

Children talking to ChildLine about sexual abuse

“Last night when I was in the toilet, my mum’s boyfriend came in and sexually abused me. I don’t want to tell Mum, because she won’t believe me.” (Girl, aged eight)

“Dad has been sexually abusing me and my sister. My mum died when I was four years old. I feel bad when he abuses me.” (Girl, aged nine)

“My mum has a drinking problem. When she drinks too much she comes into my room, undresses me and makes me have sex with her.” (Boy, aged 14)

“Children feel they have been bad and that if they hadn’t been the way they are it wouldn’t have happened to them. Due to the sexual abuse, children have issues around mental health and depression. I would say that they are always affected. I can’t think of a case where the child was not emotionally affected.” (ChildLine counsellor)

Key findings

- In 2008/09, ChildLine counselled 12,268 children about sexual abuse as their main problem, representing 8 per cent of all calls answered and the fourth largest main reason for children calling ChildLine that year.
- In addition, 3,826 children rang ChildLine and were counselled about another problem, but also said that sexual abuse was an additional problem.
- In total, 16,094 children spoke to ChildLine about sexual abuse as either their main problem or an additional problem, representing 10 per cent of all calls answered.
- Between 2004/05 and 2008/09, the annual number of children counselled by ChildLine regarding sexual abuse rose from 8,637 to 12,268, giving an overall increase of 42 per cent.
- Over the past five years (2004/05–2008/09), the rate of percentage increase for sexual abuse for boys counselled by ChildLine has been proportionately higher (129 per cent) than for girls (14 per cent).
- Family relationship problems constituted the largest additional problem (23 per cent) affecting children when they called about sexual abuse.

Key findings continued

- In 2008/09, 54 per cent of children who called ChildLine said that their abusers were males and 17 per cent said that their abusers were females. Twenty-nine per cent of the children did not identify whether their abuser was male or female.
- In 2008/09, 59 per cent of the perpetrators were family members. Of this total, 24 per cent of the perpetrators were fathers and 11 per cent were mothers. Only 5 per cent of the perpetrators were strangers. Nine per cent of children did not disclose information about the perpetrator.
- In 2008/09, 60 per cent of the children who spoke about sexual abuse were in the 12- to 15-year-old age group.
- In 2008/09, 46 per cent of children told us they had not confided in anyone before calling ChildLine, 16 per cent had confided in friends and 14 per cent had confided in their mother.
- In 2008/09, 14 per cent of children contacted ChildLine within less than a week of being sexually abused.

1. Introduction

ChildLine was launched by Esther Rantzen on the BBC television programme “Childwatch” in October 1986, and is the UK’s free, 24-hour helpline for children in distress or danger. Since its launch, ChildLine has been used as a source of help and protection for children who are in real need, with over 2.3 million children having been counselled. Over 1,300 trained volunteer counsellors provide comfort, give advice and protect children and young people who feel that they have nowhere else to turn. Since it was established, ChildLine has counselled more than 205,000 children about sexual abuse.

The true prevalence of sexual violence against children is difficult to estimate since it is a secret crime. However, a recent review published in *The Lancet* estimated that between 5–10 per cent of girls and 5 per cent of boys have experienced penetrative sexual abuse and up to three times this number have been exposed to other forms of sexual violence (Gilbert et al, 2008).

Retrospective research with 2,869 young people aged 18–24 years conducted by the NSPCC found that 16 per cent of young women and 7 per cent of young men reported having experienced sexual violence involving physical contact before they reached the age of 16 (Cawson et al, 2000). The impact of sexual abuse on the health and wellbeing of children and the lasting consequences into adulthood are well recognised.

ChildLine has direct access to the experience of children suffering abuse, helping to build up a picture of the problems those children face, what they think and feel about those problems, and the most effective ways to protect them and make them feel safe. This helps ChildLine and others to create policies and deliver better services for children and young people.

The previous ChildLine casenote on sexual abuse (ChildLine, 2007) reported that, in 2005/06, a total of 11,976 children spoke to ChildLine about sexual abuse and 94 per cent of those children knew their abuser.

Following on from the original casenote, this casenote examines what has changed over the intervening years. It compares the numbers of calls on the different types of sexual abuse, the different ages of children calling and the range of issues related to sexual abuse. The key 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.

Information available at ChildLine is mainly for monitoring purposes and not set up for research. However, the information is valuable for understanding children's concerns. For information about the methodology used in this casenote, see appendix 1.

2. Evidence: what children tell ChildLine

2.1 The number of children who call ChildLine

This casenote reports what children told ChildLine about sexual abuse between April 2008 and March 2009.

During this period, ChildLine counselled 156,729 children (103,236 girls and 53,493 boys) in total for all problems. The girl:boy ratio of children counselled was 2:1.

During the same period, ChildLine counselled 12,268 children and young people (8 per cent) for sexual abuse as a main problem and 3,826 children and young people (2 per cent) for sexual abuse as their additional problem.

Figure 1

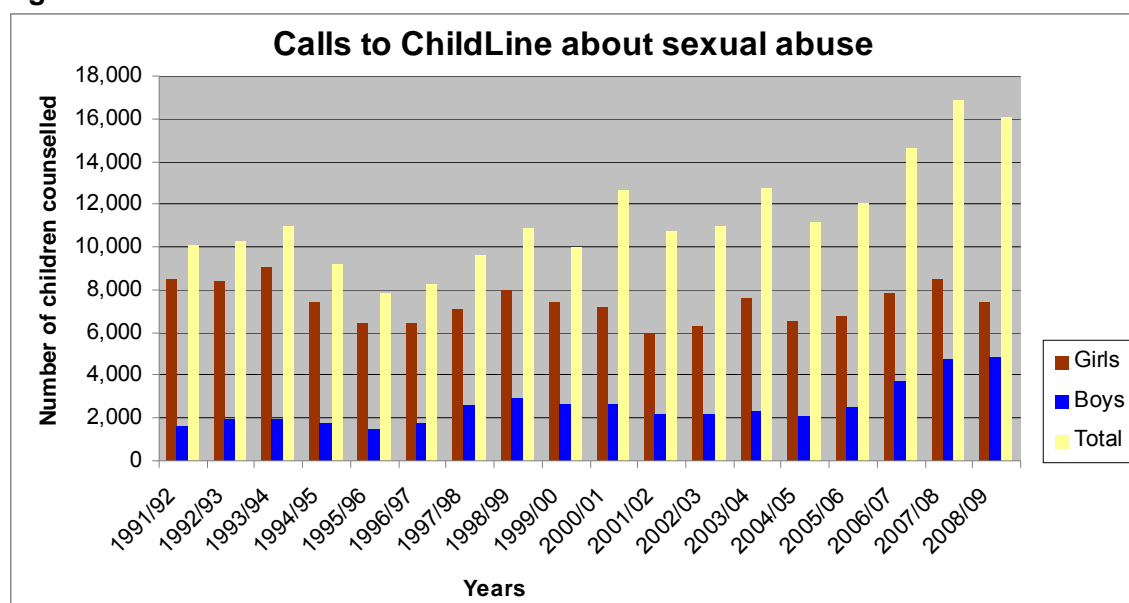


Figure 1 shows that the number of girls calling ChildLine about sexual abuse has always been more than the number of boys calling. In 2008/09, the ratio between girls and boys for sexual abuse was 2:1.

Over the years, calls from boys about sexual abuse have increased at a greater pace compared to those received from girls. This suggests that our recent awareness-raising messages and campaigns about sexual abuse targeted specifically at boys may have been successful.

