

CURRENT TOPIC

ChildLine—the first twelve years

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Abstract

This brief article aims to give a history and overview of ChildLine's work in the first 12 years of its existence and to provide references to more detailed information on a range of issues that children and young people themselves have identified as important. All callers' names and identifying details have been changed to preserve confidentiality.

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Children need ChildLine

“I used to believe I had a normal family. I thought it was normal not to be spoken to, just shouted at. I thought it was normal to be scared to go home, to be bashed around, and worst of all, to be hated. I was afraid to tell you, but now I have, I'm glad I did. I needed to share it. Tell others to speak out as soon as they can.” (Tiana, aged 14)¹

ChildLine—0800 1111—is the free telephone helpline for children and young people in danger or distress. It is available from anywhere in the UK and provides a confidential telephone counselling service for any child with any problem, 24 hours a day, every day. Since it was launched in October 1986, ChildLine has helped one million children. In addition to the telephone helpline, ChildLine also provides a freepost service for children and young people throughout the United Kingdom and has recently (February 1998) launched a schools outreach programme, ChildLine in Partnership with Schools (CHIPS), which enables young people to learn about ChildLine and to work with each other. *CHIPS Chat*, a newsletter for young people in secondary schools, is published three times a year.

In 1997/98, ChildLine counselled over 115 000 children—about all kinds of problems and concerns²:

- 20% of children counselled (over 22 000) rang about physical or sexual abuse, sometimes both
- 17% (more than 19 000) spoke about bullying
- 13% (more than 14 500) rang about family problems
- Children also rang about substance abuse, running away, bereavement, their unhappiness when parents divorce, pregnancy, worries about sex, suicide, and problems with friends or at school.

How ChildLine began

In the spring of 1986, the BBC consumer programme, *That's Life!*, presented by Esther Rantzen appealed to viewers for their help in conducting a survey on child abuse. The BBC ran a helpline for 24 hours after the programme for adults and children who wished to call. The lines were jammed by children, who insisted on remaining anonymous, but confided details of terrible cruelty and abuse.

Three thousand adults (90% were women) completed a BBC questionnaire³ in which 90% recounted, usually for the first time, experience of sexual abuse in their childhood. A special ChildWatch team was set up to examine the questionnaire and make a programme on child abuse. They found that children in 1986 were suffering as much as children had in the past; the suffering described by adult survivors of sexual abuse in childhood was echoed by today's children. Adults and children told the same story—cruelty happens at home; most abusers are members of their own family; they have no one to turn to; they think no one will ever believe them if they ask for help—yet they felt able to confide in an unseen, unnamed person at the end of a telephone line.

The ChildWatch team met with child care professionals from the statutory and voluntary sectors—including the NSPCC, Kidscape, Great Ormond Street Hospital, and Social Services departments—to discuss how to establish a permanent telephone helpline which would provide a way of helping those who could not be reached in any other way. These original advisors became ChildLine's Professional Advisory Group, comprising distinguished professionals with specialist knowledge and experience of working with children and young people.

In October 1986, the BBC special on child abuse, called *ChildWatch*, launched ChildLine. British Telecom provided ChildLine with space and with a simple memorable telephone number, 0800 1111. The logo, a smiling telephone, was shown on the programme. The response that first night—approximately 55 000 attempted calls—and subsequent nights exceeded all expectations. ChildLine quickly took root in the minds of children and young people as their line, and after more than 12 years in existence, has become established as *the* place that children and young people identify as their own.

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How ChildLine works

From the beginning, the core of ChildLine has been volunteer counsellors, who currently number around one thousand, drawn from all parts of society and representing a wide age range. These volunteers receive a focused ChildLine training, which aims to equip them for working on the phone and for the issues which children and young people wish to talk about. They are supported by a professional staff team drawn from different backgrounds, including the medical profession, social work, nursing, psychology, counselling, and teaching.

Many of the children and young people who ring ChildLine tell us they have never spoken to an adult before about their problems and that it has sometimes taken them months to pluck up the courage to ring us. This is particularly true of sexually abused children. In a recent ChildLine survey,⁴ more than 30% of 2500 young people between the ages of 11 and 16 told us they would be most likely to tell another young person in the first instance if they had a problem. Most children start by ringing anonymously and rarely name their abusers—often because they have been threatened with dire consequences if they speak out. These are some of the things that children tell us: “He said he would kill Mummy if I told.” “I don’t want him to go to prison.” “I don’t want to be put into a children’s home.” “I just want him to stop hurting me.”

ChildLine’s trained counsellors help children to talk through their problems, including the shame, grief, and pain that they suffer, and help them to build their shattered self esteem. Children and young people are encouraged to believe that they have the right to be safe and ChildLine works actively, with them, to help resolve their problems.

All calls to ChildLine are confidential. ChildLine counsellors do not make referrals against the child’s wishes unless there is a life threatening situation. ChildLine will, however, make a referral to another agency such as social services (or social work departments in Scotland) or the police if the child is ready for further action to be taken. In 1997/98, 970 children and young people were referred. Intervention of this kind is not always possible—very early in ChildLine’s life, counsellors learnt that attempting to push a solution before a child was ready simply meant that the child might never ring back again and the abuse would continue unchecked. ChildLine’s counsellors, therefore, work patiently and carefully with children, often helping them to identify a person whom they know and trust and who can help them to change their situation. This person may, for example, be a friend of the same age, a teacher, a near relative, a family friend, or a trusted professional.

