Voices of Children and Young People in the EU

Child Helpline Data for 2019
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Disclaimer

Data presented and statements made do not capture the full scope of practices and policies of all countries and cases handled by child helplines and other child protection organisations at the national level. The exact data can be requested from Child Helpline International.

Child Helpline International’s work is firmly grounded in the principles and values enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, including children’s right to privacy and protection from harm. To preserve the trust and confidence children and young people place in child helplines every day, any personal details cited in case summaries have been altered and anonymised.

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When we have the correct information, we can find the best way forward to meet the rights of every child and young person. And how do we ensure we have this correct information? It’s very easy: We listen.

Every year, Child Helpline International collects data from its child helpline members and shares it among them, so that we can all learn from what the children and young people who contact the child helplines are telling us. This information allows us to improve our services and provide decision-makers with reliable data to ensure that children’s rights policy effectively addresses the issues children are facing.

We are therefore proud to present this report, which showcases the data on the contacts that were made by children and young people with child helplines across the EU during the year 2019. The report not only provides an insight into the issues facing children in the EU, but also offers solutions as to how we can all help to improve their lives.

Throughout the year, children and young people in the EU continued to contact child helplines with questions about sexual behaviour and sexuality, and with concerns about family and peer relationships. However, more than half of the counselling contacts that were made in the EU related either to mental health or violence.

As stated in the EU Charter for Fundamental Rights: “Children shall have the right to such protection and care as is necessary for their well-being”. Furthermore, children have the right to be protected from violence (UNCRC, Article 19), and the right to the highest attainable standard of health and health care services, including mental health (UNCRC 24). This report clearly shows the importance of child helplines in protecting children from violence and promoting their mental health, alongside the many, many other reasons for contact.

Child helplines in the EU share knowledge, experiences and expertise with each other to protect children from violence and to promote their physical and emotional wellbeing. Most importantly, we work together to achieve our common goal: ensuring that every child has free and unrestricted access to child helpline services, including children who are particularly vulnerable.

Every child has a voice, a story to tell; a trouble to share, a problem to solve; a question to ask, a cry for help to be answered. Child helplines in the EU will continue to do what they have done for years to ensure the rights of every child and young person. We Listen.

Magnus Jägerskog
BRIS (Sweden)
Regional Representative, Europe

Heidi Holappa
Child and Youth Phone (Finland)
Deputy Regional Representative, Europe
Executive summary

We survey our members around the world every year to gather information about the contacts they receive. This report presents the compilation and analysis of the data pertaining to the year 2019 in the EU.

We obtained data from 26 child helplines across 23 countries in the EU, which represents 83.9% of our full members in the region. Our child helpline members in the EU received 959,470 counselling contacts in 2019. That means that a child or young person in the EU has actively reached out to a child helpline for advice, help or support almost a million times.

Mental health and violence were the two main reasons for contact reported by the child helplines. More than half of all counselling contacts were related to these two topics. Our child helpline members responded to 396,619 contacts on issues regarding mental health. This represents 37.2% of all the counselling contacts, or one in three of these contacts. Our child helpline members responded to 171,367 contacts on issues relating to violence. This represents 16.1% of all the contacts that led to counselling.

12 of the child helplines in the EU were also able to provide us with information about the contacts they received that had been made by children and young people belonging to vulnerable groups. Vulnerable children and young people accounted for 3.9% of the total counselling contacts from these 12 child helplines. This means that around 1 in every 25 of the contacts receiving counselling were children and young people who belong to a vulnerable group.

Every child and young person has the right to be heard, the right to protection and the right to access essential services, free from bias or other barriers. Child helplines play a critical role in the promotion and realisation of children’s rights globally, as they provide a safe and accessible platform for children and young people across the globe to receive the support they need through immediate counselling and referral services. We have made key recommendations to ensure that child helplines can continue to play this vital role.
#1: Every child should have free and unrestricted access to child helpline services, including particularly vulnerable children

In order for this to happen:

- Child helplines require **reliable long-term funding** to do their crucial work, including sustainable funding during times of emergency, such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

- Child helplines need **effective technical solutions** such as chat, call, forums and accessible website information to cater for a diverse group of children with different communication needs and preferences.

- Children, including those who are particularly vulnerable, need to be made aware of the services of child helplines through the communication channels they trust and prefer. **Targeted efforts should be made for particularly vulnerable groups**, and the 116 111 number should be promoted.

