 per cent for boys overall.

For those who gave the duration of the problem, 29 per cent of boys who called about alcohol and 25 per cent of boys who called about drugs, the problem had been going on for between one to five years. This suggests that the problem has become relatively ingrained before they call ChildLine.

For some of these boys, heavy drinking can be a serious problem with life-threatening repercussions.

For instance, one 16-year-old boy said: “I have been speaking to a counsellor and feel like I am changing every day. I have been drinking a lot. I think I am addicted to alcohol and plan to kill myself.”

### 3.12 Runaways and homelessness

In 2007/08, 1,002 calls (2 per cent) from boys were about being homeless. This was double the figure five years ago. In addition, in 2007/08, 697 (1 per cent) of calls were by boys who had run away.

More than half the homeless boys who rang (55 per cent) talked about family relationship problems. It was also the case that over half (52 per cent) of boys who called about running away mentioned family relationship problems. Clearly, serious family problems put this cohort of young people at serious risk.

The Children’s Society (Rees and Lee, 2005) found in their study of young people running away in England that their accounts of the reasons for running away focus primarily on problems they are experiencing at home, including poor family relationships, conflict and maltreatment.

On average, the homeless boys were older than the runaways, with more of the runaways being in the 12–15 age group. On the other hand, boys who said they were homeless were more often in the 16–18 age group category than average.

It is reassuring that of the boys who said how long they had been experiencing the problems, almost half (46 per cent) of both homeless and runaway boy callers said they had rung ChildLine within a week. Of the boys for whom these problems had been going for longer, some had been homeless or runaway on several occasions and others had stayed temporarily at friends or relatives or slept rough for a period of time.

In many of these cases, ChildLine is literally a lifeline. Many boys phone ChildLine because they have run away from home or been thrown out and have nowhere to go. Phoning ChildLine is a last resort.

One 15-year-old boy said: “I have been hit by my mum for as long as I can remember, and it’s getting more violent. I left home and am not going back. I have no friends or family I can stay with tonight and am on the streets.”

Another 16-year-old told ChildLine: “My mum has thrown me out. I am hungry, haven’t eaten and want to kill myself as I am missing my family.”

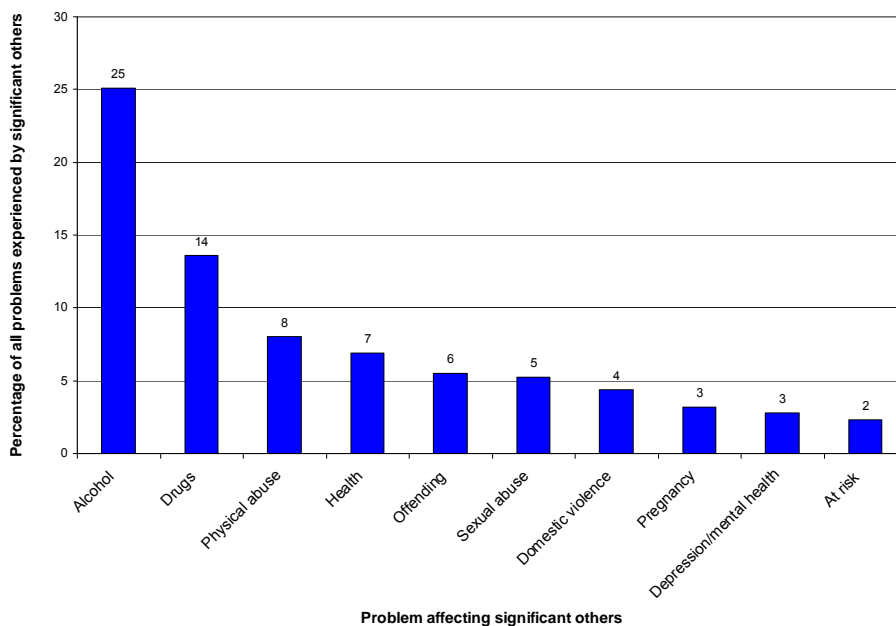
Some boys phone ChildLine because they are thinking of running away. This is important as speaking to ChildLine could be the first step in resolving the problem and avoiding having to run away. In this instance, ChildLine can have a tangible support role.

