



Working with children and families

ChildLine

Gill Keep

My name's Gill Keep, and I'm ChildLine's senior policy officer in our policy research and development department. ChildLine was set up in 1986 and it came about as a result of a programme that Esther Rantzen did, called Childwatch, which was about child abuse and after the programme, they set up a helpline for anybody to phone in who'd experienced child abuse. There were so many calls. over ninety thousand in one night, that people became very aware that this was a huge problem which hadn't been looked at.

Last year, we counselled 115,000 children, and children called about everything under the sun, everything that you could imagine. They called about not getting on with their mums and dads, about having arguments with their brothers and sisters, about being worried about their exams, through to very serious problems about being abused sexually or physically, being thrown out of their homes in the middle of the night and having nowhere to stay. About being bullied, about the feelings about their parents being divorced. Everything that you could imagine children called ChildLine about.

Stan Tucker

Gill identifies the same key concern as Carolyn from the Children's Legal Centre

Gill Keep

The single largest problem that children call us about now is bullying, and last year we had over 19,000 calls about bullying which is unbelievable, and it's bullying ranging from being beaten up, and having your head put down the toilet or having your clothes and possessions taken away from you or torn, through to the verbal bullying and name calling, teasing, to being excluded, being told that you're not my friend any more, every range, every kind of bullying that you can imagine. It was quite startling to see that the children all the young people involved who called about racism or who identified themselves, as being from a minority ethnic community, talked of quite severe racist behaviour towards them.

A lot of them talked about racist bullying in schools, and many of them were suffering at home, from, racism within their own families. For instance one young girl who's mother had married a second time, had stepfather, who was white, was appalling to her, and very racist, and, told her that she should scrub her skin clean and all that sort of stuff, and this was incredibly upsetting happening in her own home.

Stan Tucker

The trained counsellors that answer the calls often have to deal with several issues at once.

Gill Keep

When a child calls ChildLine, they often have not spoken to anybody else about the problem, and even the act of calling can be very frightening to a child. It can feel as though they are exposing themselves, putting themselves on the line, they don't know the reaction they're going to get. Very often, children talk to us, and by the end of the conversation, it's become clear to them who in their own immediate circle they can go to with this problem. There's a ChildLine counsellor, by talking about the problem with the child, will be able to help the child think, 'Well who is there that I know who I would feel safe going to? Can I go to my aunt, is there a favourite teacher, maybe the parent of a friend?' ChildLine can only help so far, most children phone once, and that's enough for them, it's given them the confidence that they need to then go somewhere else with the problem if they need to, or perhaps it's been resolved for themselves just through the one phone call. One of the great strengths of

ChildLine and one of its great successes is that we listen to children. We don't judge children, we let them tell us what they want to tell us, and that includes personal details about their age, where they live, we never ask children anything like that, it's up to them to volunteer it.

Stan Tucker

How do the children who ring ChildLine describe their treatment by people in the legal and social services?

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Because of the kind of service that ChildLine is, we tend to hear more bad news than good news. We do hear from children who are very pleased about the sort of service they've received from adult professionals. Children, who go to court, for instance, as witnesses, sometimes tell us that the clerk of the court was very helpful, they showed them round in advance. But unfortunately, we get very many calls where, children haven't had a particularly happy experience at the hands of professionals. And, often it's simply because they've felt they haven't been heard, and they haven't been listened to, and their views have not been taken into account or respected. And I think it's also very interesting that there's a great fear of professionals, even from children who may not yet have had any contact with professionals. There is a great fear about their power, and what they might do, and that they might sweep in, and sweep out again, leaving fragments of the family's life scattered all around.

Stan Tucker

Finally, Gill sums up the key message from all the children who have rung ChildLine.

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What children have told ChildLine that they most appreciate is being listened to, and their views respected, even though, and they do realise that it isn't always possible for what they want to happen to happen. They are sophisticated enough to understand that. But the process of listening, and treating them with respect, and their views with respect, is very important, especially if the reason that they're involved with adult professionals is a traumatic one, abuse or divorce or whatever, it's very important that they're given the opportunity to say their piece. I think the message is a very simple one which is, listen to children, don't underestimate them, listen to what they have to say, respect what they have to say, and talk about decisions with them.