- Child helplines require sufficient resources to focus on ongoing, internal capacity-building to cater for the specific needs of particularly vulnerable children.

#2: Child participation through the inclusion of children and young people’s voices is essential for relevant and impactful policymaking and practice on all levels

Child helplines can support this goal, therefore:

- Child helplines require **long-term financial investments in technology and knowledge** for reliable, efficient and confidential data collection, analysis and management.

- Reliable and confidential child helpline data should be recognised by partners and policymakers as a **resource to properly inform children’s rights policymaking**.

#3: Mental health and ending violence against children must remain top priorities on the children’s rights agenda in the EU

Child helplines must be acknowledged as a key partner in preventing and tackling mental health, both as a service, and as a key source of data on children’s experiences.

**Structured partnerships and collaborations have a crucial role to play in eradicating violence against all children** by working to shape an integrated protection response. We align with Sustainable Development Goal 16.2 – to end the abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against children, and with the EU Strategy for more a more effective fight against child abuse.
In order to understand the issues faced by the children and young people who get in touch with child helplines, we survey our members around the world every year to gather information about the contacts they receive. This report presents the compilation and analysis of the data pertaining to the year 2019 in the EU.

Depending on the requirements of their counselling and research activities, our child helpline members record various information for every contact they receive. In order to understand why children and young people are contacting child helplines, Child Helpline International works closely with them to create a common categorisation of those contacts. This categorisation includes ten broad reasons for making contact with child helplines as well as nine types of contextual information. The child helplines indicate to us, on a yearly basis, the number of contacts received for each of these reasons, which are further sub-divided, and the contextual information, all of which is further sub-divided.

It should be noted that the content and level of detail of information recorded for each contact is the prerogative of the child helplines themselves and is not directed by Child Helpline International. Therefore, these categories might differ from the categories used by some child helplines when they originally collected their data. It should also be noted that child helplines have differing practices relating to the information recorded. Whereas some indicate the reason given for calling by the child or young person, others indicate the reason identified by the counsellor, which in some cases might not be the same. Finally, the absence of contacts in a particular category could mean that the child helpline did not receive any contacts pertaining to that category, or that the child helpline does not collect this information.

We obtained data from 26 child helplines across 23 countries in the EU, which represents 83.9% of our full members in the region. For this report, we added up the number of contacts received by each of those child helplines in each category of contact throughout 2019.
In 2019, our child helpline members in the EU received a total of **3,419,935 contacts** – both counselling and non-counselling contacts – across 23 countries. This is the number of all contacts received. Non-counselling contacts include questions, information requests, missed contacts, silent contacts and testing contacts.

Specifically, our child helpline members in the EU received **959,470 counselling contacts** in 2019. That means that a child or young person in the EU has actively reached out to a child helpline for advice, help or support almost a million times. This represents 28.1% of all global contacts and it is also the number of times a child helpline has been able to provide support, advice or another form of counselling to a child or young person, often offering direct interventions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Counselling contacts</th>
<th>Percentage of all counselling contacts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>34,270</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>22,663</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croatia</td>
<td>1,268</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyprus</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>0.003%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czechia</td>
<td>136,459</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>56,009</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>10,355</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>120,495</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>8,839</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>7,553</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>7,940</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>27,698</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luxembourg</td>
<td>1,209</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malta</td>
<td>6,246</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>126,508</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>81,849</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>898</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>6,624</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>4,909</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>19,614</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>27,152</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>250,781</td>
<td>26.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The countries that received the most counselling contacts in 2019 were the UK, Czechia, the Netherlands, Germany and Poland.

**Total number of total contacts** received in 2019 across all regions:

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Counselling contacts</td>
<td>959,470</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-counselling contacts</td>
<td>2,460,465</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Contacts per country

We included 23 countries based on their EU membership during 2019. As a result, the United Kingdom is included as a member of the EU in this report as its withdrawal from the EU did not become effective until 31 January 2020.
Reasons for contact

We obtained data from 26 child helplines mapped at a categorical level as outlined by our Data Framework. It is important to note that not all child helplines report on every reason for contact at a (sub-)category level.

Mental health and violence were the two main reasons for contact reported by the child helplines in the EU in 2019. More than half of all counselling contacts were related to these two topics (53.2%).

Child helplines also received large numbers of contacts relating to peer relationships, family relationships and sexuality. More than four out of five times when a child or young person contacted a child helpline in the EU in 2019, it concerned one of these five categories (86.7% of all contacts).

