

A ChildLine Information Sheet

Child abuse

"I was nine years old when it started. Sexual abuse and stuff like that. After it stopped, I still felt awful. I couldn't bear it and just wanted to die. I took a whole bottle of tablets and ended up in hospital.

"Then I saw a poster about ChildLine, and decided to call. When I went into the phone box I was so scared. I felt so bad about telling on him. The counsellor had this gentle voice, so I started telling her. I went on calling ChildLine for a year after it all came out. Now I'm nearly 20. I don't talk about it much any more, but I'd like to nominate my ChildLine counsellor for an award." Sara, 19

Every child has the right to grow up in a caring and safe environment. Fortunately most children and young people do. They receive the love and care they need to develop into healthy, happy adults.

But not all.

Some children are not loved by their families. Others live in families that are having a really difficult time and cannot cope with their problems. Some children are deliberately neglected or hurt by the adults around them.

What is child abuse?

Abuse can take different forms and a child may suffer from more than one form at a time. These are:

- sexual abuse
- physical abuse
- emotional abuse
- neglect.

1. SEXUAL ABUSE

"I thought for a long time that what was happening was OK because Dad said that it was a game people played with their sons – a secret game that only men knew about." Adrian, 15

Sexual abuse is when a child takes part in sexual activities – whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. These activities can include being forced or lured to have sex; touching or being touched in a way that makes a child uncomfortable; or encouraging children to behave in sexual ways that other children of their age would not do. Abuse also includes children looking at or producing sexual images, known as pornography.

2. PHYSICAL ABUSE

"Yesterday I spent my dinner money on a McDonald's with my friends. When my mum found out she went mad. She called me a thief and punched me until my nose bled. It felt like she wanted to kill me. Mum and Dad both beat me with anything they can find – shoes, plates and coat hangers." Tracey, 10

Physical abuse is when a child is hurt by being smacked, hit, kicked, or shaken; beaten by hand, with a belt or other objects; or physically abused in other ways. Children have told ChildLine of hiding bruises from teachers and friends, being taken to the hospital with broken bones, and of suffering cuts, burns and other injuries.

3. EMOTIONAL ABUSE

"Dad shouts at me a lot. I hate it when he gets angry. It makes me feel shaky and awful inside. I want to tell my dad how I feel, but I'm scared he won't listen to me."
Chris, 8

Emotional abuse is when children do not feel loved or valued because they are constantly told off, put down or told they are no good at anything. Some children tell ChildLine's counsellors that they are criticised, shouted and sworn at, persistently blamed for things they have no control over, or told that other people – sometimes brothers or sisters – are better than they are. When children are emotionally abused, they are turned away when they need love or support, and are frequently rejected or ignored by those who are meant to look after them.

4. NEGLECT

"My mum and dad are alcoholics. I've run away a few times and they always say they worry about me, but they never do anything about it. They spend all the money on drink. There's no soap in the house and all my clothes are too small. All the kids in my class call me names and make fun of me. It hurts."
Paul, 14

Neglect is when children are denied the essentials in life they need to grow up and become healthy, well cared for adults. Neglected children are forced to get by without proper food, housing, medical care or clothing. They can miss going to school and not being able to mix with their friends and peers. Also they may not be properly protected by their parents or carers from physical or mental harm. Neglected children can be hungry, cold, lonely and sick.

How many children are abused?

It is impossible to know how many children are abused. ChildLine is for any child with any problem, but the largest number of calls we receive are about abuse.

Every year, ChildLine receives tens of thousands of calls from children who are frightened, shocked and in terrible distress because of the abuse they have suffered. Each call is an act of courage that will change a child's life. In 2001/02, ChildLine counselled over 112,000 children about all kinds of problems and concerns:

- 21,000 of children counselled (20 per cent) rang about physical or sexual abuse, sometimes both
- over 12,400 of those children were counselled about physical abuse
- over 8,400 of those children were counselled about sexual abuse

ChildLine has been at the forefront of changing public awareness in the UK about child sexual abuse. Our approach to children calling about abuse remains the same today as when we launched. The helpline counsellors aim to support children and young people with information, with choices and with emotional support – to build their confidence, so that they realise they are not to blame and that they have the right to be safe.

