



## Helpline highlight:

More people contacting the NSPCC with concerns about neglected children

## About this report

This report demonstrates how the NSPCC's helpline for adults can be a valuable part of the child protection system. This edition focuses on how the helpline can assist with cases of child neglect in the community.

The NSPCC is the only UK charity focused on ending cruelty to children. Through national services such as our free helpline, we provide advice and support to anyone concerned about a child. Our trained child protection professionals are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. They come from a range of backgrounds including social work, education, police, counselling and psychotherapy. Their training and experience enables them to make assessments on all enquiries and – if necessary – refer serious reports on to police or children's services.<sup>1</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> In England, Wales and Northern Ireland the term 'children's services' is used. In Scotland the more general term 'social work' is used. For the remainder of this document the term children's services is to be used to refer to both children's services and social work.

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“If people contacted us sooner about neglect the intervention could be earlier and there would be less harm for the child.”

**NSPCC helpline counsellor**

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# Neglect: a serious child protection issue

Child neglect is a direct cause of at least one in six deaths and serious injuries in serious case reviews and is a salient feature of many more (Brandon et al. 2009).

## Key findings

The number of people contacting the NSPCC about neglect has more than doubled over the past two years. The majority of them were members of the public.

It seems that people are becoming more aware of neglect, are taking it seriously and are becoming more motivated to take action and contact the NSPCC if they are worried.

Neglect is a form of abuse that undermines children's development and makes them vulnerable to lasting emotional, physical and social disorders.

However, in the majority of our calls, people wait longer before contacting the NSPCC about neglected children than they do about children experiencing other forms of abuse.

In many cases, people wait more than a month to call. This leaves vulnerable children to suffer and the effects of neglect to become more entrenched.

The NSPCC's study *Child Cruelty in the UK 2011* (2011) found that around one in 10 11-17 year olds have experienced neglect at some time in their lives. Neglect is also the most prevalent form of abuse within the family in the UK.

“Neglect is the persistent failure to meet a child’s basic physical and/or psychological needs, likely to result in the serious impairment of the child’s health or development.”<sup>2</sup>

***Child protection guidance for England, Working together to safeguard children (HM Government, 2010)***

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## Reports to NSPCC of neglect more likely to require a referral to statutory services

Reports to NSPCC about the neglect of a child are more likely to be referred<sup>3</sup> to the police or children's services than contacts<sup>4</sup> about other issues. 71 per cent of neglect contacts are serious enough to be referred to the police or children's services.<sup>5</sup> The percentage referred for other issues ranged between 11 per cent and 67 per cent.<sup>6</sup>

In 2011/12 of the just over 12,100 contacts by people worried about the neglect of a child, just over 8,600 were referred to the police or children's services. These referrals involved just under 17,600 children.<sup>7</sup> For the non-referrals, helpline counsellors provided advice, support and information to the callers.

NSPCC referrals are cases of neglect identified by helpline counsellors who are child protection professionals. They assess that these cases are so serious that they need attention.

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“He is running up and down the road on his own with just a nappy on. His mother is indoors and takes no notice. This has kept on happening for three months.”

**An anonymous caller about a three-year-old boy.**

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Helpline counsellors explain the reasons why they think contacts about neglect of children are more likely to require a referral:

“Often with calls about neglect there are lots of little things which add up, as they have waited so long. And the things they have seen and witnessed directly are more tangible so it allows referrals to be made.”

### How our counsellors deal with concerns

A helpline counsellor explains below how they make a decision whether to refer when someone contacts the NSPCC about neglect.

“We talk to them about their concerns, ask questions about the child and family and then assess this information in the light of our knowledge and experience, in order to form a judgment about whether the child is at risk of harm or a child in need.

“We ask about the child’s health and development, the parenting capacity of the parents or carers, and family and environmental factors. If neglect is identified we would make a referral to children’s services or the police.

“If there is an immediate risk, such as the children being left alone, we ask the police to go round immediately and check the children are safe. Alternatively we refer to children’s services who may make an assessment and offer support. This could include support from a social worker, a health visitor, school nurse, substance misuse services or a GP.”

“He had sick all down him and he was in a shocking state. He was smelling of wee and she won’t wash his clothes and he was going round in the same clothes day after day.”

**An anonymous caller about a ten-year-old boy.**



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<sup>2</sup> Government guidance on the definition of neglect is broadly similar across Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, but with slight variations.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Referrals’ are when the information is passed on to children’s services or the police. Referrals can be about more than one child.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Contacts’ is used to describe people contacting the helpline through telephone, text and online reporting. ‘Calls’ is used to describe people who contacted the helpline by telephone.

