



CHILD CRUELTY IN THE UK 2011

An NSPCC study into childhood abuse
and neglect over the past 30 years

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KEY FINDINGS

- Around one in four 18-24 year olds reported experiences of severe physical violence, sexual abuse or neglect in childhood.
- The number of young adults experiencing severe violence, forced sex and prolonged verbal abuse during childhood has dropped over the last 30 years.
- Young adults from lower socio-economic groups and those with separated parents reported significantly higher levels of physical violence, coerced sexual acts, regular verbal aggression and parental lack of care and supervision during childhood.
- Almost one in five 11-17 year old children has been physically attacked by an adult, raped or sexually assaulted or severely neglected during their lives.
- Severely abused and neglected children were almost nine times more likely to attempt suicide, and almost five times more likely more likely to self-harm, than children not severely abused and neglected.
- Children who suffered several types of maltreatment were significantly more likely to have special educational needs or a long-standing disability or illness. They were also more likely to have a parent with enduring physical, learning or psychiatric problems.

“I spent my childhood feeling like a faulty product which my parents couldn’t take back to the shop and they were angry all the time because they couldn’t return me.

“They punished me with violence and told me off for crying. When I was four years old my mum threw me down the stairs and broke my arm. Another time, when I was about nine years old, she hit me around the head with a stiletto heel.

“I had only talked to a few close friends about my childhood before I took part in the NSPCC research. When the doors are closed, kids only know what goes on in their own family.”

Andy, 22, research participant

PART 1

FOREWORD

Ten years ago the NSPCC published a seminal report into the scale and severity of child abuse and neglect across the UK. At the time it was the most comprehensive study into maltreatment ever undertaken in this country. It covered the childhood experiences of nearly 3,000 18-24 year olds interviewed in 1998. The oldest had been born in 1974. The findings created a launch pad to raise awareness of levels of cruelty, and set the context for developing child protection policy and practice over the last decade. As the first study of its kind, it could not however establish or assess the trends in abuse and neglect.

Since then, the UK has gone through several child protection tragedies. They include the killings of Victoria Climbié, Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman and, more recently, Peter Connolly.

These tragedies have spurred two major child protection inquiries by Lord Laming, a raft of government policies to protect children from abusive adults, and legal and structural reforms to overhaul child protection services.

It is unclear what impact such reforms have made on levels of child maltreatment in the UK. Indeed, it is difficult to weigh the state's contribution to reducing child abuse and neglect against the actions taken by individuals and communities through long-term social change.

During 2009, the NSPCC commissioned a second major piece of research to establish what had changed and to investigate further the extent of child maltreatment. First, our researchers asked 1,761 18-24 year olds about their childhood experiences and compared their replies with those given in the earlier survey.

One in four of the young adults reported experiences of severe physical violence, sexual abuse or neglect in childhood. However, despite the high levels of maltreatment, the comparison with the earlier study reveals that many childhoods have changed for the better over the last 30 years. Overall, the young adults in 2009 reported less physical, sexual and verbal abuse during their childhoods than those interviewed previously.

Separately, we interviewed 2,275 children aged 11-17 years old about their experiences to give an up-to-date picture of childhood maltreatment in the UK.

What these children told us gives a more comprehensive and immediate picture of the scale of child maltreatment than we have ever had before. It allows us to look at experiences of abuse and neglect which cause great harm to the child, and the impact on children's wellbeing and behaviour.

The incidence of severe maltreatment in our study indicates that almost 1 million secondary school children have been seriously physically or sexually abused or neglected at some point during childhood. With around 46,000 children of all ages currently on a child protection plan or register, the research raises concern that the vast majority of abused and neglected children are not getting the vital help and support they need.

The scale of child maltreatment requires a major shift in UK child protection policy towards better identification of abuse and neglect, and more effective and earlier intervention. Children need far greater levels of protection from abuse and neglect and more help to recover from their ordeals. Interventions should focus on the child's best interests, taking full account of the child's needs and wishes.

This must be backed by continuing efforts to raise public awareness about child cruelty, and campaigns which encourage people to change behaviours towards children and take responsibility for keeping vulnerable children safe.

The findings also confirm there are some groups of children at high risk of physical and verbal violence, sexual abuse and neglect. These can include children who live in poverty, come from violent families, are disabled, have separated parents or parents with mental health, drug or alcohol problems. Such children are also vulnerable to abuse, bullying or maltreatment by other adults and children.