My dad hits me all the time. What am I doing wrong?

You are doing nothing wrong. It is not your fault if you are abused – physically, sexually or emotionally – or if you are neglected. All children are naughty or get into trouble sometimes, but that does not give adults the right to abuse them. It is the abuser who is wrong.

If children or young people are sexually abused, their bodies can sometimes respond in ways that can make them feel ashamed. This is not their fault. It is the fault of the abuser.

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All children have a right to be safe. They should not have to keep secrets and should not have to deal with abuse on their own.

If you are being abused or neglected – or believe you are at risk of being abused – you must think of someone you trust, like a parent, teacher, relative or friend, and tell them. You have a right to be believed. If the first person you tell doesn't believe you or won't help, then you should find someone else to talk to or phone ChildLine. You have a right to be helped.

Every week ChildLine counsellors talk to children who are being threatened, assaulted and raped. Their experiences are so acutely degrading – and frightening – that just for children to talk about them is difficult. Without ChildLine many children would simply be too afraid to get help. Most children calling about abuse are between 13 and 15 years old.

ChildLine offers something completely unique to thousands of children and young people who feel they have nowhere to turn. They know they will be listened to. This simple fact means that children know they can get help and so are asking for help earlier by calling ChildLine.

ChildLine has played a vital role in helping ensure that children are far more likely to be believed when they disclose abuse. Increasingly children themselves realise they have the right to be safe.

I've been touched in a way that makes me uncomfortable. Am I being abused?

Abuse can take many forms. It can also mean different things to different children. Some children, especially younger ones, may be abused without knowing that what is happening to them is wrong.

A child or young person may experience one form of abuse, like emotional abuse. Alternatively they may suffer more than one form of abuse at a time. For example, a young person may be sexually and emotionally abused.

Abuse can happen once or it can occur many times. Either way, the abused person needs to seek help.

Who abuses children?

Many people, including children, believe that they are most likely to be hurt or abused by a stranger. This is not true. 'stranger danger' is a real concern, but more than half the children who call ChildLine about sexual abuse are being abused by someone in their own family. Nearly always, the abuser is someone known to the child.

Nine out of ten children who phone ChildLine about sexual abuse say they are abused by men. ChildLine also hears from children who are abused by other young people. Women are as likely as men to abuse children physically or emotionally or to neglect them.

Abusers can be rich or poor, black or white, have any job or be unemployed. They include parents, step-parents, uncles, aunts, grandparents, teachers, family friends, brothers and sisters.

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What happens when an abused child calls ChildLine?

“A lot of children wouldn’t want to talk to you face to face – they don’t want to have to deal with you, your expressions, or you looking at them. They’ve been threatened and intimidated and told that no one will ever believe them. It means going to a counsellor and having to say, “I’ve been abused” feels impossible – it’s easier on the phone. Children have anonymity, privacy and confidentiality. They can end the call when they like.”

ChildLine counsellor

When children call ChildLine, we don’t push them to take action immediately, but try to help them at their own pace. ChildLine has learned that to do anything else can mean a child may never call again – some children are as afraid of intervention as they are of the abuse continuing.

Calling ChildLine gives children the opportunity to talk to someone ‘safe’, someone who will not judge them. Children often find it very difficult to talk about being abused. They sometimes feel the abuse is their fault, and they worry greatly about what will happen if they tell – either because they are afraid of getting a loved one into trouble or because they have been threatened into keeping silent, or a combination of both. In many cases, they are worried that they will be taken away from home and that their families will be broken up.

They are afraid of being taken from their home, of being made to face their abuser, or being made to tell strangers what has happened – even of an abusing parent whom they still love being sent to prison.

ChildLine puts the interests of the child first. Just by being on the end of the line our counsellors help relieve some of the loneliness and desperation that abused children feel. They help children understand that the abuse they have suffered is not their fault.

Sometimes during one call, or perhaps over many months, ChildLine counsellors talk through with a child what has happened, and what they can do. Experience has taught us that this helps children to find the confidence finally to tell a teacher, a parent or a friend – though in some situations ChildLine will intervene directly to help a child.

Do ChildLine counsellors report abuse to the police?