An example comes from a 13-year-old boy who said: "I don't want to live at home any more as my mum slaps me and treats me differently to my brother who also beats me up. I am going to run away."

Another boy who did not give his age told ChildLine: "I'm not happy at home. I argue with my mum, she's been pushing me around and threatening me. I want to run away." ChildLine counsellors are able to offer other options, and even suggest mediating with the boys' parents. ChildLine also reminds the child that if things get tough again, they should ring back.

### 3.13 Significant others in boys' lives

Figure 7



Boys who called ChildLine in 2007/08 did not just describe their own problems. In 4,343 calls, boys mentioned others in their lives who were experiencing problems. The significant people in their lives included parents, siblings, wider family and friends. Most of these boys' concerns about others were highlighted in terms of the impact on their own lives.

Alcohol and drug abuse came top of the list. The issue of problems with alcohol was most commonly reported by boys as being experienced by significant people in their lives, mentioned in a quarter (25 per cent) of the problems experienced. Drugs were mentioned in 14 per cent of the calls.

This is in line with a study by ChildLine Scotland and the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (2005), which investigated children's concerns about the health and wellbeing of their parents and significant others based on four years of ChildLine Scotland data (9,363 caller records).

It also found alcohol misuse was by far children's most common health concern about their parents, accounting for 28 per cent of calls. They also found that substance abuse by parents or significant others caused significant problems for the callers, such as neglect, physical abuse, loss of parental affection and care, and isolation from friends, as home life was so unpredictable and sometimes violent.

One boy, who did not give his age, said: "I have problems at home, which make me feel unwelcome and uncomfortable to be there. My mum takes drugs and is an alcoholic. She regularly abuses me both physically and verbally."

One 11-year-old boy told ChildLine: "I am being hit by my mum, who drinks a lot. She is always shouting at me, even if I haven't done anything wrong."

As shown in figure 7, other prominent issues experienced by significant others in the boys' lives were physical abuse, health, offending, sexual abuse, domestic violence, pregnancy, and depression and mental health problems. This shows how boys are not just dealing with their own problems, but with a multitude of problems affecting important people in their lives. This can in turn affect their own wellbeing.

Most of these young people turn to ChildLine precisely because they feel protective about the adults in their life, and don't want to be responsible for bringing destructive intervention into the home. For these boys, the confidentiality of a call to ChildLine releases them and enables them to ask for help.

### 3.14 The role of ChildLine

ChildLine is an opportunity for young people to talk about the problems they are experiencing, safely and confidentially. Counsellors take them seriously and work with them in partnership, respecting the fact that the child has made the courageous decision to call. Of the boys who mentioned if they had told somebody before, 46 per cent (4,861 boys) said they had told nobody before, and many of the others had only told a school friend (another child). This really emphasises the central importance of ChildLine as a resource for boys.

A much smaller proportion of girls, only 33 per cent, had told nobody other than ChildLine (although if they had told someone, many of them had only confided in another child). Since it seems girls are more willing to tell someone and ask for support, it is all the more vital that ChildLine reaches out to boys who need help, as there is a higher chance that boys do not feel able to confide in anyone else.

Featherstone and Evans (2004) describe how half of children and young people worry about having no one with whom to discuss their worries. They also said that a quarter of children and young people say they would not talk to their parents about their worries because they think they would be told off or made to feel stupid. Additionally, nearly two out of five children and young people would not tell their friends their worries because they think they would be laughed at. Once again this emphasises the importance of the service ChildLine offers.

Figure 8

Age given by boys in 2007/08	Percentage of boys (who described if they had told someone) who had told no one
11 and under	39%
12–15	46%
16–18	53%

As the age given by those boys who call increases, the percentage who had told no one before calling ChildLine also increases. This suggests boys are sharing their problems less as they grow older.

Of the boys who reported having told someone else, 26 per cent had told a teacher and 21 per cent told a friend. Many calls to ChildLine come from young people who have been on the receiving end of confidences that have concerned them.