The NSPCC believes that this research gives a clear message for individuals, communities and governments alike. We need to pick up on children's problems as early as we can, stop their maltreatment and help them recover. We need to reach these children before they begin to act out their trauma by harming themselves, their families and their local communities.

THE STUDY

The main aim of the study was to provide the NSPCC with an accurate estimate of the prevalence of child abuse and neglect, along with bullying and witnessing domestic violence in the UK.

The study built on knowledge gained from an earlier survey undertaken by the NSPCC in 1998-99. By comparing the responses of today's 18-24 year olds, we can see how child abuse and neglect has changed over the last 30 years, from when the respondents in the first study were born. And by looking at the experiences of 11-17 year olds, it gives us a fuller picture of what's happening to children today.

TNS-BMRB, the specialist social research division within TNS International, was commissioned to conduct the fieldwork interviews using computer-assisted self-interview techniques. The NSPCC research team designed the survey and completed all the data analysis.

Fieldwork took place from 9 March to 15 November 2009; 1,761 interviews with young people aged 18-24 and 2,275 interviews with children aged 11-17 were undertaken. The survey was carried out across the UK with households randomly selected using postcode data. The sample was comparable to the general population. Care was taken to minimise any harm, offence or upset to children, young adults and parents.

In exploring the childhood experiences of 11-17 year olds in greater depth, we looked specifically at the prevalence of severe forms of maltreatment which are likely to raise child protection concerns both among the public and professionals working with children.

We defined severe maltreatment as meeting one or more of the following criteria:

- There was a rape or attempted rape, or forced sexual contact, by an adult or child – consensual sex between young people was not included even where technically it may have been criminal.
- There was contact sexual abuse by a parent or guardian or sibling (if child is under 18).
- There was contact sexual abuse by an adult to a person under 13.
- There was contact sexual abuse by an adult relative to a person under 16.
- The maltreatment resulted in physical harm or injury – such as a broken bone, a black eye or being knocked unconscious.
- A weapon with potential to cause serious injury had been used – such as a knife, gun, rock, stick or bat.
- The maltreatment happened six or more times.
- The victim perceived the maltreatment as “child abuse” or “criminal” behaviour.
- There was serious emotional neglect or lack of physical care or supervision that would place a child at risk.¹
- The young person reported two or more different types of abuse or neglect by an adult caregiver over their lifetime - in a pattern of maltreatment.²

The findings presented here are part of a very rich set of data collected by the NSPCC on the prevalence of child maltreatment and victimisation in the UK, including data based on interviewing parents with children under 11 years. The full research findings will be published in a series of reports over 2011/12.

¹ Defined as any one of the following:

- parents never or hardly ever asking their child who they were going out with or where or what they were doing
- not getting enough food, not being taken to the doctor when ill or not having a safe place to stay
- parents never or rarely encouraged their child to talk about their troubles, gave praise, joked or played with them, comforted them when they were upset, told them they appreciated what they tried/accomplished, hugged or held them
- the child's family never let child know they cared about them, talked about their problems or were willing to help them.

² Involving two or more of the following:

- being hit, kicked, beaten or physically hurt
- being scared or feeling really bad because grown ups called the child names, said mean things or said they didn't want the child
- being neglected e.g. not having enough food, not being taken to the doctor when ill or not having a safe place to stay
- being prevented from being with another parent by being taken, kept or hidden
- being shaken very hard or shoved against a wall or piece of furniture.

“Over the years, my mum kicked and beat me, she throttled me, threw me down the stairs, pushed me into a scalding hot bath. She once held my head under water and another time she shoved a full bar of soap in my mouth. There are too many incidents to recount.

“I’m still living with the feelings and fears from those days now, in my twenties.

“When I was very young, I didn’t know any different. The hostility and violence was just part of life with my mum. Her answer to most things was to lash out or scream at us. That’s how I was brought up.

“For a long time, I accepted what was going on at home as normal. But no child should have to live in fear or on edge in their own home – that’s the place they should feel safest.”

Pete, 20, research participant

CHILDHOOD MALTREATMENT: 18-24 YEAR OLDS (2009)

Surveying young people at the start of adulthood gives a full, retrospective view of the prevalence of abuse and neglect experienced over the whole of childhood. This is important as such experiences can accumulate over time and certain ones become more common as children grow older.

One in four 18-24 year olds (25.3%) had been physically attacked by an adult during childhood, sexually assaulted, or severely neglected at home. One in seven (14.5%) had been severely maltreated by a parent or guardian.