Generally, if a child phones ChildLine to talk about being abused, nothing is passed on to the police or social services unless the child wants this to happen.

In some situations though, such as if a child is very young and unable to get help themselves or if a child’s life is in danger, ChildLine intervenes directly to ensure the child’s safety.

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What does child abuse do to children?

"I think my dad's sexually abusing me... he hits me too. If I don't do what I'm told, he does dirty things. I feel disgusting and ashamed. I want to kill myself. I tell him to stop but he won't. I've tried to tell my mum, but I can't get the courage. It would break her heart and she might not believe me."
Rosie, 14

While some forms of abuse can be seen – like bruises and burns – many others can't. Yet all forms of child abuse can do long-term or even permanent damage to a child's wellbeing and development. Young people who call ChildLine about their abuse often tell us they feel worthless, unloved and betrayed. They are often confused and frightened, and many feel incapable of trusting other people or unworthy of another's love. Abused children can lose confidence, become withdrawn or aggressive, and may lose the ability to concentrate.

It is not at all uncommon for a victim to suffer severe depression, which can lead to self-harm – sometimes to attempts at suicide. This loss of confidence and sense of betrayal can also make it difficult for them to develop relationships and get on at school.

Many children tell ChildLine that, while they want the abuse to stop, they are afraid of splitting up their family.

Children often feel guilty and blame themselves for the abuse. They can also feel ashamed and embarrassed. ChildLine assures children and young people that they are not to blame, and helps them to understand that talking about the problem can be a first step in improving their situation.

How can children be protected from abuse?

There are laws to protect children and to deal with people who abuse them. The most important laws are the Children Act 1989 (England and Wales), the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 and the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. These acts say what should happen if a child is being abused or is at risk of harm.

What happens when a child tells someone they are being abused?

Childcare professionals, such as teachers, are obliged to tell the police or social services if they suspect or know about abuse. Social workers must look into reports of child abuse. First of all, a social worker may talk to the child and parents, and try to decide whether or not a child is being neglected or abused.

ChildLine believes it is essential that social workers, police officers, doctors or others looking into abuse talk to children on their own.

How do the police and social workers investigate child abuse?

Sometimes people looking into child abuse decide to have a child protection conference. Anyone who knows the child and the family can be invited to attend. Generally this includes teachers, doctors, health visitors, play workers, and other people who know the child, as well as police and social workers. The child can suggest who they would like to attend the conference. At the conference, children and families are asked for their views. Children can always ask to speak on their own – supported by a teacher or friend – if they feel they cannot talk about what has happened in front of their parents or other adults.

After the conference, if it is decided that the child is at risk of harm, then their name can put on the child protection register. Conferences can recommend 'schemes' to help children and families, such as having someone help out in the home or getting extra help at school. Sometimes a conference can recommend that a child should live somewhere else – with someone else in the family, for example, or with friends or foster carers – until it is safe to live at home again.

The law can make a person who has been abusing children leave the home and keep away, so that the child can stay at home safely with other members of their family.

Once a child or young person has told somebody about being abused, the police may become involved. They may ask the child to make a video about what has happened to them. The police may need this video to bring the abuser to court. The child will be supported by someone they know and trust – or by a social worker or police officer – throughout this process.

Will I have to go to court?

"My dad looked really sad in court. I hate what he did, but I don't hate him."

Lucy, 13

If the person who has been abusing is charged by the police, then the abused child may have to go to court to tell a judge about what has happened to them. This is very difficult for most children. Children need support to help them get ready for court, to help them understand what they will have to do and to explain how to speak to the judge and other people in court. Abused children are also allowed to talk from behind a screen or by video link, so they don't have to look at the abuser.

Children and their families often need help after court to talk about their feelings and sort out what to do next. ChildLine talks to many young people who have been to court. Most children need time to get better and to start their lives again. Friends, teachers and other family members can all help.

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I'm worried that my friend is being abused. What should I do?

If you think that someone you know is being or has been abused, you must talk to an adult you trust – like your mum or dad or a teacher – about your concerns.

If you feel uncomfortable doing this, you may prefer to call ChildLine and talk to one of our counsellors. We will not tell anyone you have called and will listen to your concerns and advise what you can do.