ChildLine in Partnerships (CHIPS) trains young people to listen and act as mentors to each other. One important distinction made by CHIPS is between problems that another child can adequately deal with and problems, such as abuse, which are serious enough to warrant disclosing to an adult, eg by phoning ChildLine. Additionally, 20 per cent told their mother but only 6 per cent told their father, a statistic that will be of concern for fathers.

There is clearly a mix of family, professionals and friends that young boys are telling about their problems. Featherstone and Evans (2004) describe the most likely confidantes for young people as friends, mothers and fathers. They also describe teachers as the first adult non-relation seen as a potential source of support for children.

Ideally, every child would have a trusted adult to whom they could turn, and in whom they can confide. Since this is not the case, ChildLine acts not simply as a listening ear, but the means whereby children and young people can find support, consider positive options, and increase their confidence and self-esteem.

Often ChildLine acts as a link between young people and their own families when relationships are in danger of breaking down. By offering hope in situations that children perceive as being hopeless, ChildLine becomes a lifeline for many children.

## 4. ChildLine counsellors' views

### 4.1 Encouraging boys to open up

The reluctance in many boys to reveal their feelings, especially if they fear it is unmanly to ask for help with personal problems, can make it hard at first for ChildLine counsellors to develop a rapport with boys who call. One counsellor said that sometimes "boys tend to start the call aggressively and with bravado". Because of this it may "take a lot to tease information out so you have to really work hard at it to get them to talk about their problems".

Another counsellor said: “You have to try to gain a bit of trust from them and try and connect at some level before they really open up.”

The methods used by counsellors to encourage boys to open up were discussed. One counsellor said: “Sometimes it’s just being really patient with them, so they know there is someone there.” Another counsellor echoed this, saying: “It has to be teased out of them what the problem is.”

Gradually boys start to open up. A counsellor commented: “Usually around the middle of the conversation they sort of come out with what’s really been going on and what they have really called for.” Another said: “I think they’re surprised that someone’s there and someone is listening to them.”

#### **4.2 Talking about emotions**

Many counsellors agreed that “boys feel that it is hard to talk about their emotions.” One elaborated that: “Boys tend not to have the range of language skills particularly when talking about their emotions.” Another said: “They don’t respond to questions about feelings because the vocabulary isn’t there, because it’s something they’ve never had to do.”

In contrast, “girls will be able to tell you whether they are sad or depressed. They are able to differentiate between the two, whereas when you’re talking to boys you don’t get the naming of the emotions in the same way.”

#### **4.3 Concepts of masculinity**

Counsellors suggested that this resistance in discussing emotions was linked to notions of masculinity. One commented: “For boys, there is that thing that men don’t share their emotions”, while another said: “...they see it as a weakness” and “...there is still the stigma that boys don’t cry.”

Another counsellor said: “A lot is heaped on boys. You have to be this type of man. You have to be a big hard tough guy.” This masculine sense that a boy must be able to deal with problems by himself was elaborated by another counsellor who described “boys who have been ashamed that they are upset and have not been able to cope with their problems”. One boy “...could not understand why he could not sort out all his family problems and was actually ashamed of this”. This idea was reiterated by another counsellor, who said: “They tend to see it as their fault.”

Looking to the future, one counsellor commented: “I just think that boys need to learn that it is okay to talk. It is okay to cry. It is okay to be upset.”

In *Boys Allowed*, similar notions of a masculine man were described. The publication commented that this stereotype was reinforced by individuals and society around them.

#### **4.4 The effects of peer groups**

Counsellors described the effects of peer groups on boys, with one commenting: “I think they’re afraid of their mates finding out and making fun of them.” This was



contrasted with girls who were described as “more inclined to tell their friends their problems and to talk them through.” Another counsellor described how boys thought: “It can only be me that is affected by this, because nobody else says anything.”

Young people’s use of ChildLine is affected by these peer relations. As one counsellor said: “I have had quite a lot of conversations with girls about how their friends have used ChildLine and they have passed on numbers, whereas I have never had that from a boy, saying ‘my friends use ChildLine’.”

