

ChildLine - Don't Call Us: More Support is Needed for Child Telephone Helplines

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Last year, ChildLine – the national telephone helpline for children – celebrated its twentieth year of operation.¹ Since its launch, it has answered 22 million telephone calls and counselled almost two million children on a range of grave problems including sexual, physical and emotional abuse, bullying, self-harm and suicide. ChildLine can rightly be viewed as one of the most important developments in child protection and wider child welfare in the UK in the last two decades.

As part of its celebrations, ChildLine launched a '20th Birthday Appeal'.² The aim of the appeal was to raise £20 million that would enable the organisation to increase the proportion of calls it answers from 57% to 80%. Currently, 2,000 of the 4,500 children who ring ChildLine each day are unable to get through.

When one thinks of the tremendous courage it must take a distressed child to phone a complete stranger, and discuss such painful and personal issues, then it should leave us with a profound sense of sadness that any of these telephone calls – let alone thousands – are not answered. Sadness, though, is not the only emotion this situation ought to provoke. For we should be incandescent with rage that in the 21st Century, in the world's fourth largest economy and – with great irony – in an age of unparalleled concern about child abuse but also great telecommunications capability, we cannot manage something as simple and straightforward as answering calls from abused and frightened children.

Whose responsibility?

The question needs to be asked as to how this situation has been allowed to come about, or more pertinently, who has allowed it to come about?

ChildLine, and the NSPCC, whose aegis it now comes under, can argue that they do not have the resources for answering more calls. This is, perhaps, a not unreasonable argument. However, one can only wonder why they have not launched a massive fund-raising and political campaign to address this issue. Given how transparently important and deserving the service is, one would have thought the success of such a campaign was virtually guaranteed. ChildLine/NSPCC also have to be challenged as to why they have set themselves the defeatist-sounding target of answering only 80% - as opposed to 100% - of telephone calls from children.

After children themselves, it is the individuals and organisations working with children who can best appreciate the adversities to which they are exposed and their need for a helpline. Yet few, if any, of these groups, whether in, for example, education, health, police or social work, have drawn attention to this scandal.

And what of the Government and for that matter previous ones over the past 20 years? It is hard to believe that they have not been aware of this issue. And if they have been – is it that they don't care? In light of the plethora of child-centred initiatives Labour governments have implemented since 1997, such as Sure Start, Children's Trust and the post of Children's Commissioner, it would seem unfair to level this accusation. That said, the toleration of this situation is a major error; indeed the Government can be seen to be in contravention of its own policy objectives. Three of the central goals of its current and crucial Every Child Matters programme, subsequently given force of statute

under the *Children Act 2004*, are that children 'stay safe', 'enjoy and achieve' and 'be healthy'.³ But how can the Government conceive of these aspirations ever being realised when it is not possible to achieve something as basic as answering the telephone to desperate children?

The media too has done little to resolve this situation. Although it often reports on child abuse, it is preoccupied with sensationalist cases. Conspicuous among these are those where parents/carers murder their children and those where strangers abduct, sexually abuse and kill children. This is, of course, not to say that the media should not cover these terrible cases – it undoubtedly must. It needs, though, to be concerned with the full, albeit depressing, range of wrongs affecting children. Moreover, the media should lead, as well as follow – uncovering the story, as well as reporting upon it.

And neither can the general public absolve themselves of responsibility. For they have not been writing to their MPs or newspaper editors or protesting on the streets demanding that action be taken to tackle this issue. Neither, for that matter, have they been flooding ChildLine/NSPCC with donations.

Ways Forward

Who, then, is responsible for this situation? In truth, we – ChildLine/NSPCC, those working with children, Government, media and the general public – all shoulder some of the blame. Collectively, the message we have sent to children is: don't call us, we'll call you. However, just as all of these sections of society are part of the problem, so too can they be part of the solution.

Although late in the day, the Government, for its part, appears to be recognising this. The then Chancellor, Gordon Brown, promised in his budget in March, an annual grant of £10 million a year to ChildLine.⁴ This grant has since been 're-announced' by Ed Balls, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families.⁵

Notwithstanding this decision, ChildLine/NSPCC, with the support of other children's organisations, and the backing of the media, should embark upon a high profile and ambitious fund-raising drive. The purpose of this would be to ensure that ChildLine has sufficient funding, in the medium and long-term, to answer every call children make.

In the short-term, ChildLine/NSPCC should lobby the Government to ensure that it keeps its funding pledge but also makes up an deficits that might arise in the future, in what is, for many children, a fourth emergency service.

But it should not be thought that ChildLine's inability to answer calls from children is solely a financial matter. For this situation also reflects the existence of more fundamental and underlying influences upon society's attitude and approach to vulnerable children. Chief among these are our ability to become immune to children's needs, a focus upon treatment rather than prevention or early intervention, and a fixation with perpetrators at the expense of victims.

Conclusion

These influences can be seen to be at work in respect of a whole series of services to children. The shortage of therapeutic services for abused and other traumatised children has been known about for years.⁶ Provision, such as accommodation and legal support, for women and children experiencing violence is woefully inadequate.⁷ The Princess Royal Trust for Carers recently reported that there are tens of thousands of children struggling to care for ill or disabled relatives with little or no help.⁸ My own research, on internet-based child pornography, has found that the police have few resources for identifying the victims who feature in these images.⁹

One would never want to lose sight of the tremendous progress that has been made over the past twenty years and more in helping children. But neither should we be blind to the need that still exists. There remain countless children, in various desperate straits, who are making calls upon us that we are not answering.

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FOOTNOTES

- 1 ChildLine. 2006. ChildLine's 20th Birthday Appeal. ChildLine: London. www.childline.org.uk/open/CL20/CL20. Asp [10 November 2006]
- 2 Ibid
- 3 Department for Children, Schools and Families. 2005. *Aims and Outcomes – Every Child Matters*. DfCSF: London. Available: www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/aims/ [25 September 2006]
- 4 HM Treasury. 2007. Budget 2007. Building Britain's Long-Term Future: Prosperity and Fairness for Families. HM Treasury: London
- 5 DCSF. 2007. £30m boost for children's helplines. Press Notice 2007/0122. DCSF: London
- 6 Baginsky, M. 2000. *Counselling and Support Services for Young People aged 12-16 years who have Experienced Sexual Abuse: A Study of Provision in Italy, the Netherlands and the UK*. NSPCC: London.
- 7 Radford, L. and Hester, M. 2006. *Mothering through Domestic Violence*. Jessica Kingsley: London.
- 8 The Princess Royal Trust for Carers: London. *Young Carers' Policy*. The Princess Royal Trust for Carers: London.
- 9 Gallagher, B., Fraser, C., Christmann, I. and Hodgson, Bo. 2006. *International and Internet Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation. Research Report*. Huddersfield: University of Huddersfield. <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/461/>
See also: International and Internet Child Sexual Abuse, *childRIGHT* number 240, October 2007, p14.