In recent years, from 2004/05, there has been a gradual percentage increase each year in the calls to ChildLine about sexual abuse. In 2008/09, ChildLine counselled a total of 16,094 children about sexual abuse either as their main problem or as an additional problem, representing 10 per cent of all calls answered.

Of the 16,094 children who called about sexual abuse, 10,397 were girls (10 per cent of total calls) and 5,697 were boys (11 per cent of total calls). This total number of sexual abuse calls has slightly reduced compared to the previous year 2007/08.

Figure 2

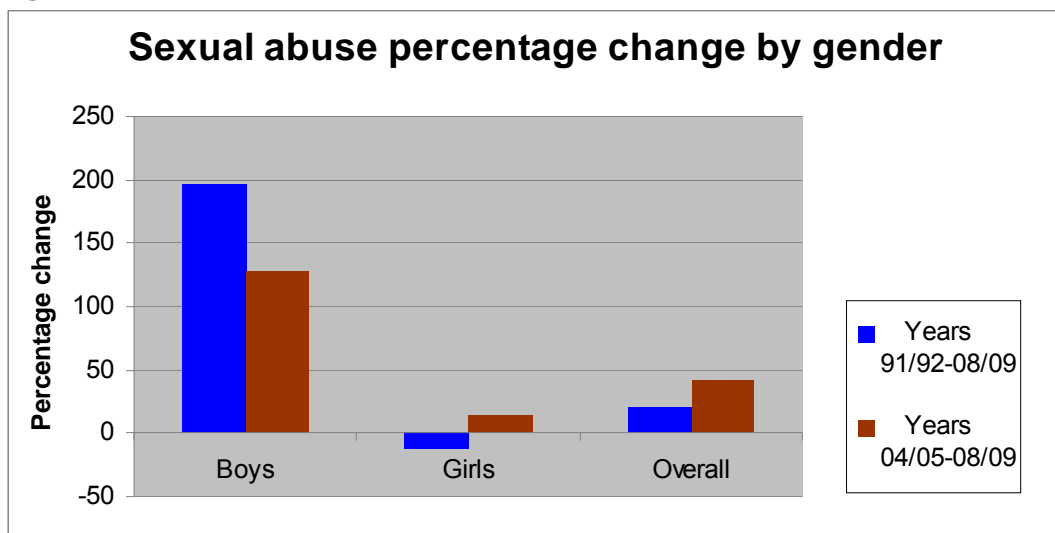


Figure 2 compares the percentage differences between earlier years and now by gender. Between 1991/92 and 2008/09, calls to ChildLine from girls about sexual abuse have decreased by 12 per cent whereas calls from boys have increased by 196 per cent.

Interestingly, between 2004/05 to 2008/09, calls about sexual abuse from girls have increased by 14 per cent and from boys by 129 per cent. This suggests that boys are beginning to seek help and are responding to campaigns highlighting the importance of telling someone.

2.2 Main problems children discussed during calls to ChildLine in 2008/09

Figure 3

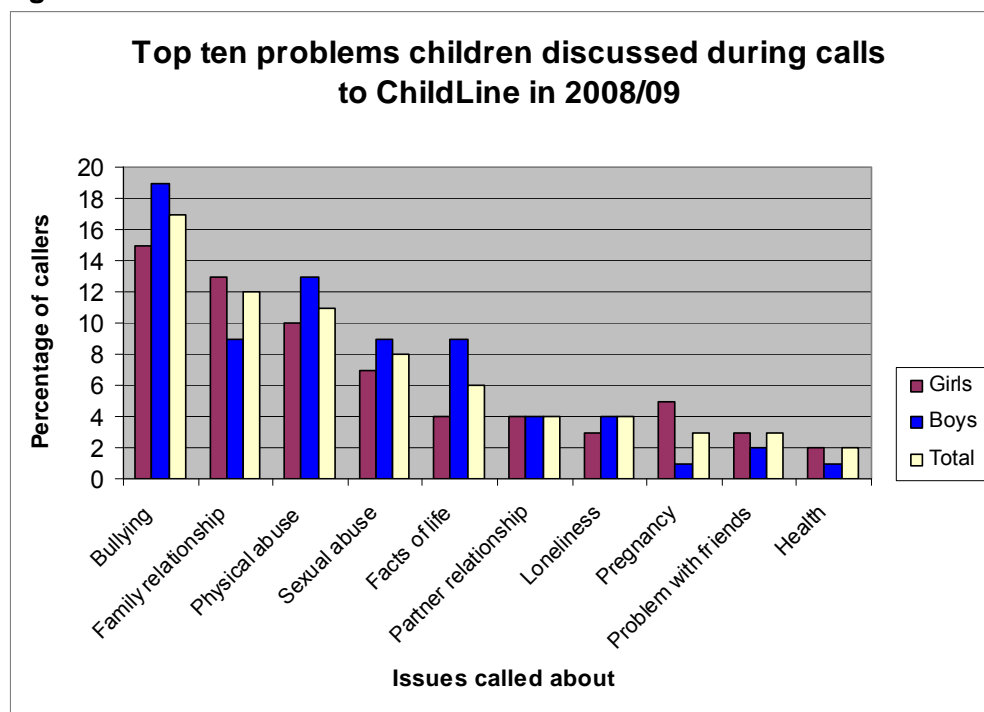


Figure 3 shows the proportion of children calling ChildLine about a range of different issues as a main concern during 2008/09. Overall, the top five issues (bullying, family relationship, physical abuse, sexual abuse and the facts of life) remained the same as last year.

Partner relationship problems, loneliness and problems with friends moved up one place. Calls related to pregnancy dropped from sixth place to eighth and calls about health appeared in the top 10, replacing sexuality.

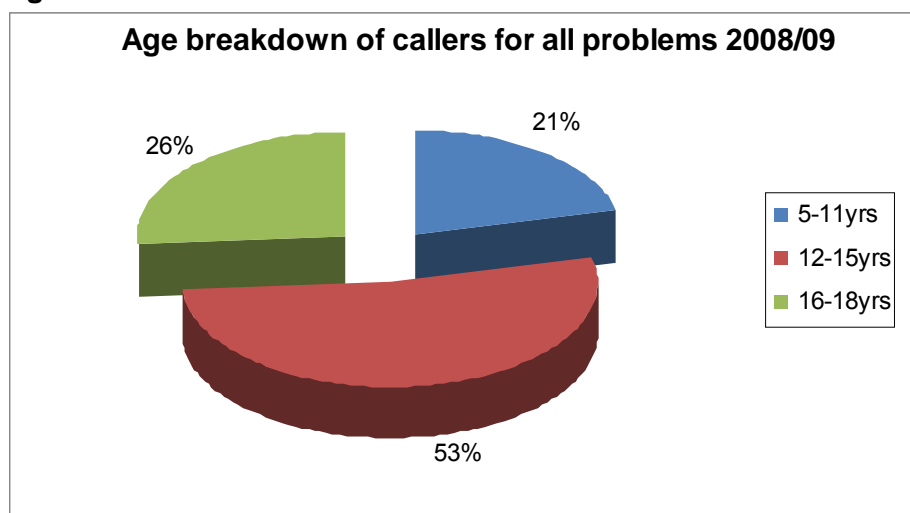
Overall, boys called proportionately more about bullying, physical abuse, sexual abuse and the facts of life, whereas girls called proportionately more about family relationship problems, third party issues, pregnancy and problems with friends. Sexual abuse was the fourth main problem children called ChildLine about in 2008/09.