#### 4.5 Phoning at a later stage

Counsellors suggested that this masculine notion of coping affected the time when boys choose to call, with one saying: “I think that boys ring up when it is more serious rather than just ring up and talk about it.” Another said: “They will try and handle their own problems rather than asking for help” and “When boys call it is the absolute last resort, they have tried absolutely everything.”

It was suggested that boys have the feeling that “They have to cope and they finally come to us when they can’t cope any more.” Unfortunately, this meant that “...quite often it has gone on a lot further than it needs”. One counsellor said: “They ignore a trivial problem until it becomes a major problem.” Another said that the problem “gets to a point where they just don’t know which way to turn and need help”.

This was contrasted to girls, with a counsellor commenting: “...very often they give us a call at the first sign of trouble”. Another counsellor described how “girls would consider ChildLine more as a friend. They would think ‘I will just ring ChildLine and talk to them’.”

The publication *Boys Allowed* also described that rules of masculinity prevented boys calling ChildLine until their problems were so severe that they became desperate or simply could not cope.

#### 4.6 Boys wanting solutions to problems

Counsellors said that when they do call, boys often had different attitudes towards ChildLine than girls. Girls tended to discuss their feelings and saw this as valuable in itself. Boys, on the other hand, wanted a concrete solution to their problems and did not see the benefits of talking about them. “Men are the fixers, they want to fix things, and they don’t want to work through things.” Another described the attitude of boys as “I want the answer now, I want you to resolve it, and I want it finished now.”

#### 4.7 ChildLine Online service – online instant messaging

As well as providing telephone counselling, ChildLine is developing one-to-one internet counselling via a new ChildLine Online service. Young people will be able to type in their concerns and receive instant typed responses from counsellors. The counsellors who will be using this service described the benefits they see this service as having for boys: “It is easier to write it for a boy than to say it. It will be particularly useful for boys who have difficulty in actually talking.”

It was also noted that "...the pace can be much slower online." In terms of counselling, it was considered that this "is actually good for some young people that it can be slower".

For other counsellors, the service could be a stepping stone for boys to the telephone counselling service "and give them confidence to talk to a counsellor after they've talked online for a bit – a natural progression".

#### **4.8 Texting and mobile phones service**

Counsellors thought that the increasing use of mobile phones was encouraging young people to call ChildLine. It is safer in terms of confidentiality and easier, in that they can choose the time and the place. One counsellor said: "I think children have a lot more access to mobile phones." In ChildLine's earliest years, children had to make use of a public phone box, or their parents' landline, both of which meant that the call could be interrupted or overheard.

Counsellors also talked positively about the advantages for boys of the ChildLine text counselling service, scheduled to be introduced in 2010. Boys may be encouraged because they might think "...if I just do this by text, I'll get what I need very quickly and I can dip in and out of it." The element of control in texting was seen as important.

#### **4.9 The change in boys' attitudes**

Despite the masculine notions described by counsellors, some did believe they were beginning to see signs of change in a number of boys' attitudes. One said: "Boys are more aware now that the saying 'boys don't cry' doesn't stand, that boys' feelings should be recognised and addressed." Others described a change in some boys' attitudes to calling ChildLine, saying "some boys are now beginning to realise that they don't have to be macho and it's okay and that I can call" and "it's okay if you need support and it's a healthy way to be". For a number of boys "...there's a change in mindset that it's okay to call – it's really cool now." Another counsellor said: "Boys are starting to open up now and say that it is ok to do that. For such a long time it hasn't been okay."

The changes are doubtless a reflection of changing attitudes in society as a whole, and they may also be the result of ChildLine's active promotion of the service to boys. Certainly it is encouraging that boys' calls have more than doubled in the past five years although there are still two girl callers for every one boy.

#### **4.10 Positive results for boys**

The counsellors talked about the positive results for boys of speaking to ChildLine. One counsellor described how "...maybe it is the first time they have spoken to someone about the issue or the problem". Others talked of the progress that could be made over a phone call. One said: "You can hear and feel contentment ... in their voice. They're calm, they're opening up more."