<sup>5</sup> In England 71 per cent of contacts were referred, in Scotland and Wales 73 per cent were referred and in Northern Ireland 75 per cent were referred.

<sup>6</sup> The percentage of contacts which were referred was 39 per cent for sexual abuse, 59 per cent for emotional abuse and 67 per cent for physical abuse. Concerns about other issues (adult behaviour, child behaviour, family relationships etc) are referred out 11 per cent of the time.

<sup>7</sup> Of the 17,595 children who were referred because of neglect, 1,279 (8 per cent) were under ones (including unborn), 7,000 (43 per cent) were between one and five, 3,803 (23 per cent) were between six and nine, 2,660 (16 per cent) were between ten and thirteen and 1,455 (9 per cent) were between 14 and 17. For 1,398 children the age of the child was not known.



## More people than ever are seeking guidance about neglect

In 2011/12, over 12,100 people contacted the NSPCC worried about a child or children being neglected. It is the most common issue we provided help and support on. Between 2009/10 and 2011/12 the number of people contacting the NSPCC with concerns about children being neglected has more than doubled.<sup>8</sup> Over the past five years the number of referrals about neglect have increased fourfold.

Helpline counsellors explained why they thought more people were contacting the NSPCC worried about neglect:

“This may be affected by media coverage of the involvement of neglect in cases such as Peter Connelly. Similar cases in Scotland involving neglect such as Brandon Muir may have had a similar effect.”

“Perhaps people are more aware of what neglect is and of child protection as a whole. Maybe child protection is more at the forefront of people’s minds.”

“More people know they can contact NSPCC even if they are not sure.”

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### Contacts about child neglect concerns: UK breakdown

**Of the 12,100<sup>9</sup> people who contacted the NSPCC:**

- almost 10,400 were from England
- just under 500 were from Scotland
- just under 600 were from Wales
- just under 200 were from Northern Ireland.



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<sup>8</sup> Contacts about neglect have increased from 5,363 in 2009/10 to 12,110 in 2011/12

<sup>9</sup> The remainder were from the Channel Islands, other, or not known

# Why people contact us about neglect

In 2011/12, 28 per cent of contacts to the NSPCC were about neglect.

There are a variety of types of neglect that people contact the NSPCC about when they are concerned for a child. These can overlap, with many children experiencing more than one type of neglect. Helpline counsellors have described below the key neglect issues people contact the NSPCC about and their frequency (in descending order).

## **Related to parental alcohol or substance misuse**

In many cases neglect of children is linked to the parents' drink or drug problems. Parents become unable or unwilling to attend to the needs of the child due to intoxication.

*Working Together* (2010) and other government guidance across the UK highlights the increase in neglect associated with factors such as parental drug and alcohol misuse.

### **For example a relative phoned about a three-year-old girl:**

“The mother, she’s an alcoholic and she’s drinking 24/7, and the child who is three years old is not being looked after properly. I walked into the house, the mother was passed out and the door was wide open. The child was playing with the kettle and had got a bottle of bleach.”

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## **Home environment**

This includes dirty, messy or inappropriate home conditions.

### **For example, a friend of the family contacted the NSPCC using the online reporting form:**

“There are flies and maggots in some of the rooms. The house is full of unwashed clothes and mess. Their pet dog lives in their bathroom. The whole house stinks of dog’s urine. The young child can’t play anywhere as there is so much mess everywhere.”

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## **Physical appearance**

This includes a child’s dress and hygiene.

### **A woman contacted the NSPCC using the online reporting form about children aged nine months old and 10 years old:**

“All of the time the kids are really dirty. They are also underdressed when outside so they get cold.”

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## **Not being fed properly**

### **A neighbour contacted the NSPCC using the online reporting form about children aged seven and four:**

“The children often go round to other houses in the street asking for money or something to eat for dinner because the mum and dad spend their money on drink and drugs. I find this appalling.”

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## Emotional neglect

All forms of neglect cause emotional harm. Emotional neglect can occur alongside physical neglect or quite separately in cases where the standard of physical care is apparently high. It is often described as the parent's emotional unavailability or coldness to the child and as one type of emotional abuse.

*Working Together* (2010) gives the following definition of emotional neglect:

“The persistent emotional maltreatment of a child, such as to cause severe and persistent effects on the child's emotional development.”