One in nine (11.5%) young adults had suffered severe physical abuse at the hands of an adult, which included being hit, kicked, beaten or attacked with a weapon. Parents or guardians were responsible for 5.4% of the violent acts carried out in childhood.

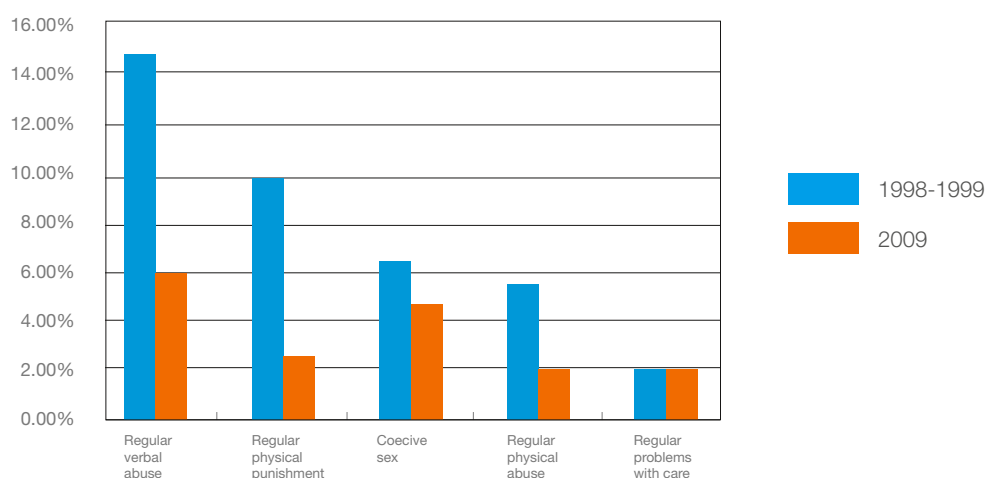
One in nine young adults (11.3%) had been sexually assaulted, either by an adult or another child or young person. 4.7% had been raped or forced into sex by another child. 3% had suffered sexual abuse involving physical contact at the hands of a boyfriend, girlfriend or “date”.

Almost one in 10 young adults (9%) had been severely neglected by parents or guardians during childhood.

TRENDS IN CHILD MALTREATMENT: 18-24 YEAR OLDS (comparing the 1998/99 and 2009 studies)

One key aim of the study was to look at changes in the prevalence of child maltreatment over time. In 2009, researchers asked the 18-24 year olds some of the same questions asked in the previous survey in 1998 and compared responses.³ Together, the two studies give a picture of child maltreatment trends over the last 30 years, from when the first respondents were born.

30 year trends in child maltreatment



³ These questions differed from the ones used to assess the overall prevalence of abuse and neglect, as described in the previous section. As a result, cross-comparisons cannot be made between the different data collected on the young adults in 2009.

Physical violence: The 18-24 year olds in both surveys were asked whether they had ever been thrown or knocked down, beaten up, choked, or threatened with a knife or gun during childhood. The prevalence of such physical violence at home, school or elsewhere reduced from 13.2% in 1998 to 9.9% in 2009. The prevalence of such violence on a regular basis had fallen more sharply from 5.7% in 1998 to 1.8% in 2009.

It is not possible to determine whether this decline in physical violence shows a decline in violence from parents or guardians, other adults, peers or a combination of these. However, while the majority of 18-24 year olds in 1998 said they had been smacked or slapped by an adult during their childhood, less than half reported this in 2009. Overall, the prevalence of regular physical discipline by an adult had dropped from 10% to 2.8%.

Sexual abuse: Participants in both studies answered similar questions around forced or coerced sexual acts experienced under the age of 16 at the hands of adults or other children and young people. The comparison shows a reduction from 6.8% in 1998 to 5% in 2009, indicating a decline in forced or coercive sexual activity.

Verbal violence: The 18-24 year olds in both surveys were asked whether they had been shouted, sworn or screamed at as a child, called stupid or lazy, threatened with smacking or being sent away. The experience of regular prolonged verbal aggression by adults – either at home, school or elsewhere – had significantly reduced over time from 14.5% in 1998 to 6% in 2009.

Care and supervision: The 18-24 year olds in both surveys were asked several questions about levels of parental care and supervision experienced as children. These included whether they often or always went hungry, had dirty clothes or had to care for younger siblings – or whether they were rarely or never taken to the doctor when ill. Around 10% in each study reported that they often or always had at least one problem with lack of parental care or supervision. The number reporting that they had often or always faced more than one of these parental care issues was also stable at just under 2%.