Another counsellor described it as "a sense of relief" for the boys, while another suggested that "sometimes they can sort themselves out just through talking to us".

#### 4.11 Young people's views on concepts of masculinity

A group of young people were also asked about their views on boys calling ChildLine. They echoed counsellors' views, that male pride could stop boys from calling. They described how it could make boys "feel weak asking for help". They also referred to boys' fear of people knowing they wanted help and "laughing at you".

Young people also expressed the view that girls tend to share feelings, while boys do this less, although some of the young people thought that this was slowly changing.

### 5. Conclusions

- The number of boys counselled each year has more than doubled in the last five years, with 58,311 boys counselled by ChildLine in 2007/08. This is a very significant increase.
- Five years ago, when *Boys Allowed* was published in 2002/03 there were four girls counselled for every boy. There are now only two girls counselled for every boy. This is a very important change.
- Sexual abuse happens to boys. In 2007/08, 1,803 boys rang ChildLine to report rape. Many boys had been sexually abused by their fathers, although a significant minority, 863 reported having been sexually abused by their mothers.
- Bullying was still the single biggest reason for boys calling ChildLine in 2007/08, making up 22 per cent of boys' calls (12,568 calls).
- Calls about sexuality, the facts of life, and loneliness and isolation have particularly increased for boys. This shows increasingly boys are phoning ChildLine when they have concerns about these personal issues, and feel able to talk about them.
- Family relationships are key to boys' welfare, both in themselves and in the links they have to other problems raised. Twenty-two per cent of boys mentioned family relationship problems as either a main or an additional concern. There were particular links to boys who had run away or were homeless, where over half talked about family relationship problems as an additional concern.
- Boys' problems change with their age. They use ChildLine to help with different issues at different stages in their life. Younger boys call more about physical abuse and bullying. While older boys call more about sexual problems, loneliness, depression and mental health problems, and alcohol and drug abuse.
- Boys are far less ready to share their problems with anyone else before ringing ChildLine. Since some of these problems are potentially life-threatening, such as depression, homelessness, or sexual abuse, it is crucial that ChildLine is available and accessible.
- With the large increase in boys' calls it is clear that ChildLine is becoming more and more relevant to boys today. ChildLine is providing a service that is being used by a large number of boys for a range of boys' current concerns. Part of this increase in the

number of calls may be attributed to awareness-raising activities aimed at boys and young men.

- Boys tend to speak about their emotions to ChildLine less than girls. This was described as being linked to notions of masculinity and boys' belief that they should be able to cope by themselves. However, there are positive indicators that this is changing.
- The availability of new media technologies and the ChildLine Online service promise to make ChildLine even more relevant to boys. Instant online counselling and information and support via text messages should provide more avenues for boys to express themselves.

## 6. Recommendations

"I have no support. No one listens to me." (Boy, aged 16)

"Men's mental distress is a hidden problem. An examination of the evidence suggests that gender and the way we are socialised into different cultural norms could be having a big impact on the way men interact with mental health services. The image of the tough, resilient male who hides emotion is deeply ingrained in society and may affect men's help-seeking behaviour."

(*Men and mental health* - MIND, May 2009)

The MIND report *Men and Mental Health* echoes many of the findings of this casenote. They reflect the need for differentiation in how services are advertised and delivered. It is also important that the issues presented in this casenote are considered when developing and implementing policy and practice guidance in all countries of the UK. The recommendations that follow are therefore relevant across the UK:

### 6.1 Delivering services

- 6.1.1** There is a need for alternative and innovative ways to engage with boys and their problems. For example, a street dance group may provide opportunities for some boys who otherwise feel too isolated and lonely to confide in anyone. Boys also appear more willing to use new technologies. There is a need for service providers, including ChildLine, to continue to explore a range of methods for children to access support and advice services, such as SMS (texting), the internet and social networking sites.
- 6.1.2** All services must consider whether they need to differentiate the way they provide support/services to boys and young men from those provided for girls and young women. Organisations should collectively engage with boys and young men to identify how services can be delivered in ways that provide effective support.
- 6.1.3** It is clear that society/culture has changed or is changing, but it is still important that there continues to be a clear message from friends, peers, family media

and society that it is legitimate for boys and men to seek help both before and at a point of crisis.