As we can see, a large number of children and young people (or a concerned adult or peer) who contacted the child helplines expressed concerns relating to mental health. The child helplines recorded more than twice as many contacts relating to mental health compared to violence, the second largest reason for making contact.
Our data suggests that in the EU girls are more likely to contact child helplines than boys – 49.4% of the counselling contacts were made by girls, compared to 34.8% by boys. The gender of 15.3% of the callers was not identified, and 0.5% of the counselling contacts were made by non-binary children and young people.
12 of the child helplines in the EU – representing 46% of our child helpline members who provided us with data for 2019 – were also able to provide us with information about the contacts they received that had been made by children and young people belonging to vulnerable groups.

Vulnerable children and young people accounted for 3.9% of the total counselling contacts from these 12 child helplines. This means that around 1 in every 25 of the contacts receiving counselling were children and young people who belong to a vulnerable group.

The majority of vulnerable children and young people who reached out to these child helplines for counselling were children and young people with disabilities, followed by members of an ethnic/racial minority in the country where they were located when they made contact with the child helpline. The next groups are children and young people in conflict with the law and LGBTQI+/SOGIESC children and young people. Finally, a smaller number of contacts were made by children and young people in detention and children and young people on the move/in migration.

- **With disabilities**: 45.5%
- **Member of an ethnic/racial minority**: 23.7%
- **In detention**: 6.6%
- **In conflict with the law**: 11.6%
- **LGBTQI+/SOGIESC children and young people**: 11.5%
- **On the move/in migration**: 1.1%
Contacts by gender

Gender analysis suggests that, for children and young people with a disability, members of an ethnic/racial minority and LGBTQI+/SOGIESC children and young people, more girls than boys made contact with the child helplines who recorded contacts from vulnerable groups. On the other hand, boys accounted for more contacts from children and young people in conflict with the law or in detention.

These 12 child helplines reported that the category of children and young people with disabilities saw the highest amount of contacts of unknown gender, as well as non-binary children and young people.
“I don’t have any friends...”

A 17-year old boy called the child helpline to ask for help with social services. For the past two months he had not received any of the benefits he was entitled to from the government due to his disability, but he hadn’t been able to do much himself to try to find out why there were problems with the payment. He explained to the counsellor that he had problems with his legs, and wasn’t able to get out of the house by himself. He lived alone with his mother, who worked all day, so he was often left all by himself and as a result of his disability he spent most of his day lying in bed. “I don’t even have any friends, because I can’t get out to meet anybody.”

The counsellor offered the boy psychological support. He thanked him for calling, and to report the boy’s situation to the protection authorities in the area, so that further support could be offered. He also agreed to talk about the boy’s case with the social services department, to try to find out why there were problems with the benefit payments. The boy was encouraged to call the child helpline again if he had any other questions.

There is still much to be done to make sure that child helplines in the EU are accessible for particularly vulnerable children and young people, including those who do not speak the local language and those who need more specialised support and guidance.

Let’s look at two examples. According to the EU, there are 5.4 million children in migration in Europe, but only 251 contacts from children in migration were recorded and shared by our child helpline members. UNICEF estimates there are 5.1 million children with disabilities living in Europe and Central Asia, yet only 10,494 contacts were received from and regarding children with disabilities. There may be several reasons for these discrepancies, such as lack of resources to increase accessibility, technically and otherwise, the difference in categories that child helplines use to collect data on contacts, and the lack of awareness of child helpline services among certain groups of vulnerable children.

Through our WeListen Programme, with funding from the European Commission’s Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme (2014-2020), we are committed to supporting particularly vulnerable children by:

- **Harmonising data categories on particularly vulnerable groups**, so that child helplines collect data using similar definitions. This will help to better reflect reality and to contribute to the availability of reliable data for EU policymakers.
- **Advocating for sufficient resources for child helplines so that they can provide counselling to children and young people via a range of communication means**, thereby catering to a more diverse group of children with different needs.
- **Advocating for sufficient resources for child helplines in terms of human resources and internal capacity-building that promotes inclusive practice.**
- **Strengthening our members with capacity-building opportunities and knowledge exchanges on inclusive practice**, such as our eLearning platform.