In 2008/09, 8 per cent (12,268) of all callers counselled by ChildLine rang about sexual abuse as their main problem. This includes 7 per cent (7,457) of girls and 9 per cent (4,811) of boys.

Furthermore, 2 per cent (3,826) of children who called ChildLine to talk about another issue as their main problem also reported sexual abuse as an additional problem. Of these, 2,940 were girls and 886 were boys.

2.3 Age breakdown of callers for all problems in 2008/09

Figure 4



Of the children counselled by ChildLine, 75 per cent gave their ages and 25 per cent did not. As figure 4 shows, the majority of the callers (53 per cent) were between 12–15 years old. This is the age range that perhaps is a difficult period in children’s lives as it is a transitional period, in terms of their emotional and physical development, and in terms of changing schools. Twenty-six per cent of the children were 16–18 years old and 21 per cent were 5–11 years old.

Table 1
Age breakdown of callers counselled about sexual abuse

Age breakdown	Girls	Boys	Total
5–11 years	1,348 (22%)	582 (16%)	1,930 (20%)
12–15 years	3,676 (59%)	2,165 (60%)	5,841 (60%)
16–18 years	1,156 (19%)	854 (24%)	2,010 (21%)

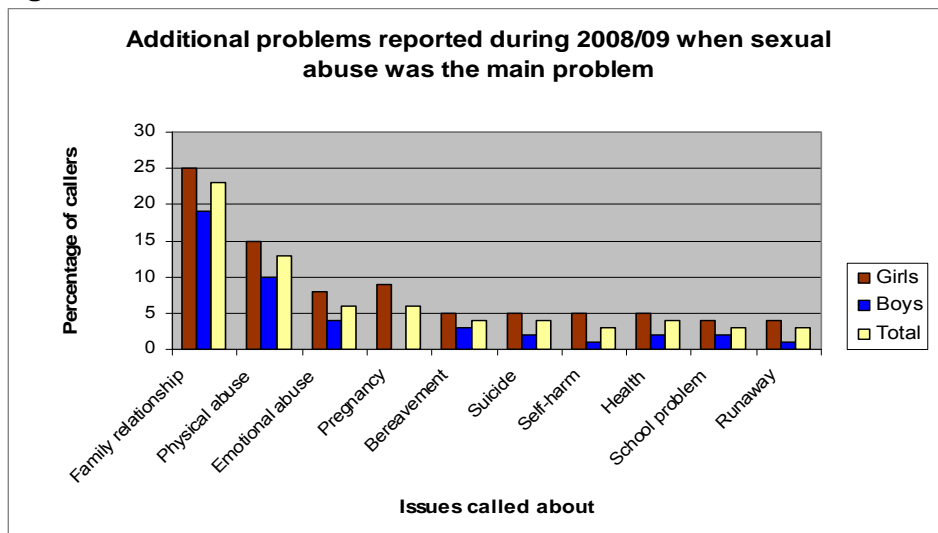
Table 1 gives the age range for girls and boys who rang about sexual abuse. The majority of the sexual abuse callers were 12–15 years old; for girls it was 59 per cent and for boys it was 60 per cent.

Those in the 5–11 age range were 22 per cent for girls and 16 per cent for boys. The older age group, 16–18 years old, were 19 per cent for girls and 24 per cent for boys.

2.4 Additional problems children reported when sexual abuse was the main issue

Children who called ChildLine to talk about sexual abuse as their main concern also reported other issues affecting them.

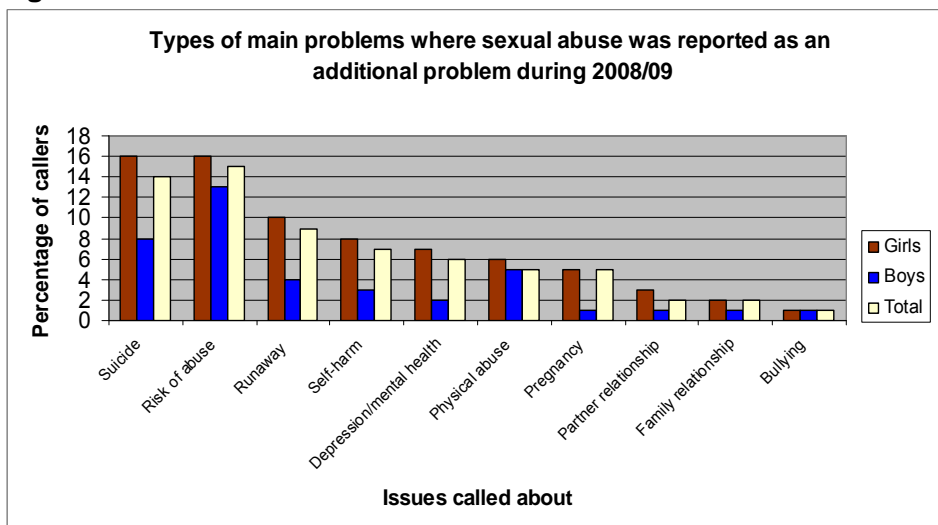
Figure 5



For girls, the first three issues of concern in addition to sexual abuse were family relationship problems, physical abuse and pregnancy, whereas for boys the main three issues affecting them in addition to sexual abuse were family relationship problems, physical abuse and emotional abuse.

2.5 Types of main problems where sexual abuse was reported as an additional issue

Figure 6



Some children who called ChildLine to talk about another main problem might also report that sexual abuse was happening to them. A proportion of both girls and boys who called about physical abuse also said that they were being sexually abused.

Some children who called about suicide as their main problem also said that they were being sexually abused, with the majority of these calls being from girls, which amounted to 317 girls (16 per cent) and 47 boys (8 per cent). Sexual abuse can be life threatening. Children who called about running away as their main problem also reported that they were being sexually abused, which amounted to 183 girls (10 per cent) and 30 boys (4 per cent).

3. Key Issues

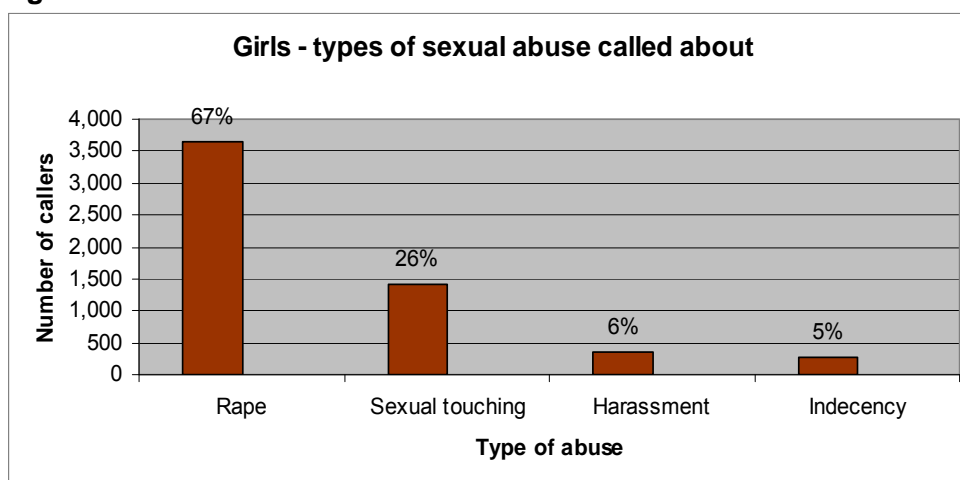
3.1 Definitions

At ChildLine, the term “sexual abuse” covers a wide range of behaviours, including indecency (which includes flashing, as well as exposure to pornography); sexual harassment (defined as “comments and/or behaviour that are suggestive or disparaging”); sexual touching; and rape, which ChildLine defines as “vaginal and/or anal penetration with fingers, penis or objects, and/or oral sex or attempted oral sex”.