## 6.2 Teaching and learning

**6.2.1** Training and course providers should consider how theories and practical issues related to gender are addressed in courses for professionals working across children's services, in health, education, social care, sport, the police, youth services and early years.

The number of calls about bullying, the facts of life and sexuality underline the need for Personal Development/Personal Social and Health Education/Health and Wellbeing curricula to ensure that these important issues are delivered in a manner that is accessible and engaging both for boys and for girls. The analysis shows different issues are raised at different ages, for example primary school-aged boys are more likely to raise the issue of bullying; this needs to be borne in mind when considering what issues are raised at different times during children's school careers.

**6.2.2** The various strategies across the UK on reducing teenage pregnancy should consider how boys' understanding of the facts of life and experience of family relationships should inform current and future plans to reduce teenage pregnancy.

**6.2.3** Adequate and accessible provision of information about ChildLine and the appointment of independent schools counsellors. ChildLine offers a crucial, confidential anti-bullying service, which children understand and use. Posters showing ChildLine's number, 0800 1111, should always be on display. School counselling services should also be provided throughout the UK to give children and young people access to an adult who can help them if they are experiencing or witnessing bullying. Such services, both the confidential helpline and face-to-face support, give children an opportunity to talk to someone before problems get out of hand and counsellors can support children in developing the tools to help themselves and build their resilience and self-esteem

**6.2.4** A safe school environment. The most effective anti-bullying initiatives are those that form part of a whole school strategy. Alongside devising and implementing anti-bullying policies, all members of the school community, including teachers, support staff, pupils, parents and governors, should be involved in creating and maintaining a safe environment.

## 6.3 Abuse

**6.3.1** The nature and frequency of boys' calls about physical abuse demonstrate that a large number of boys calling ChildLine are experiencing regular, and often harsh, physical punishment and abuse. This underlines the importance of reforming the law to give children equal protection under the law on assault, and would send a clear message to parents and other carers that it is never acceptable to hit a child. Reform should be accompanied by widespread support and advice for mothers and fathers on positive parenting methods.

- 6.3.2** Local safeguarding children boards (LSCBs) and area child protection committees (ACPCs) (Northern Ireland) should review their policies and practice on female offending in guidance, given that the prevalence of reporting of this type of abuse by boys and other research suggests that 5 per cent of sexual offences are committed by females.

## **6.4 Loneliness**

- 6.4.1** Families need to remind themselves that feelings of loneliness and isolation can be life-threatening (see the ChildLine casenote on suicide for further information). The findings reinforce two important points: the need for children to be able to access a network of support from family and friends; and the need for the significant adults in their lives to take time to build the relationships that will allow a child or young person to talk to them about their worries.

We also know that children may prefer not to tell someone they know because they do not want to burden them. In that context, services like helplines, drop-in centres, and school counselling provide an important alternative source of support for children and young people.

## **6.5 Advice for parents and carers**

- 6.5.1** Parents and carers should be aware of the gender-specific experiences of boys and the pressures on them. Parents and carers should encourage boys to seek support from appropriate services and helplines like ChildLine when needed.

We know good relationships between fathers and sons are an important source of support for boys. It is important therefore for fathers to take time to be with their sons and to demonstrate how emotions and feelings can be handled.

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## Appendix 1

### Methodology

#### ChildLine recording process

When a child or young person talks to ChildLine, the counsellor makes a note of the age and gender of the caller, the main reason that the caller gives for ringing (eg the caller is being bullied) and, where applicable, who the person responsible for or involved in the problem is. Counsellors have no independent way of verifying the age of callers. Therefore, the ages used in this casenote are based on the ages given by the callers themselves.

During the course of a call, counsellors also note down any additional problems that are discussed subsequently. This information is later transferred onto a database and categorised according to the nature of the problem/s.