Does ChildLine receive hoax calls?

This is a question that is often asked by adults—but rarely by children! ChildLine receives calls from children in groups, laughing and joking with friends. Often there is one child in the group that has phoned ChildLine to “test”, who may telephone later with a particular problem. It is important, therefore, not to jump to conclusions, and to provide an accept-

ing response to children and young people through the ChildLine switchboard. Like The Samaritans helpline, we often receive silent calls, or calls where callers can only sob down the phone—calls where children cannot bring themselves to talk immediately. These young people desperately want help but wish to test out the service for themselves; they need reassurance, for example, that we do not trace telephone calls, and courage to try to find the words to describe what is happening to them.

ChildLine now

From its inception, it was necessary for ChildLine to define its aims and objectives which hold as true today as they did at the beginning. These are:

- To protect children at significant risk of harm (as defined by the Children Act 1989⁵)
- To help children resolve or alleviate their problems. This is achieved by a child centred approach, with special consideration for the age and stage of development of the young person calling
- To raise public awareness and influence policies and practice which affect children’s lives and development.

It has been necessary for ChildLine to expand very rapidly to meet the needs of the children who call. The latest information received from BT indicates that, at the present time, approximately 15 000 calls are attempted to ChildLine every day. We are now able to answer about 4000 calls a day, although there are still children and young people who want to talk to ChildLine but cannot get through.

ChildLine’s original base—now its headquarters—is in London. To increase the number of children we can counsel, call centres have opened in Nottingham, Glasgow, Manchester, Swansea, Rhyl, and Leeds, and one will soon open in Belfast.

ChildLine also runs special geographical lines, for example for the Channel Islands, West Sussex, and Lincolnshire. There are also lines for children of parents who work in the armed services and are living abroad. As part of its core service, ChildLine provides a Minicom service for children with hearing disabilities.

ChildLine’s campaigning work

ChildLine is committed to ensuring that children’s voices are heard and we campaign for changes that will help children and young people. Some successful examples of recent campaigns are:

- Research and recommendations from the Boarding School Line (1991)⁶ were incorporated into the Department of Education’s guidelines for the inspection of boarding schools relating to privacy, access to phones, and prevention and detection abuse
- In 1994, ChildLine ran a Bullying Line, which answered more than 40 000 calls and counselled more than 3500 children in depth. Following our successful report, *Why Me?*,⁷ which proposed positive action against bullying in schools, ChildLine has distributed almost 100 000 leaflets on bullying for children and adults

- ChildLine gave evidence to the Utting and Warner Commissions of Inquiry into children in care. We then established a permanent line, previously known as ChildLine for Children in Care and now known as The Line (0800 884444), available to all children living away from home; *Time to listen* (1994)⁸ told decision makers what children are saying about their lives in care, and *Children living away from home* (1997)⁹ looked in detail at children's lives in foster homes, in children's homes, and in boarding schools
- In 1996, ChildLine published *Going to court: child witnesses in their own words*,¹⁰ which argued for improvements and changes in the court system for child witnesses. ChildLine has been instrumental in working with other organisations, such as the NSPCC, to produce a Child Witness Pack¹¹ to help children called as witnesses in court. We continue to campaign for children's rights in the legal system, including a recent conference (May 1999) which was supported by leading QC, Cherie Booth, and Hillary Rodham Clinton, lawyer and First Lady of the United States, both of whom addressed the conference on the issue of the legal rights of children and young people¹²
- ChildLine has highlighted the vulnerable position of children who live with parents suffering from alcohol abuse. In 1998, ChildLine co-hosted a conference with Alcohol Concern to bring together professionals working with adults and children
- ChildLine works with MPs, peers, and policy makers to ensure that children's voices are heard in the heart of government. ChildLine has played a key role in briefing and lobbying peers and MPs on the Sex Offenders Act (1997), and continues to work with other children's charities and government on the implementation of the Act to ensure child protection is given a clear priority
- ChildLine publishes help and guidance on coping with the stress of exams, responding to children and young people who phone ChildLine about exam stress. ChildLine has published a leaflet, *Exam stress and how to beat it*.¹³

Other ChildLine publications include:

- *London calling: calls to ChildLine's dedicated London and South East service*¹⁴
- *Unhappy families, unhappy children*¹⁵
- *"I know you're not a doctor but . . ." Children calling ChildLine about health*¹⁶
- *Children calling from Northern Ireland*¹⁷
- *Beyond the limit: children who live with parental alcohol misuse*¹⁸

- *Child protection: everybody's business*¹⁹
- *Children helping their friends*²⁰
- *Listening to ten year olds*²¹
- *Children and racism*²²
- *"It hurts me too": children's experiences of domestic violence and refuge life*²³
- *Stressed out: what children tell ChildLine about exams and work pressure*²⁴
- *We know it's tough to talk: boys in need of help*²⁵
- *Children at crisis point*.²⁶

Of special interest to paediatricians and related professionals are *"I know you're not a doctor but . . ."*,¹⁶ written by ChildLine volunteer and retired paediatrician, Sheila Cross, and forthcoming ChildLine publications about children, HIV and AIDS, and children and mental health.

Information about ChildLine and its work can be obtained directly by looking at the ChildLine website (<http://www.childline.org.uk>).

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