The Government’s definition of child sexual abuse, as found in *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (HM Government, 2006), states that “Sexual abuse involves forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, including prostitution, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. The activities may involve physical contact, including penetrative (eg rape, buggery or oral sex) or non-penetrative acts (oral sex). They may include non-contact activities, such as involving children in looking at, or in the production of, pornographic material or watching sexual activities, or encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways”.

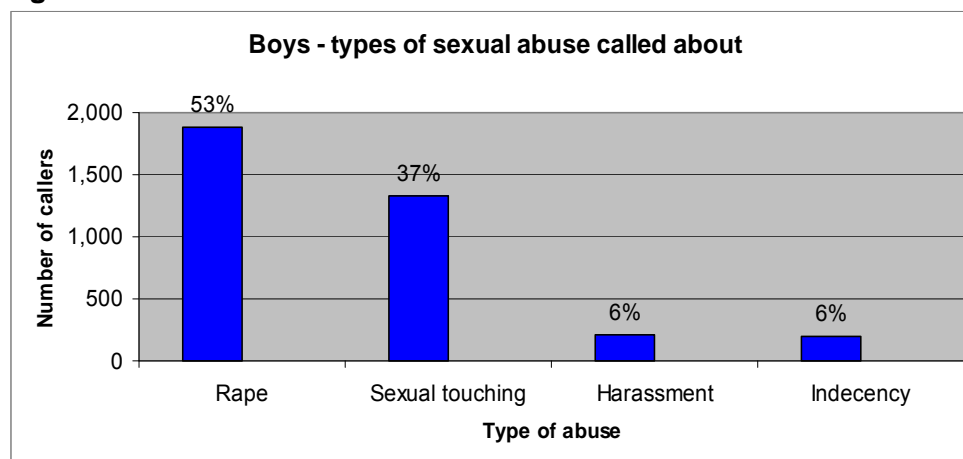
3.2 Types of sexual abuse

Figure 7



The main type of sexual abuse reported by girls was rape (see definition provided in section 3.1), amounting to 67 per cent of those calls received about sexual abuse. The next most frequently reported type of abuse was sexual touching, which amounted to 26 per cent. Other types of abuse reported by girls were harassment (6 per cent) and indecency (5 per cent).

Figure 8



As with calls from girls, the main type of sexual abuse reported by boys was rape (see definition provided in section 3.1), amounting to 53 per cent of those calls received about sexual abuse. Sexual touching was the next biggest type of abuse reported, amounting to 37 per cent, which is slightly higher than for girls. Other types of abuse reported were harassment (6 per cent) and indecency (6 per cent).

The trends in the type of sexual abuse are similar to previous years. In the 2005/06 ChildLine casenote on sexual abuse (ChildLine, 2007), the highest type of sexual abuse reported by boys and girls was also rape.

3.3 The perpetrators of the sexual abuse as the main problem

Table 2

Perpetrator group	Girls	Boys	Total
Caller's family	4,126 (55%)	3,156 (66%)	7,282 (59%)
Known to caller	2,144 (29%)	1,146 (24%)	3,290 (27%)
Stranger	470 (6%)	142 (3%)	612 (5%)
Unknown – not disclosed	717 (10%)	367 (8%)	1,084 (9%)

In 2008/09, 59 per cent of the children who called about sexual abuse told ChildLine that their abusers were family members. Twenty-seven per cent of the abusers were known to the callers, while only 5 per cent of the abusers were strangers. Nine per cent of the callers did not mention the identity of the abuser.

Table 3

Perpetrator gender	Girls	Boys	Total
Male abusers	4,972 (67%)	1,651 (34%)	6,623 (54%)
Female abusers	420 (6%)	1,722 (36%)	2,142 (17%)
Gender unknown	2,065 (28%)	1,438 (30%)	3,503 (29%)

The main abusers were males, comprising 54 per cent. Female abusers accounted for 17 per cent, while for 29 per cent of calls the gender of the abuser was not disclosed by the caller. Ten times more men than women abused girls. Almost the same number of men as women abused boys.

Table 4

All perpetrators	Girls	Boys	Total
Father	1,986 (27%)	986 (20%)	2,972 (24%)
Mother	332 (4%)	979 (20%)	1,311 (11%)
Unknown/not disclosed	717 (10%)	367 (8%)	1,084 (9%)
Male acquaintance	698 (9%)	127 (3%)	825 (7%)
Stranger	470 (6%)	142 (3%)	612 (5%)
Teacher	242 (3%)	357 (7%)	599 (5%)
Stepfather	506 (7%)	92 (2%)	598 (5%)
Friend of family	270 (4%)	238 (5%)	508 (4%)
Boyfriend	468 (6%)	7 (0%)	475 (4%)
Both parents/family	231 (3%)	182 (4%)	413 (3%)
Uncle	261 (4%)	109 (2%)	370 (3%)
Male school children	292 (4%)	58 (1%)	350 (3%)
Mother's partner/boyfriend	300 (4%)	37 (1%)	337 (3%)
Brother	228 (3%)	103 (2%)	331 (3%)
Grandfather	159 (2%)	93 (2%)	252 (2%)
Female acquaintance	25 (0%)	146 (3%)	171 (1%)
Aunt	13 (0%)	125 (3%)	138 (1%)
Sister	15 (0%)	118 (2%)	133 (1%)
Authority figure	49 (1%)	81 (2%)	130 (1%)
Stepmother	4 (0%)	113 (2%)	117 (1%)
Grandmother	14 (0%)	68 (1%)	82 (1%)
School children	37 (0%)	44 (1%)	81 (1%)
Neighbour	49 (1%)	27 (1%)	76 (1%)
Stepbrother	35 (0%)	30 (1%)	65 (1%)
Father's partner/girlfriend	2 (0%)	56 (1%)	58 (0%)
Female school children	12 (0%)	41 (1%)	53 (0%)
Foster mother	0 (0%)	33 (1%)	33 (0%)
Male relative	26 (0%)	2 (0%)	28 (0%)
Girlfriend	2 (0%)	20 (0%)	22 (0%)
Foster father	10 (0%)	7 (0%)	17 (0%)
Stepsister	0 (0%)	14 (0%)	14 (0%)
Female relative	1 (0%)	8 (0%)	9 (0%)
Foster brother	3 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (0%)
Foster sister	0 (0%)	1 (0%)	1 (0%)
Total	7,457	4,811	12,268

3.3.1 Male perpetrators

In 2008/09, 6,623 children (54 per cent) who called about sexual abuse said that their perpetrators were males. Among this group, 2,972 children cited their father as the perpetrator, making fathers the main male perpetrators in 24 per cent of all cases.

Fathers were the perpetrators for 27 per cent of the girls and 20 per cent of the boys.
"My dad comes into my room, pulls his clothes down, takes out 'sausage' and rubs it against me. I don't like it." (Girl, aged seven)

"My dad has been raping me and my sister. My mum died when I was four. I feel bad when he is abusing me." (Girl, aged 10)

The second highest type of perpetrator given by children counselled by ChildLine about sexual abuse was a male acquaintance, reported by 825 children (7 per cent). Five per cent of children reported a stepfather as their perpetrator, while four per cent of the callers reported a boyfriend as their perpetrator. Other male perpetrators reported were uncle (3 per cent), mother's partner (3 per cent), brothers (3 per cent) and grandfather (2 per cent).