#### Confidentiality

In the majority of cases, the aforementioned is the only information that is recorded about callers. However, if the counsellor has concerns about the safety of the caller, feels that the caller may be at serious risk of harm and/or the counsellor thinks that it is likely that the caller will ring ChildLine back, then more detailed information is recorded and a summary of the discussion that takes place is inputted into the database.

Children and young people choose to talk to ChildLine because they know they will receive a confidential service and that what they say will not go any further unless they wish. ChildLine will always make an informed judgement as to whether the child can give realistic consent to act on his/her behalf. On rare occasions, this contract of confidentiality can be broken if the child is assessed to be in a life-threatening situation. The majority of children do not identify their whereabouts and maintain their own anonymity.

#### Case records and thematic analysis using NVivo

The information recorded by the ChildLine counsellors about the call they receive is called a case record. If the counsellor thinks that it is likely that the caller will ring ChildLine back, then more detailed information and a summary of the discussion that takes place is also recorded.

In total, 1,000 boys' case records from 2007/08 were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis. Qualitative software package NVivo was used to assist this analysis.

#### Focus groups

In addition to the thematic analysis, four focus groups across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales with a total of 25 counsellors were conducted in order to supplement the data with their unique professional insights into issues faced by boy callers.

In addition to these, a consultation was undertaken with young people from NSPCC's participation group "The Way Forward".

#### Use of quotes

Where direct quotes from children and young people have been used in this casenote, identifying details have been changed to protect the identities of callers.

## **Diversity**

The ethnicity of the caller is not specifically requested, and is only recorded if it is volunteered by the caller. Therefore, it is not possible to analyse the different calls in terms of ethnicity of the caller at this stage.

The development of the new ChildLine Online service will offer a range of opportunities for disabled children and young people to use the service. The new technology caters for a range of disabilities, ensuring greater accessibility. The development of the ChildLine Online service has ensured the needs of disabled users are considered from the start, both in terms of content and function.

## About the information in this casenote

The findings in this casenote are based on detailed analysis of calls to ChildLine from April 2007 to March 2008. Children and young people often talk to ChildLine because they know they will receive a confidential service and that what they say will not go any further unless they wish. ChildLine will always make an informed judgement as to whether the child can give realistic consent to act on his/her behalf. On rare occasions this contract of confidentiality can be broken if the child is assessed to be in a life-threatening situation. The majority of children do not identify their whereabouts and maintain their own anonymity.

The counsellor will listen and take the child or young person seriously when they call. ChildLine will help the child to talk through their concerns, exploring what might make a difference, and whether there are supportive adults in their lives. Sometimes the child will practise what they would say to increase their confidence in speaking to such an adult. The counsellor will also give the child information on how other agencies can help. If the child wants ChildLine to make contact on their behalf, or this is assessed as necessary, ChildLine will mediate, advocate or refer the child to a relevant agency or person, such as social services, the police, the ambulance service, or a parent or teacher.

ChildLine's data is not comprehensive, as the main priority for helpline counsellors is to provide comfort, advice and protection to the caller, not to gather demographic or other information for research purposes.

The content of ChildLine counselling conversations is captured through written records. Every time a counsellor speaks to a young person, the counsellor notes the main reason the child called, any other concerns raised, and 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.

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 continues to use its own name, and the 0800 1111 phone number remains unchanged. Volunteer counsellors continue to provide a free 24-hour service for any child or young person with a problem.

For more information, please contact NSPCC Safeguarding Information and Library Services on: 020 7825 2775 or email: [info@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:info@nspcc.org.uk) or contact the NSPCC Media Team on: 020 7825 2500, email [media@childline.org.uk](mailto:media@childline.org.uk) or visit: [www.nspcc.org.uk/casenotes](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/casenotes)

All names and potentially identifying details have been changed to protect the identity of callers.

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ChildLine is a service provided by the NSPCC. In Scotland the ChildLine service is delivered by CHILDREN 1<sup>st</sup> on behalf of the NSPCC.

NSPCC registered charity numbers 216401 and SC037717. CHILDREN 1<sup>st</sup>  
Scottish registered charity number SC016092.