High risk groups: In both studies, the rates of childhood neglect, physical violence, coerced sexual activity and regular verbal harsh treatment were significantly higher among the young adults from lower socio-economic groups. They were also higher for those young adults whose parents had separated during childhood.

“The earliest memory I have of the sexual abuse is from when I was about seven. I remember being woken up in the night and Dad was there. I was scared. I didn’t know what to do. I just lay there.

“From the age of about 10, my dad’s friend started to come round and sexually abuse me too. Sometimes my dad would leave me with him.

“When I was older, after I told about it and was taken into care, I had a horrible time at school. My best friend refused to speak to me. There were rumours going around the school and stuff posted on MySpace, like ‘Lydia is shagging her dad’ and ‘Lydia is a prostitute’.

“I ended up trying to commit suicide, I felt so low. I took 104 tablets and ended up in hospital for three weeks.

“Things improved for me gradually with help from a counsellor. I went on to take five A Levels and I’m hoping to become a doctor.

“I’m not the same as I used to be. I’m not as fun and outgoing. I still feel isolated sometimes because it doesn’t go away.”

Lydia, 19, research participant

CHILDHOOD MALTREATMENT: 11-17 YEAR OLDS (2009)

The study of 11-17 year olds gives a picture of current levels of child abuse and neglect in the UK. It finds a significant minority of children reporting severe maltreatment at some point during their childhood.

Around one in five children (18.6%) had been physically attacked by an adult, sexually abused, or severely neglected at home. This is equivalent to 973,000 secondary school children in the UK population.⁴

One in 14 11-17 year olds (6.9%) had been physically attacked by an adult during childhood. Parents or guardians were responsible for more than half (55%) the violent acts carried out on the children.

One in twenty children (4.8%) had been sexually assaulted – either by an adult or another child or young person. 3% of children had been raped or forced into sex by another child and 2% had been sexually abused by an adult.

Severe emotional neglect or lack of physical care or supervision that would place a child at risk was the most common child maltreatment – suffered by one in 10 children (9.8%). Physical neglect – not getting enough food, not being taken to the doctor when ill and not having a safe place to stay – was experienced by 1.4% of children.

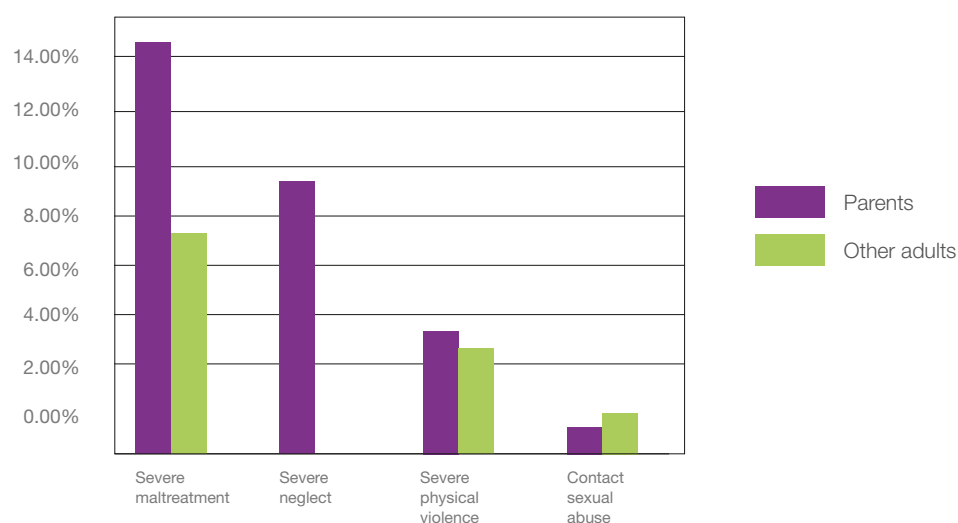
Parental maltreatment: More than one in eight 11-17 year olds (13.4%) reported severe maltreatment by a parent or guardian at some point during childhood (see page 7 for definition).

Maltreatment by other adults: One in 13 children (7.8%) reported severe maltreatment by another adult during childhood. One in 30 children (3.3%) reported serious physical violence by another adult and one in a hundred had been sexual assaulted by an adult.