"My best friend's dad is hurting me. I did promise my friend that I won't tell anyone about this because he will hurt my friend. I don't want him to hurt my friend. He is touching me down below." (Girl, aged 11)

"My mum's boyfriend has been sticking holes in my door and watching me. He is playing with me." (Girl, aged eight)

"My mum's boyfriend is beating me up. He is living with us for three months. He wants me to put my penis in his mouth. He is making me wear mum's clothes and makeup. If I refuse, he is hitting me with a slipper." (Boy, aged 14)

3.3.2 Female perpetrators

In 2008/09, 2,142 children who called about sexual abuse reported that their perpetrators were females, accounting for 17 per cent of the calls.

Among this group, 1,311 children (11 per cent) cited their mother as the perpetrator, making mothers the main female perpetrators. Mothers were the perpetrators for 4 per cent of girls and 20 per cent of boys.

In 2004/05, 923 children counselled by ChildLine named female abusers and in 2008/09 2,142 children named female abusers. This is an increase of 132 per cent.

"My mum tried to rape me last night. I am upset. My mum came in from the pub drunk, asked me to take my clothes off and tried to put a rubber thing inside me. My mum is drinking a lot since Dad had broken up with her. Mum is in the pub now. I have not talked to her since last night." (Boy, aged 11)

"I am physically and sexually abused at home by Mum. It is been happening since I was two years old. I feel sad." (Girl, aged 12)

Other female perpetrators reported by children who called ChildLine were a female acquaintance (1 per cent), aunt (1 per cent), sister (1 per cent), stepmother (1 per cent) and grandmother (1 per cent).

"I have been living with my nan since I was 12. Nan forced me to have sex with her last night and I don't want to do this. I have nowhere else to live." (Boy, aged 17)

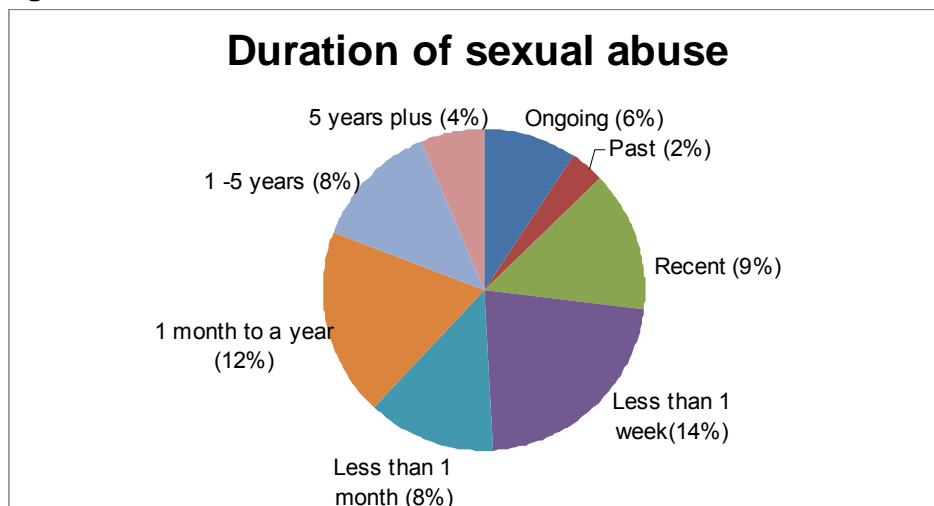
"My stepmum is sticking her fingers up my bum and other places just in front of my mum. This has been happening for a year. My mum is also doing the same thing. She asks me to have a bath with her and touches me in wrong places. My stepmum takes drugs and I see her once a month." (Girl, aged six)

An NSPCC report on female sex offenders in 2005 (Bunting, 2005) suggests that a precise prevalence rate for female sex offending is difficult to establish and many reasons have been suggested as to why there may be under-reporting of this type of offence and under-representation of females within offender populations. The same report suggests that females may account for up to 5 per cent of all sexual offences against children.

3.4 The duration of sexual abuse

How long the sexual abuse has been occurring in a child's life has a distinct bearing on the long term effects on the child. The duration of abuse is longer when it happens within the family. Children often find it difficult to cope with this type of abuse as the very person who is supposed to protect them is abusing them. They feel upset and confused.

Figure 9



In 2008/09, 14 per cent of the children contacted ChildLine to talk about sexual abuse as their main problem within less than a week. Another 8 per cent of them said that it was less than a month. Twelve per cent of them said that the abuse was going on for one month to a year. The number of children contacting ChildLine about sexual abuse within less than a week is indicative that children are able to call ChildLine early on with their sexual abuse problem.

Table 5 – Male perpetrators

Perpetrator	Ongoing	Past	Recent	1 month–1 year	1–5 years
Father	239	31	168	320	282
Male acquaintance	33	19	114	106	52
Stepfather	38	8	20	104	101
Boyfriend	31	2	53	83	21
Uncle	28	9	19	55	37
Mother's partner/boyfriend	12	1	17	71	44
Brother	25	15	19	50	27
Grandfather	18	14	10	36	30
Stepbrother	38	8	20	104	101

For 320 children who had been abused by their father, the abuse had been going on for between one month and a year. For 282 children who had been abused by their father, the abuse had been going on for between one to five years and for 239 children it was still an ongoing problem.

“My dad has been raping me and my sister. My mum died when I was four. I feel bad when he is abusing me.” (Girl, aged 10)

Table 6 – Female perpetrators

Perpetrator	Ongoing	Past	Recent	1 month–1 year	1–5 years
Mother	87	4	93	138	94
Female acquaintance	11	0	25	9	1
Aunt	5	0	13	19	13
Sister	4	0	9	24	7
Stepmother	13	0	3	29	10
Grandmother	9	0	7	14	10

For 138 children who had been abused by their mothers, the abuse had been going on for between one month and a year. For 94 children who had been abused by their mother, the abuse had been going on for between one to five years.

3.5 Internet sexual abuse

Sometimes new technology is used to sexually abuse children. The internet can be a mechanism through which abusers can reach and groom children.

Between 2008/09, a total of 65 children who talked to ChildLine about sexual abuse as their main concern also spoke about internet issues during the course of the call. Those 65 children who called represent 9 per cent of all callers referring to internet issues. In the same period, a total of 723 children spoke about internet issues while being counselled for other problems.

"I am very upset. This man on the internet has got me to do things on the webcam before by threatening me that he would tell my friends about what I do. I changed my internet identity but he found me again and forced me to do things again. I don't want to tell the police." (Girl, aged 18)

"I was chatting to a boy who is 15 years old on the MSN this evening. He flashed his private parts to me via webcam. I am scared and worried." (Girl, aged nine)

ChildLine counsellors mentioned that sometimes children talk about their boyfriend asking them to do things that they do not want to do. Boyfriends ask them to do things with their friends and take photographs. One counsellor said:

"I had a caller who'd willingly taken photographs with her boyfriend and this ended up on the internet. She was distraught because you can't stop it. Everybody in school knows and she was worried that somebody is going to tell her parents."

4. Issues associated with calls to ChildLine about sexual abuse and the impact it has on the children

4.1 Self-blame

Children who are sexually abused frequently blame themselves for the abuse, taking on the guilt and shame. They may be shocked and confused with what is happening in their lives, especially since it is usually by someone known to them, often within the family, and therefore they feel unable to seek help. They may be made to feel that it is their fault.

