

Towergate and ChildLine working in Partnership May 2010

Throughout April 2010 ChildLine volunteer counsellors answered **43,659** calls and handled **5,594** online chats

Focus on Loneliness

Over the last five years ChildLine has found that children are increasingly talking to counsellors because they are feeling lonely, sad and isolated. For some young people, loneliness may be a natural part of growing up. However, other children and young people may feel so desperately lonely that their lives are affected in a debilitating and devastating way. Loneliness can be a very serious problem.

ChildLine volunteer counsellors, more than 230 of whom have been funded by Towergate, talk to children every day about issues associated with loneliness. Family relationship problems, bullying and physical abuse are the top reasons that young people experience these emotions, but depression and mental health problems, issues at school and bereavement can also lead to children feeling isolated and that they have nowhere else to turn. In fact around 35 per cent of these children say that they have spoken to no one other than ChildLine about their problem.

"My Mum died three weeks ago and I really miss her today because I have broken my arm and want my Mum to hold my hand. I feel lonely" (Jessica, aged eight)

For many callers, loneliness is a feeling they have been coping with for some time: a pervasive, painful and ingrained problem. Many children experiencing loneliness phone ChildLine because they have reached a point of desperation. One ChildLine counsellor observed that *"A lot of the time children don't want to bother their family with how they feel because they think they've got enough problems. They can become really withdrawn and lonely"*.

Why do children feel lonely and isolated?

As mentioned, there are many reasons that children tell us they feel sad and lonely, but by far the most common reason they tell us they feel this way is when they are experiencing difficulties in relationships with parents. For many callers who are lonely, not being able to communicate with and effectively relate to their parents can cause or compound these feelings.

Parental divorce or separation can also be a lonely experience for many young people. It can be hard for them to choose with whom to live, and they can end up missing the parent with whom they have less contact. The absence of either parent due to divorce or separation can be deeply upsetting for a young person. Both parents usually play an important role in a child's development and the absence of one, especially if they were close before the separation, can make a young person feel especially lonely.

Another form of isolation experienced by callers in relation to family relationship problems is being left at home alone. This can be an intimidating experience for many children and young people, and can make them feel very vulnerable. Parents working long hours may add to their children's loneliness.

"The child's Mum and Dad work a lot... and she just wanted to tell them how well she'd done at school. Often callers just want you to give them a bit of praise and reassurance when there's no one else who does" (ChildLine counsellor)

The second most common issue that children tell us results in feelings of loneliness is bullying. Bullying has always been the biggest overall reason that children speak to ChildLine, and for many children and young people, being bullied, either physically or verbally, can be a painful experience that makes them feel distressed, sad and alone. Children who are being bullied may be socially ostracised and the bullies will exert power to isolate them. They may feel utterly powerless, not know what to do and feel unable to





seek help. The young person may have exhausted all avenues for help to make the bullying stop but it has continued. This can make them feel even more lonely and isolated. ChildLine offers a place for the young person to turn.

"I am being bullied by some girls at school. They tease me and blame me for everything and there is nobody that backs me up. I have no friends because everybody has paired up and I have no one because my friends moved away recently. I feel like nothing. I told my teachers but they don't make the bullies stop, it just gets worse. My parents don't listen and tell me to ignore the bullies. It all makes me think I shouldn't have been born." (Sarah, who did not give her age)

Part of the problem for callers who are bullied is not just the bullies themselves. It is also that being bullied can prevent other people from befriending them. Part of the bullying can be to exclude the caller from activities and friendship groups, which can make the situation worse. Bullying destroys young people's confidence and this can then make it even harder for them to make friends.

How are ChildLine counsellors helping these children?

ChildLine gives young people the opportunity to talk safely and confidentially about the problems they are experiencing. Counsellors always take the child seriously and, importantly, they acknowledge that the child has made a courageous decision in contacting ChildLine to talk.

When a young person gets in touch with ChildLine, either by phone or online, they are encouraged to express how they are feeling and to explore their options with the counsellor. It is frightening for young people to feel so lonely that they cannot cope and so the counsellor will ensure that the child knows that they are not alone, that ChildLine cares about them and that the service is always there for them whenever they need it, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

The role of a ChildLine counsellor in all cases is to empower the young person to make their own decisions and seek their own solutions, but also to validate their feelings and ensure that the child knows that it is okay for them to feel the way that they do. The counsellor will encourage the child to explore the positive aspects of their lives, and in most cases they will suggest that the young person gets back in touch to let ChildLine know how they are getting on. This is particularly important when a child is feeling lonely because their feelings can degenerate very quickly into despair and the child needs to know that we are there for them to talk to, especially if they are contemplating self-harm.

Thank you to Towergate

Ideally, every child would have a trusted adult to whom they can turn, and in whom they can confide when feeling lonely, sad or isolated. Sadly this is not the case but, largely thanks to Towergate, ChildLine volunteer counsellors are there to act not simply as a listening ear, but also as the means whereby children and young people can find support, consider positive options and increase their confidence and self-esteem.

As ever we are so grateful for the donations and support that we receive from Towergate. Children often reach out to our counsellors when they really have nowhere else to turn, sometimes when their situation has become dangerous. With your help we can continue to be there for children like Maria, 12, who told ChildLine:

"I am feeling low. I feel like ending my life. I've been writing goodbye letters to people close to me. I've been self-harming for over a year. I live with my mum and sister but don't talk to them much. I have friends at school but they don't live very near. I feel lonely and isolated."

thank you