Naughton et al. (forthcoming) describe the lifelong consequences of emotional neglect in their systematic review. There are devastating consequences of this form of neglect including aggression, being withdrawn and negative effects on development and peer interactions. However, people are less likely to contact the NSPCC's helpline about emotional neglect without there being obvious physical neglect as well. It could be that the signs are harder to pick up on or there is less tangible evidence.

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### A family friend calling the NSPCC about a two-year-old child

“The mother is constantly taking drugs. The child craves attention but gets ignored”.

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### Helpline counsellors identify the other key neglect issues people contact the NSPCC about and their frequency (in descending order):

- **crying** – a child heard crying and not being tended to
- **left home alone or left unattended**
- **education** – a child not in education or not being taken to school
- **medical** – a child not being taken for medical treatment or health appointments
- **young carer** – sometimes a child undertakes a parenting role in caring for siblings. This can mean that their own needs go unattended.



# Why people wait longer to get in touch

In 2011/12, 50 per cent of callers with concerns other than neglect that resulted in a referral waited at least a month before reporting abuse. In comparison, 59 per cent of people contacting the NSPCC about neglect, whose call resulted in a referral, said they had been worried for at least a month.

Our counsellors told us why they felt people waited before contacting us:

“They may put it down to different parenting or cleanliness choices.”

“Neglect of a child can be hard to identify as many members of the public do not know what constitutes neglect.”

“People think the neglect is temporary and might get better. Sadly all too often it doesn’t change without professional help. It builds up and it’s at that stage they decide to ring.”

“People are unsure whether it is neglect or untidiness and a bit of dirtiness. We encourage people to trust their instincts. We can help people make the judgement call as to whether it is neglect. More often than not with the calls we receive it is neglect.”

“If they’re a relative of the family or a close friend and know the family well, then often they are worried about what will happen to the family if they report the neglect. They are also worried the family might become aware where the information came from.”

**A neighbour contacted the NSPCC about a 12-year-old boy using the NSPCC online reporting form:**

“He doesn’t relate well to other kids and is very aggressive. Late at night, sometimes after 11 o’clock, I see him outside on the road. I don’t think he gets enough food. Very often I see him going to school late. His clothes are filthy. This has been happening for several years.”



# Neglect affects the whole community

The public are far more likely to report concerns about neglect than other issues. 70 per cent of people who contacted the NSPCC worried about child neglect were members of the public.<sup>10</sup> Contacts from the public about other concerns were between 29 per cent and 65 per cent.<sup>11</sup>

A recurring message in *The voice of the child: learning lessons from serious case reviews* (Ofsted 2011), which focuses on serious case reviews in England, is the important role of adults who are in a position to speak on behalf of the child, including members of the public such as neighbours and other community members. Statutory agencies often have to rely on members of the public to be their 'eyes and ears'.

Serious case reviews frequently highlight the need for channels for the public to speak up on behalf of children. The NSPCC provides a crucial service in providing such a channel.

Family members are less likely to contact the NSPCC worried about neglect. This may be because they do not realise just how harmful neglect can be, or they do not want to make things worse.

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## **A neighbour contacted the NSPCC using the online reporting form about an eight-year-old boy:**

“Their home is really dirty, food is left out for days. The boy reheats the food and then eats it. He has to make his own food whilst his mother sleeps all day. He washes in puddles in the road. The mum goes out at night and leaves him on his own.”

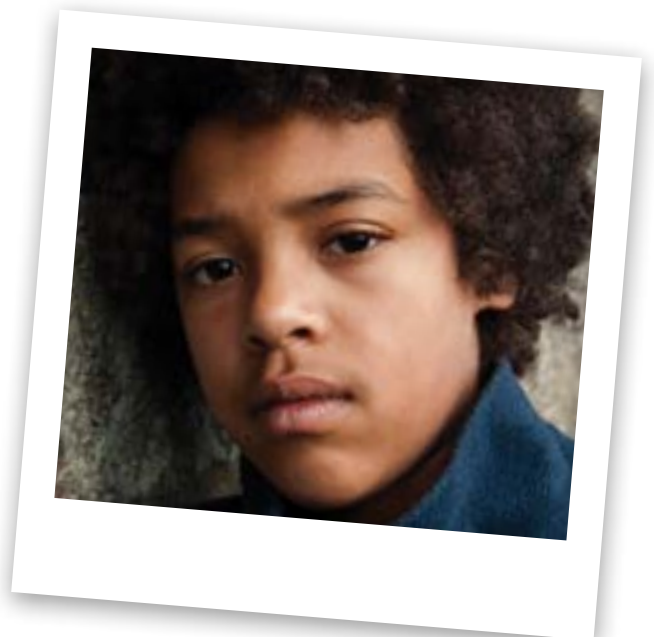
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## **Helpline counsellors talk about the higher proportion of neglect reports from members of the public:**

“The public witness events happening. They will have a different perspective to families. The families are meshed into the situation. The public are outside looking in.”