You may suggest to your friend that they call ChildLine themselves. Reassure them that ChildLine gives support without forcing children or young people to do anything they don't want to do. You could even stay with your friend while they make the call.

You or your friend, could also try ringing the NSPCC helpline (see next page) for help and advice.

Most importantly, be there for your friend, listen, and help them seek advice.

Remember, children and young people do not have to cope alone: adults are there to help them.

ChildLine's achievements

ChildLine is committed to ensuring that children's voices are heard. We campaign for changes that will bring lasting improvements to the lives of children and young people. These have included:

- producing a number of campaign reports based on the experiences of ChildLine callers about eating problems, bereavement, suicide and young runaways, which have received widespread media interest
- holding a major international conference on children and the law in 1999, Hearing Children's Voices, after campaigning for many years to make the ordeal of going to court easier for children. ChildLine Scotland also played a leading role in the Child Witness Reform Group. In its report, *Justice for Children*, the group called for changes to be made to the present legal system, which is traumatic and distressing for children
- lobbying at the forefront of the Children for Scotland campaign, for a children's commissioner to be appointed
- joining forces with six other leading children's charities to form the Children's Charities Coalition on Internet Safety (CHIS) after years of campaigning to provide greater protection for children using the web

Child abuse

Helplines

The NSPCC's national Child Protection Helpline is aimed at all those who are concerned that a young person is at risk. Children and young people who need help can also call. The line is open 24 hours a day.

Freephone: **0800 800 5000**

Textphone: **0800 056 0566**

The NSPCC Asian Child Protection Helpline operates from 11.00am to 7.00pm, Monday to Friday. If you need help you can speak to an Asian counsellor in Gujarati, Hindi, Bengali/Sylheti, Punjabi, Urdu or English.

For the Asian Helpline Service in English call **0800 096 7719**

Booklists

Books for children and young people

Elliott, M., *The Willow Street Kids: Be Smart, Stay Safe*, Kidscape, London, 1997. For ages 7–11 years

Masters, A., *Bullies Don't Hurt*, Puffin Books, London, 1997. For ages 12+

Sanders, P. and Myers, S., *What Do You Know About Child Abuse?* Franklin Watts, London, 2000. For ages 7–14 years

Rouf, K., *Secrets: White families*, The Children's Society, London, 1989. For ages 8–16 years

Macleod, M., *Talking With Children About Child Abuse*, ChildLine, London, 1996

Factual and research publications

Campbell, B., *Unofficial Secrets: Child Sexual Abuse, the Cleveland Case*, Virago, London, 1997

Corby, B., *Child Abuse: Towards a Knowledge Base* (2nd Edition), Open University Press, Berkshire, UK, 2000

What to do if You're Worried a Child is Being Abused, Department for Education and Skills, London, 2006. Available to download at

www.everychildmatters.gov.uk

Child Maltreatment in the United Kingdom: A Study of the Prevalence of Child Abuse, NSPCC, London, 2000

Leaflets

Protecting Children from Paedophiles, Kidscape, London, 2001. Available to download at **www.kidscape.org.uk**

Are you Worried About the Safety of a Child? NSPCC, London, 2002. Available to download at **www.nspcc.org.uk/inform**

ChildLine is a service provided by the NSPCC.

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Please note – all names and identifying details have been changed to protect young people's identities.

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CONTACTING CHIDLIN E

Children can call ChildLine on **0800 1111** (all calls are free of charge, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year).

Or write to us at ChildLine, Freepost NATN1111, London E1 6BR; or visit **www.childline.org.uk**

Children who are deaf or find using a regular phone difficult can try our textphone service on **0800 400 222**.
Monday to Friday 9.30am to 9.30pm
Saturday to Sunday 9.30am to 8.00pm

We have a special helpline for children and young people living away from home in places such as refuges, boarding schools and young offenders' institutions called The Line on **0800 88 4444**.
Monday to Friday 3.30pm to 9.30pm
Saturday to Sunday 2.00pm to 8.00pm

ChildLine in Partnership with Schools (CHIPS) helps schools set up schemes to encourage children and young people to support each other. For more information call **020 7650 3230**.