Sexual abuse by peers: 1.7% of children said they had been raped or forced into a sexual act by a peer, 1.5% by a boyfriend, girlfriend or “date” and 0.1% by a sibling. Children were responsible for two thirds (65.9%) of contact sexual abuse. Sexual abuse became more common during teenage years up to the age of 17. Girls were the main victims.

⁴ Based on 18.6% of 5,231,300 children aged 11-17 years in the UK in 2009. Source: Mid Year Population Estimate 2009, Table 1.

Child maltreatment by parents and guardians – neglect, by definition, is perpetrated only by parents and guardians



The study indicates that severely abused and neglected children are almost nine times more likely to try to kill themselves, and almost five times more likely to self-harm than children who have not been severely abused or neglected.

Children with special educational needs, long-standing disability or illness, or who had a parent with enduring physical, learning or psychiatric problems, were significantly more likely to suffer multiple forms of maltreatment.

The study found that the more different types of maltreatment which children experience – including witnessing violence in the family or in the community – the greater the level of trauma and delinquent behaviour.⁵

⁵ Fourteen types of delinquent behaviour were considered, ranging from getting drunk, smoking and illicit drug use to spraying graffiti, carrying weapons, being excluded from school, bullying or injuring others.

“After I came out about the sexual abuse, I couldn’t believe how many people had their suspicions.

“Everyone knew my dad could be violent. He was an intimidating man. Maybe things would have been different if someone had had the courage to take a stand.

“Children need to know they’ve got support otherwise how are they going to be brave enough to say anything?

“If it weren’t for my godmother, I don’t think I would have had the courage to talk about what happened at home. She helped me get some counselling and it completely changed my outlook.

“My mum’s mum drank herself to death and my granddad cheated on her for 17 years. My own mum went into an abusive relationship with my dad who was violent towards us both.

“But it just takes one person to break the cycle.

“I can’t live like that any more, now I know what it’s like to live with a loving, supportive partner. When I had my little boy, I realised I had to protect him.”

Bella, 22, research participant

PART 2

KEY MESSAGES FOR POLICY MAKERS

1. The scale of child maltreatment requires a major shift in UK child protection policy.

The study found 18.6% of secondary school children have been severely abused or neglected during childhood – equivalent to 973,000 children across the UK.

With around 46,000 children of all ages currently under local authority protection, this finding raises concern that the vast majority of abused and neglected children are not getting the vital help they need.⁶

While successive governments have taken significant steps to improve the child protection system, local authorities remain under strain to provide effective child protection plans for more than a small proportion of cases. Children's services cannot be in the community all the time to prevent this extent of abuse or neglect.

Trends over the last 30 years as indicated by our research suggest that heightened public awareness and action has had an impact in cutting levels of child maltreatment. It is likely that public education campaigns, and high levels of media coverage around child abuse, have led to a social shift in how people treat children.

It is essential that we all work together to stop child maltreatment, for the sake of our children and our society. Children and adults need access to advice and support from helplines like ChildLine and the NSPCC Helpline. As well as providing advice and counselling, these can also act as a gateway to statutory services and bring abused and neglected children to the attention of local agencies.

Tackling child cruelty is everyone's business. We need to keep challenging public perceptions about what constitutes normal or acceptable behaviour and encourage individuals to take responsibility for helping to protect vulnerable children in their school, street or community. We need to remove the barriers that stop people from acting on any concerns they might have about a child. We also need to support communities to challenge behaviour, report suspected maltreatment and ensure professionals act when concerns are raised.

2. Practitioners need to spot and stop maltreatment in its tracks. Early intervention can prevent profound damage to children and communities.

The study identifies the harmful consequences of child abuse and neglect both for victims and for society as a whole. These consequences can add to the burden on the state and form a vicious cycle resulting in further victims.

⁶ There were 45,955 children on child protection plans or registers in the UK at 31 March 2010 (excluding unborn children).
http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/statistics/child_protection_register_statistics_wda48723.html

Maltreated children are more likely to be suicidal, suffer mental health problems, self-harm and show delinquent behaviour. They are also more likely to be bullied by other children, siblings or adults. Bullied children, in turn, are more likely to have poorer emotional wellbeing. The more types of maltreatment and victimisation children experience, the greater their trauma.

Intervening early to stop maltreatment and help overcome the harm it causes could help cut the high rates of suicidal, self-harming and delinquent behaviour among secondary school children revealed in this study.