"Last night when I was in the toilet, my mum's new boyfriend came in and abused me. I don't want to tell Mum. I think she won't believe me." (Girl, aged eight)

"I am being sexually abused by my brother. My mum and dad don't believe me. My parents think it is my fault and I must have led him on or come on to him. I am told to keep this a secret and I am struggling to cope with this." (Girl, aged 12)

In addition, the abuser will use every method of intimidation and emotional blackmail to prevent the child disclosing, and being forced to keep the abuse secret adds to the feelings of guilt.

4.2 Self-harm

One of the ways in which some children try to cope with the sexual abuse is by self-harming. According to the children who called ChildLine, this is a way of releasing their emotional turmoil. Research suggests that self-cutting and self-poisoning are the two most commonly reported single methods of deliberate self-harm (Hawton et al, 2006).

“One of the ways children try to cope with the sexual abuse is by cutting themselves; yes, they self-harm.” (ChildLine counsellor)

Some studies have also found evidence to suggest that adolescents with a more severe history of sexual abuse (such as involving intercourse) and physical abuse (such as being hit more often) are more likely to self-harm than adolescents with a less serious abuse history (Evans et al, 2005).

4.3 Suicide

Even when sexual abuse does not physically put a child's life at risk, the emotional effects can be very dangerous. The calls to ChildLine from children show that one of the effects of sexual abuse is suicidal thoughts. Some children can feel as if there is no way out and that, as a last measure, ending their life is the only way open to them to get rid of their problems.

“Children do call us and say they are suicidal because they are being sexually abused.” (ChildLine counsellor)

“Children have told me that their calls to ChildLine were the only time when they felt that there was hope – they say ‘without ChildLine, I would not be here’.” (ChildLine counsellor)

There is also considerable evidence for a strong and direct association between both sexual and physical abuse and suicidal phenomena in adolescents (Hawton et al, 2006).

4.4 Other effects

Sexual abuse is rarely the only form of abuse suffered by children. It is associated with emotional abuse, and very often with physical abuse, which is often used to intimidate a child into silence.

“My dad is hitting me and I am scared. He is touching me in naughty places. My mum has gone to heaven. Dad is saying he will rape me if I tell anyone. He has kept me away from school for the last two years.” (Girl, aged 10)

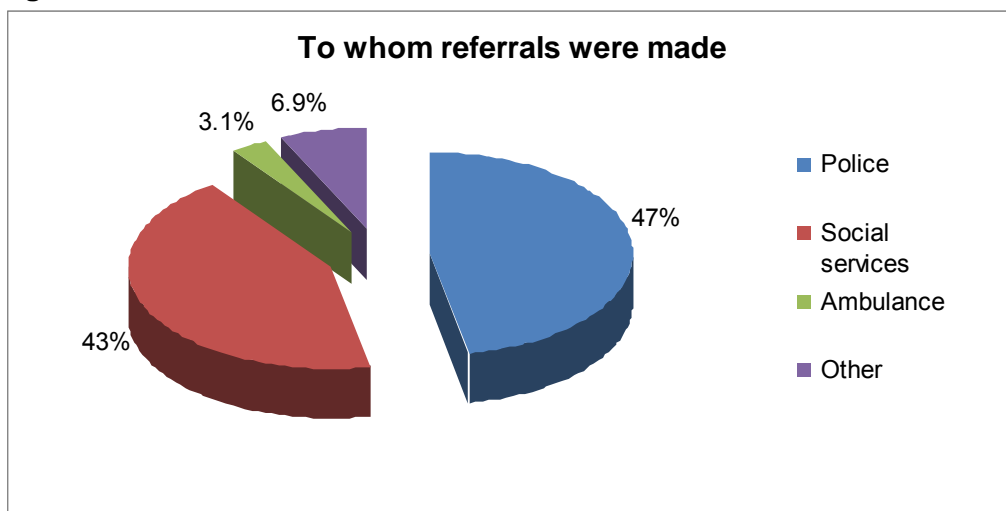
Sexually abused girls also worry about pregnancy, and if they were to become pregnant, how they would be able to tell someone of their worries and ask for help. Some children also use alcohol or drugs in order to block out the emotional pain caused by the abuse.

5. Referrals

Children who ring ChildLine to talk about abuse are often fearful that action will be taken that will make their situation even worse. For this reason, ChildLine offers children confidentiality, provided that their lives, or the lives of other children, are not in danger. This is explained to the child who calls.

Were ChildLine not to offer children this confidential space, many abused children would not trust counsellors sufficiently to talk to them. However, the goal is always to make the child safe, and many children as a result of work by ChildLine counsellors do agree to be referred to other agencies. If there is danger involved for the child then the ChildLine counsellor will break confidentiality and make a referral to appropriate agencies.

Figure 9



In 2008/09, 159 children counselled for sexual abuse as a main or an additional problem were referred to other agencies, amounting to 9 per cent of callers about sexual abuse. Of this percentage, 47 per cent of referrals were to the police, 43 per cent to social services and 3.1 per cent needed emergency ambulance services.

6. ChildLine counsellors' views

Counsellors have a unique insight into the feelings and experiences of the children who call ChildLine. Due to the nature of confidential telephone counselling, children are able to talk to them and describe their feelings and experience. In this section, counsellors discuss what children have told them about sexual abuse.

6.1 Time and patience

ChildLine counsellors described how some children take a long time to talk about what is happening to them. One counsellor said:

"Sexual abuse takes a long time to talk about. They [children] don't usually use clinical terms. They talk around the issue defining exactly what happens."

Counsellors patiently listen to what the children have to say and support them throughout. According to one counsellor:

“Sometimes you have to read between the lines. They are actually saying I am not good today and it takes a quarter of an hour or so for them to say their dad is touching them in a wrong way but they blame themselves. We assure them it is not their fault.”

In ChildLine counsellors' views, children frequently present with an entirely different problem to begin with but will talk about the issue of sexual abuse in the course of the conversation. For example, one counsellor said:

“We received a call from a girl about her father. She adored him – he was the pillar of the community and a good father in every other way. She never said exactly what was going on but clearly she was being abused by her father. The way he had worded it with her was that it is OK to be like this. She had difficulty and was feeling suicidal. He had put the responsibility on her and yet she was in this position where she adored her father but she wasn't sure whether what was going on was the right thing – was it OK or wasn't it? It was a huge thing – you didn't want to turn her against her father because she loved him but yet you needed to try to get her to understand that what was going on was abuse.”

Another counsellor added:

“I can think of a 14-year-old boy who had gone to see his dad and the dad had got him to watch a video with him. Later, when the boy went to bed the dad had come in and the boy mistook what went on as Dad's way of loving. He didn't know that his dad was abusing him.”

6.2 Struggling to understand

Children may struggle to understand everything that is happening with the abuse, as it can be both a physical and an emotional issue. As one counsellor explained:

“I have taken a call from a girl who wanted to know whether what was happening with her father was right because it had been happening for a long time. Now that she was going to sleepovers, suddenly the penny started to drop and she began to question who she could talk to and ask about her experiences. Not her family or her friends but she felt she could talk to ChildLine.”

6.3 Emotional/family ties

Counsellors comment that children may desperately want the abuse to stop but may still love the person who is abusing them. In these cases they may try to protect their family life, not wishing to cause anything bad to happen to their abuser.

One ChildLine counsellor said:

“They don't want to be separated from their parents, and family breakdown is worse for them than what they are going through. It is hating the abuse and loving the abuser because they are their family.”

Another ChildLine counsellor said:

"...sometimes they [children] don't tell because it has always happened to them. Then, they reach an age where they find out that it doesn't happen everywhere. They then need to find out why does this happen in my home and not in others and who can I ask? If you tell your friends it is what happens in your house and you started to worry at it then that is going to spread. You can't ask your family because that is dangerous as they think it is OK. This is why ChildLine performs a very useful function."