“With neglect it’s normally the parents or carers of the children who are felt to be responsible for the neglect. This makes it difficult for people in the family to make a referral.”

“Quite often callers would compare what they’ve seen with their own children. That’s why they call: because they wouldn’t do that to their own child.”



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<sup>10</sup> 12 per cent of contacts about neglect were from the parents or carers and 11 per cent were from relatives. The remainder were from other groups.

<sup>11</sup> The percentage of contacts which were the public was 42 per cent for sexual abuse, 65 per cent for emotional abuse and 65 per cent for physical abuse. For other issues (adult behaviour, child behaviour, family relationships etc), the percentage of contacts coming from members of the public was 29 per cent.

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## Megan's story

A caller phoned the NSPCC because she was worried about her neighbour Sarah and her child Megan, aged three, and did not know what else to do.

Last year Megan's father died. Sarah and Megan had no other family and had become very isolated.

The caller popped round to their home mid-afternoon to find Megan's mother drunk. The house was a mess and Megan was largely unsupervised with easy access to kitchen knives and other implements that could injure her. There was very little food in the house and Mum could not say for certain when she had last prepared food for Megan.

Sarah had begun to drink heavily everyday, and because she felt warm from the alcohol, she did not put the heating on. Megan was cold and dressed only in a t-shirt and nappy.

The caller found Megan's nappy was heavily soiled and did not appear to have been changed in quite a while.

Megan was disinterested in playing, moaning a lot and very withdrawn. She seemed very distressed and unhappy and the caller felt she really needed some love, care and attention.

As a result of the call, the NSPCC counsellor was able to alert children's services to the problems Sarah and Megan were having and support was put in place, which helped Sarah cope with her grief and ensured that Megan's care was improved. Megan stayed with her mum and the intervention helped this to be the case. Without that call anything could have happened.

This sample case draws on what people tell the helpline, but it does not describe a specific case.



# How neglect affects a child

As of March 2011<sup>12</sup>, 22,331 children in the UK were subject to child protection plans or on child protection registers because of evidence of harm from neglect. (Department for Education 2011, Scottish Government 2012, Waugh and Fitzpatrick 2012, Welsh Assembly Government 2011). Neglect is the most common reason for becoming the subject of a child protection plan in the UK.

Neglect can affect any aspect of a child's development. It can undermine brain development and growth (Scottish government 2007), and leave a child isolated and with difficulties forming relationships.

As highlighted in the NSPCC evidence presented to the Education Select Committee Review of the Child Protection System in England (January 2012): "Neglect can have serious consequences for children, including mental health problems, difficulties in forming relationships, lower educational achievements, an increased risk of substance misuse, a higher risk of experiencing abuse as well as difficulties in assuming parenting responsibilities later in life" (Taylor and Daniel 2005).

McSherry (2011) found that, by early school age, neglected children were exhibiting deficits in cognitive performance, academic achievement, classroom behaviour and social interactions. Neglect was also significantly related to the extent of psychological problems and relational difficulties experienced.

## Helpline counsellors told us:

"Neglect is very detrimental to health, self-esteem and education. It can have both immediate and prolonged effects."

"Neglect of children has a devastating effect, like a drip feed. It sets children up for a lifetime of not feeling worthy, of shame; a sense of not belonging."

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<sup>12</sup> In some of these cases children were on the child protection plan/register because of neglect combined with other forms of abuse. In Scotland the figures are from July 2011, not March 2011.

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# How the NSPCC can help with early intervention

There is a growing body of evidence of the effectiveness of early intervention with children and families. Early intervention has been high on the Scottish government's agenda for a number of years. The introduction in Scotland of the Getting it Right for Every Child approach from 2006, and the Early Years Framework (2009) both emphasise the need to identify and meet children's needs as early as possible.

*The Munro Review in England* (2011) and the Welsh government's agenda in the current Social Services (Wales) Bill also highlight the importance of early intervention.