Teachers have an important role to play here, as outside home, school is often the main place of safety for a child. They are well-placed to spot possible signs of abuse and neglect, like feeling suicidal. It is important that teachers are well trained and supported in this role. They can work with other professionals to prevent the long-term harm abuse can cause. Appropriate therapeutic services must be available and accessible for all children who have been abused or neglected.

The public can play their part too, by getting help for all those abused and neglected children who are unidentified and unknown to social services. Everyone needs to become more vigilant to the signs of cruelty and ensure vulnerable children get the support they need.

3. Resources should be focused on at high risk children.

The study shows that while abused and neglected children come from all backgrounds, some children can, at times, face greater risk of abuse, neglect and harm than others. They include children from violent families, children with separated parents, children from lower socio-economic groups and children whose parents misuse drugs, alcohol or are mentally ill.

Children with special educational needs, long-standing disability or illness, or who have a parent with enduring physical, learning or psychiatric problems, were more likely to suffer multiple forms of maltreatment and victimisation. The risks to children vary over time so preventative efforts needed for babies and pre-school children will not be the same as those needed for older children and adolescents.

Such children should be a priority for public policy and practice. Local agencies should take a joined-up “think adult, think child” approach where family issues such as parental mental health problems or domestic violence are identified.

4. Children’s problems don’t stop at the front door of their house.

The study shows that children are not only abused in the home. Almost half of the severe physical violence perpetrated on children by adults is not inflicted by their parents or guardians. Children are relatively rarely sexually abused by their parents. They are more likely to be sexually abused by another adult and most likely to be sexually abused by another child or young person.

Children should be taught in their schools, communities and homes how to keep themselves safe away from home, understand and practice respectful behaviour and develop healthy relationships.

NSPCC PRIORITIES AND WORK UNTIL 2016

This study shows how prevalent child abuse and neglect still is in our society, particularly for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children. Almost 1 million 11-17 year olds have been severely abused or neglected in childhood.

Despite this, we can see encouraging signs of progress. The young adults surveyed in 2009 were treated less harshly during their childhood than those interviewed at the end of the 1990s.

Many organisations and people have contributed to this improvement. During this period the NSPCC's public education campaigns have highlighted the horrors of child cruelty. They have helped people to become aware of the physical and emotional damage inflicted by cruelty and what they can do to prevent it. In turn, this has spurred individuals to make it their responsibility to act when they suspect a child is being maltreated.

The NSPCC mission to end cruelty to children in the UK continues. Over the next five years the charity will spearhead change by pioneering new ways of tackling physical violence, sexual abuse and neglect. We aim to help the country become more effective in tackling child abuse and neglect at every level.

Our strategy for change is already up and running. We have started new projects to protect children from domestic violence, sexual abuse and the harmful effects of parental drug misuse. We are reaching out to support and protect looked after children, we are developing improved tools for evaluating neglect, and we are developing programmes to stop non-accidental head injuries in babies and help children displaying harmful sexual behaviour.

This work will expand and intensify over the next five years as we design, deliver, test and roll-out new initiatives – focusing on the children at greatest risk in the areas of greatest need. We will work in partnership with agencies, individuals, communities and governments to multiply our impact many times over.

However, the report tells us this programme of work will not – on its own – support all abused and neglected children. We need to reach those vulnerable children who are unknown to local agencies. So we will continue to promote the NSPCC Helpline across the UK, encouraging all adults to tell us about incidents of abuse and neglect which we can assess and, where necessary, refer on to local services or the police.

We will also continue to offer and develop the ChildLine telephone, text and online services as a vital source of support for millions of children around the country. And for the first time, our trained ChildLine volunteers will speak to every primary school child in the UK.

In addition, the NSPCC will continue its efforts to change public attitudes and behaviours and persuade everyone to take responsibility for protecting children. We believe that the only way to ultimately end child cruelty is through social change.

FUTURE REPORTS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This document is based on a broader, more comprehensive study into the maltreatment and victimisation of children in the UK.

Future publications from this research will be:

Who do you turn to? Findings from follow-up interviews with young survivors of child maltreatment

Sexual abuse of children and young people in the UK

Child maltreatment in high risk families

Child maltreatment and victimisation experiences of children and young people living with disability

Ethnicity, child maltreatment and victimisation

Children living with domestic violence

Poverty, maltreatment and neglect

School-based violence and victimisation by peers

The NSPCC's previous report *Child Maltreatment in the UK* was published in 2000. It is available from www.nspcc.org.uk/inform

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This early findings report has been written by the NSPCC.