In some of the counsellor's views, they felt that if the abuser is the child's natural father, often the abuse may have been going on for a long time. Perhaps it might have started from when the child was very young. The child may have grown up with this abuse happening and think that it is normal, and when the child gets to their teens they start to question things, not realising that maybe this should not be happening. If the abuser is outside the family, they are likely to talk about it sooner.

6.4 Self-blame

It takes children a lot of courage and support from ChildLine counsellors to enable them to talk to ChildLine about sexual abuse. The abuse is a major issue that is affecting them both physically and emotionally. As one counsellor said:

"Children feel that what is happening to them is their fault. They feel shocked and confused and try to make sense of what is happening to them. They feel perhaps in someway they are to be blamed."

Children are powerless to stop what is happening to them; they feel ashamed to talk about it and feel violated. If it is a family member abusing them they also have emotional ties and find it difficult to see what is love and what is abuse. As children love their family, they internalise the problem and can feel that they are to blame for such a thing happening to them.

One counsellor reflected:

"...children are trying to comprehend different emotions; they are scared, filled with guilt, angry and worried. They are ashamed."

Another counsellor said:

"Often a huge amount of emotional blackmail goes on. You know that if you tell anyone 'Daddy will go to prison and Mummy won't love you anymore', your family will be torn apart and it will all be your fault that this happened. This is of course a classic misdirection, shifting the guilt for what's going on away from the abuser to the child being abused. The abuser can keep the abused child believing that they would be the one to blame for any consequences. It is a huge burden for a child or a young person to be carrying."

Counsellors said that often the sexually abused children who call ChildLine talk about their very low self-esteem and the negative impact on their lives.

6.5 Not being believed

Sexual abuse is a difficult issue with which to come to terms. One of the difficulties children face is the fear of not being believed. Although many mothers immediately react positively to protect a child, some may not wish to believe what the child is trying to tell them. If the child's father is the one who is abusing them, the child may try to let the mother know but the mother may not want to hear it. Some mothers may perhaps be in denial and do not believe the child.

One counsellor said:

"I think also fear of not being believed comes through quite a lot. One girl's mother had died and her father was actually a police inspector. She felt like 'who is going to believe me?' and that she could not tell anybody. There was no one to turn to because she did not feel that anybody would believe her."

6.6 Coping

Some children coped with being sexually abused by self-harming. The majority of the counsellors talked about children telling them that when they self-harmed it was a way of releasing their stress and frustration.

One counsellor said:

"Often children pretend they are someone else because that is the way of coping with what is happening to them. I think for some children self-harm is their biggest coping strategy. It is the one thing that they feel they can be in control of. When everything else is out of their control, they try to bring back control by doing this; mainly by cutting themselves and also food control, such as eating disorders."

Another counsellor said:

"I think they feel that by controlling the amount that they eat they can sometimes manage to stop their periods, so in their mind they go back to pre-puberty and become a child again. I think it is a way of regressing."

Most of the counsellors also said that sexually abused children reported feeling suicidal; that maybe by ending their life it will end their abuse.

7. Conclusions

- ChildLine counselled nearly 700,000 callers in 2008/09 on all problems. This is over 87,000 more than in 2007/08. In addition, ChildLine counsellors handled over 50,000 online counselling interactions.
- In the same period, 156,729 individual children (103,236 girls and 53,493 boys) were counselled by ChildLine for the first time.

- In 2008/09, ChildLine counselled a total of 16,094 calls from children about sexual abuse, either as their main concern or an additional concern, constituting 10 per cent of all calls.
- The majority of the sexual abusers reported by children were family members (59 per cent) or others known to the child (27 per cent). Fifty-four per cent of the abusers were male and 17 per cent of them were female.
- In the cases of familial sexual abuse, 24 per cent of reported abusers were biological fathers and 11 per cent were biological mothers. Seven per cent of the abusers were a male acquaintance of the child.
- In 2008/09, 9 per cent of the sexually abused children who called ChildLine were referred to other agencies. The majority were referred to either the police or social services.
- In 2008/09, 14 per cent of children contacted ChildLine within less than a week about a sexual abuse problem.

8. NSPCC recommendations

General context

The frequency and nature of calls to ChildLine across the UK cannot provide a reliable statistical picture of the prevalence of sexual abuse, but they do offer a valuable and unique insight into why this abuse continues, how difficult it is for children to disclose this kind of abuse and ask for help, and the impact it can have on children's lives.

These calls serve as a powerful reminder of the human cost of sexual abuse and the consequences of our failure as a society to protect children better.

The NSPCC's study of the prevalence of child abuse and neglect in the UK remains the most authoritative study of its kind¹. It found that 16 per cent of children experienced some form of sexual abuse in childhood before the age of 16².

As stated in the previous ChildLine casenote on sexual abuse (ChildLine, 2007), development of a more child-orientated child protection system is vital in protecting children from abuse, as well as in truly serving their best interests when abuse is an issue.

Key features of this system need to address accessible and confidential services that move at the child's pace. This includes support for children throughout the disclosure process; more control for children over what happens when they do disclose abuse; honesty and clarity regarding levels of confidentiality; and, where children are at risk in the home, removal of the abuser rather than the child.

¹ Cawson, P., Wattam, C., Brooker, S. and Kelly, G. (2000) Child maltreatment in the United Kingdom: a study of the prevalence of child abuse and neglect. London: NSPCC. An updated NSPCC study of the prevalence of child abuse will be published in 2010.

² This percentage is derived from figures reported by young adults for both contact and non-contact sexual abuse experienced in childhood (under the age of 16).

Speaking out and seeking help

The hardest thing for an abused child to do is to summon the courage to speak out against their abuser and seek help. The evidence provided by the children's calls to ChildLine are echoed in NSPCC research by Featherstone and Evans (2004), which also shows that there are a number of barriers that prevent children from disclosing abuse. These include fear of the consequences of disclosing; fear of not being believed; fear that information will be passed on without their control; and ignorance of sources of support.

The unwillingness to approach formal agencies for support is evident in the calls to ChildLine cited in this casenote: *only two per cent of callers had approached social services about their abuse, and 12 per cent had approached the police (20 per cent when the abuse was perpetrated by a stranger).*

For this reason it is important to ensure that children have confidential, accessible and responsive services where they can disclose concerns at their own pace and in their own way. ChildLine is therefore crucial to these children, providing both telephone and online advice and support, and SMS text advice provision.

These services give children and young people access to safe, confidential communication in order to be able to speak out. Generous government funding of £30 million over four years has enabled the NSPCC to develop and expand the ChildLine service. The telephone service has proved its worth, acting literally as a lifeline for many sexually abused children.

From autumn 2009, ChildLine has a new online service where children can receive free, confidential one-to-one counselling through the ChildLine website.

Our research has found that many children are spending more of their time online and some feel more comfortable expressing their feelings in an online environment than on the phone.

Logging on to the ChildLine counselling chat service will take many children into an environment that makes them feel more comfortable, in control and able to speak out. Without this, vulnerable children are less likely to have the help they need and may be more at risk.

Recommendation: Governments across the UK should take all necessary measures to encourage children to access safe and confidential services when they have concerns and continue to fund helpline services for children.

Raising awareness and increasing understanding of child sexual abuse

As has been said previously in this casenote, when children are sexually abused by a stranger, it can be easier for them to seek help from their families, and other agencies. However, ChildLine offers a unique source of safe help to the child who feels literally imprisoned when sexual abuse occurs, as is far more frequently the case, within the family.