Early intervention and prevention can also be seen as a growing theme in Northern Ireland through the Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government, the Health and Social Care Board's Transforming Your Care document and recent Children and Young Person's Strategic Partnership consultation on the future structures and direction of children's services planning.

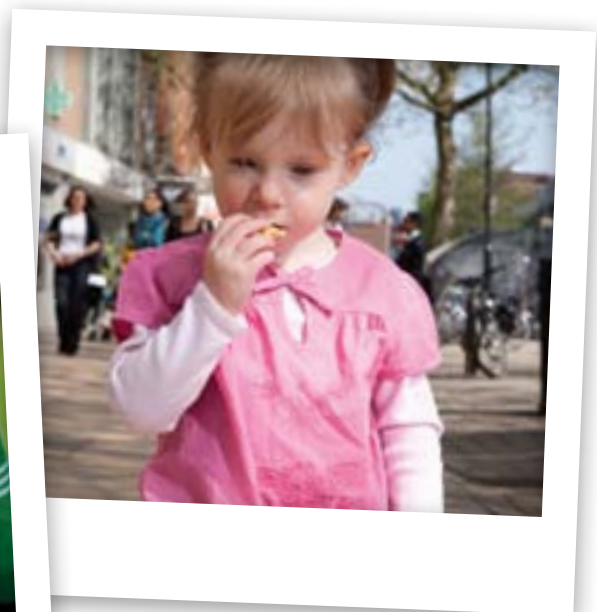
NSPCC helpline counsellors are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to give advice to the general public, parents and professionals. By encouraging people to call sooner when they have concerns about neglect, we can make sure those children are helped earlier, before the situation deteriorates.

## **Our counsellors told us why people should ring sooner:**

"If people phoned us sooner the intervention could be earlier and there would be less harm for the children. The situation could be stabilised and become less entrenched."

"Early intervention will inevitably increase the likelihood of positive outcomes for the child."

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## Conclusion

Early intervention is the most effective way of protecting children from neglect, but this relies on members of the community being the eyes and ears of children's services. Without that insight, professionals may not have the chance to help children until they have been subjected to protracted and serious harm.

It's also clear that members of the public need to be able to talk about their concerns, even when they are not sure that what they are witnessing is child neglect. The NSPCC plays a vital role in always being there for any adult concerned about a child, making an assessment based on those concerns, and making sure that neglected children are helped as soon as possible.

We want to make sure the public know that it's OK to call as soon as they're worried. If a child is being neglected, earlier action could make all the difference.

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- Available at [www.statswales.wales.gov.uk](http://www.statswales.wales.gov.uk) accessed 25 May 2012. Select: Enter StatsWales > Personal Social Services > Children > Children's Services (PM1) > Number of children and young persons on the Child Protection register at 31 March by age at 31 March (024713)

# Methodology

Contacts to the NSPCC are categorised either as “advice” or “referral”. Referrals are where concerns are serious enough to be passed on to the children’s services and/or police and where identifying details for the child/family have been provided by the person contacting the NSPCC.

Contacts are categorised as “advice” in three circumstances: the person contacting the NSPCC is only seeking guidance, there is insufficient information to make a referral, or the concerns do not meet the thresholds of seriousness.

Qualitative thematic analysis was carried out on a sample of 110 neglect referrals from 2011/12.

The quantitative data comes from data recorded about contacts to the helpline.

When we describe a year in the Helpline Highlight, such as 2011/12, we are referring to the period from 1 April 2011 until the 31 March 2012.

All quotes are from real people contacting the NSPCC but they have been edited to remove any potentially identifying factors and to increase clarity.

The case study reflects real calls to the NSPCC but has been created for the purpose of this report.

To gain the invaluable insight of the helpline counsellors a focus group and several interviews were conducted as part of the research for this report.

For more information on the work of the NSPCC please contact:

**0808 800 5000** or  
**email: [help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk)**

Researched and written by  
Dustin Hutchinson, NSPCC 2012





Anyone with concerns about a child should contact the NSPCC immediately. We're here 24/7. It's free and you don't have to say who you are.

**Call: 0808 800 5000**

**Email: [help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk)**

**Text\*: 88858**

**Visit: [www.nspcc.org.uk/helpline](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/helpline)**

\*for Channel islands 07786 200001. Standard network charges apply

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**NSPCC**   
**Cruelty to children must stop. FULL STOP**