The ChildLine cases show once again that the majority of child sexual abuse occurs within families and in contexts where the perpetrator is known to the child. Calls made to ChildLine, as cited in this casenote, clearly identify that only 5 per cent of the main perpetrators children reported as their abusers were strangers. Over a third of callers

identified that the main perpetrators of their experience of sexual abuse were adults with a parental role.

Public education is vital for tackling myths and stereotypes about offending – and this in turn can help children and protective adults to identify sexual abuse and obtain help. Yet sexual abuse within the family or by those close to and known to the child is still a difficult and challenging issue where the popular myth and stereotype still focus on strangers.

The failure to confront the reality of child sexual abuse leaves children at risk by making it more difficult for them to understand and cope with the complex feelings they have surrounding abuse by those they know and even love. It also makes it hard for them to recognise and understand what is happening to them and to seek help.

Similarly, it is important that adults who are in a position to protect children also understand that abusers may be close to home and that they need to know how to identify the warning signs.

While we commend the pilot awareness-raising work undertaken by Stop it Now!³, we take the view that the governments in the UK need to take a lead in ensuring that education and public awareness initiatives are based on what is known about child sexual abuse. All adults need to be able to recognise grooming or potentially harmful, worrying or suspicious behaviour and know how to report concerns.

Recommendation: Governments across the UK should ensure that there is a comprehensive programme of public education about sexual abuse, so that child sexual abuse is properly understood and can be challenged within each jurisdiction.

Female sex offending

One of the issues raised by this casenote is the number of calls about female abusers. As calls to ChildLine are self-selecting, this cannot be taken to be statistically representative of the level of female offending generally.

However, there is anecdotal evidence that female sexual abuse may be under-reported in the current research, which estimates that up to 5 per cent of sexual abuse is perpetrated by females. This is considered to be due to a reluctance or unwillingness on the part of professionals to acknowledge or identify sexual offending by females, as it seems shocking, unnatural and to contravene our understandings of the dynamics of sexual abuse.⁴

It is important that, regardless of what is currently known about the numbers of female offenders, more is done to understand the nature of sexual offending by women, raise awareness among the public so that they can report it, and enable professionals to identify concerns, support victims and prosecute offenders.

³ Stop it Now! UK & Ireland is a campaign, managed by the Lucy Faithfull Foundation, which aims to prevent child sexual abuse by raising awareness and encouraging early recognition and responses to the problem by abusers themselves and those close to them. For further information, visit www.stopitnow.org.uk

⁴ Recent research for the NSPCC by Dr Lisa Bunting has identified a lack of awareness or acceptance of female-perpetrated child sexual abuse as being a particular barrier to professionals responding to this type of abuse.

Currently, the issue of female sex offending is not well reflected in policy, practice and guidance around offender management or child protection. This issue should be part of the national guidance across the UK and training provided by local safeguarding children boards (LSCBs) in England and Wales, local child protection committee (LCPCs) in Scotland, area child protection committees (ACPCs) in Northern Ireland and public protection arrangements.

Recommendation: Governments across the UK should ensure that child protection guidance at both a national and local level explicitly recognises that females can and do commit sexual offences against children. Governments across the UK should also ensure that the appropriate policies and processes are in place to facilitate the assessment and management of convicted female sex offenders through public protection arrangements.

Improvements to professional training and understanding of sexual abuse

There is often a failure to address sexual abuse issues in local strategies and local training. Local safeguarding children boards (LSCBs) in England and Wales, local child protection committees (LCPCs) in Scotland and area child protection committees (ACPCs) in Northern Ireland need to work with the multi-agency public protection arrangements⁵ to deliver joint training on this issue and improve the ways they share information and educate the public on this issue.

Recommendation: Local bodies responsible for child protection training need to work with multi-agency public protection arrangements to deliver joint training and education programmes. These must address all aspects of sexual abuse, including the presence of women and children among those who commit sexual offences against children.

Prevention work with perpetrators and their partners

If children are to be better protected and sexual abuse prevented, it is important to offer ways for perpetrators and others who are concerned about potential abuse in their own families to come forward and seek help. Helplines such as Stop it Now! provide one way of doing this.

In addition, follow-up treatment services must be developed so that potential perpetrators can address their feelings and behaviours before they go on to abuse.

Other work is also critical: supportive group-work with carers of abused children, particularly the partners of adult perpetrators, can assist the child's recovery, improve the carer's protective skills, and facilitate understanding and decision-making in the home environment, helping to prevent further risk.

Given the fact that most abusers never come into contact with the criminal justice system, it is important that those who might sexually harm children are encouraged to come forward and are offered treatment.

⁵ MAPPA in England and Wales, public protection arrangements in Northern Ireland (PPANI)

Treatment programmes should be made available to those who commit sexual offences regardless of whether or not they are in contact with the criminal justice system.

Recommendation: Treatment services must be available for individuals worried that their own thoughts, feelings and behaviours may lead them to harm children. We recommend the development and expansion of accredited treatment programmes so that they are more widely available at an earlier stage, as well as for the non-abusing partners of perpetrators.

Internet safety

In addition to its undoubted value, tragically the internet has also sometimes become a mechanism that can facilitate the wider sexual abuse of children: a tool to meet and groom children, and a mechanism to distribute and exchange child abuse content. In 2006 the UK Government launched CEOP, the new child exploitation and online protection centre, to tackle this issue.

The reality is that the online environment and new technologies (especially the use of photographs, texts, webcams and social networking) are a mainstream part of children's lives – part of the way children live and interact with others, including those known to them already.

Yet, as high-profile cases continue to remind us, the internet has undoubtedly changed the potential scope of sexual abuse, providing spaces for offenders to network with one another to reinforce the idea that sexual abuse is acceptable, as well as enabling access to children and the ability to circulate child abuse materials.

Our recent *Safety.Net* campaign calls on the UK Government to ensure that filtering technology is available on computers and mobile phones, that the industry ensures that social networking sites review and remove unsuitable content and that the UK Government and industry act to disrupt the exchange of images via peer-to-peer file sharing.

It is also important that professionals understand the risks that the internet presents for children and that the internet should feature in prequalification training and as part of continuing professional development (CPD) for those who work with children.

Recommendation: The NSPCC is calling on the UK Government and industry to take action in six priority areas that are critical to children's safety. These are:

- 1. That the Westminster Government and industry should research and devise an action plan on how to combat the use of peer to peer software for the distribution of child sex abuse images.***
- 2. WiFi providers in public places should ensure that access to adult sites is restricted unless users have clearly shown that they are adults over the age of 18. Mobile phone companies that manufacture handsets with WiFi capability built in should also have safety settings.***
- 3. Social networking sites should regularly review content on their sites and make it easy for users to report inappropriate content so that it can be swiftly taken***

down. Sites should also ensure they provide **clear sources of help** for children to report bullying or abuse.

4. The Westminster Government should **review progress on the take up and use of child safety software on all computers and internet-enabled devices** (eg mobile phones), with a view to requiring manufacturers to provide safety tools.
5. **Training should be provided for professionals** (social workers, probation officers etc) who work with or come into contact with online offenders to help them manage the risks they pose.
6. Governments across the UK should fund the **development of more therapeutic services for children who have been sexually abused** where pictures or film of that abuse have appeared on the internet and they have to live with the knowledge that these images will remain in circulation.

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Appendix 1

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 case records from 2008/09 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 callers.

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 2008 to March 2009. 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 or contact the NSPCC Media Team on: 020 7825 2500, email media@childline.org.uk or visit: 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 1st on behalf of the NSPCC.

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