12 Voices of Children & Young People in the EU
“They’re in a refugee camp with a father who abuses them….“

A couple from a neighbouring country contacted the child helpline to inform them that they were the relatives of two children, aged one and two years old. They told the child helpline that the father had physically abused the children in the past. The father had taken the children with him and was now living in a refugee camp in the child helpline’s country. They were concerned as there was no communication possible for them with their young relatives and they were worried what might be happening to them.

The child helpline counsellor informed the authorities and the children were located and taken to hospital; the young girl had burns all over her hands. When physical abuse was later confirmed, the prosecution service requested that the children be transferred to a safe place. The child helpline carried out all the required procedures and the children were moved to one of the organisation’s care homes. The organisation is now in the process of carrying out all the necessary procedures so that the children can be reunited with their mother, who lives in another European country.

“My family say bad things about gay people – so how can I tell them I’m bi?…“

A child reaches out to the child helpline describing the concerns that they have about their parents and extended family’s opinions on homosexuality. The child identifies as bisexual and fears that they will be rejected by the family but also wants to be able to tell them and stop hiding who they are.

Together with the child, the counsellor explores ways to tell the family, choosing who they could tell first, and weighing the pros and cons of different courses of action. The counsellor offers a hopeful perspective based on other children’s experiences of successfully getting a respectful response from the family despite previous derogatory statements on homosexuality. The counsellor also invites the child to reach out again if further assistance is needed or if the outcome of the conversations with various family members leads to any difficulties.
Mental health was the main reason for contact reported by child helplines in the EU in 2019. Our child helpline members responded to a very high number of contacts on issues regarding mental health, representing 37.2% of all counselling contacts, or one in three of these contacts.

The two main issues raised were emotional distress – fear and anxiety problems and emotional distress – mood problems. Fear and anxiety problems can include, but are not limited to stress, sudden episodes of intense fear, persistent and irrational fear of a specific thing or situation, flashbacks, disturbing thoughts, obsessive thoughts or behaviours and stress related to a past traumatic event. Mood problems refer to negative moods, including but not limited to sadness, depressed mood, grief and loneliness.

Together with unspecified/other reasons, emotional distress - either fear and anxiety problems or mood problems – accounted for more than half (59.5%) of the contacts relating to mental health that were reported by child helplines in the EU region. The child helplines also observed a high number of contacts related to suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts, self-harming behaviours and concerns about the self.

### Mental health: Reasons for making contact

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional distress – fear and anxiety problems</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional distress – mood problems</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts</td>
<td>13.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerns about the self</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-harming behaviours</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All other reasons</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unspecified/other</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Contacts by gender

Girls were more likely to contact child helplines about mental health issues than boys. This is the case for all reasons except for substance use and addictive behaviours, where boys accounted for slightly more contacts.

- Girls: 62.8%
- Boys: 24.3%
- Unknown: 12.4%
- Non-binary: 0.5%

Reasons for contacting child helplines:

1. Emotional distress – fear and anxiety problems
2. Emotional distress – mood problems
3. Unspecified/other
4. Suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts
5. Concerns about the self
6. Self-harming behaviours
“I wish I had a normal life – everything’s my fault…”

A 15-year-old girl called the child helpline and told the counsellor that she was upset because she had been arguing a lot with her mum. Her mother had recently slapped her. “My mum told me she did not want me”. She explained that her parents had separated because her dad was alcoholic and was violent towards her mother and her sister. They had moved to a women’s refuge for a while, where her mother got support for her gambling addiction, although she was still doing it. “I wish I had a normal life – I feel everything is my fault. I can’t talk to anyone about what is happening at home.” The girl had tried to take an overdose and had been self-harming, but she didn’t want her mother to find out about this.

Hearing this, the child helpline counsellor explored how the girl was feeling and whether she had any intention to try to commit suicide again. The girl said that she did not think she would do it but agreed to contact the child helpline if she ever felt suicidal or wanted to self-harm, and she agreed to call the emergency services if she was ever in immediate danger. The girl agreed that she would visit her general practitioner and write down what she wanted to talk about in case she felt too nervous to speak out loud. The counsellor told the girl that this was a good plan and praised her for having this idea.

“I feel like I’ve let everybody down by becoming unwell again…”

A girl in high school contacted the helpline. She had been in contact with youth psychiatric care professionals until the end of 2018, but when she started to feel better this had come to an end. After a few months, however, she was feeling just as much anxiety as before. She felt as though she had failed both herself and the people who had been treating her. “I feel like I’ve let everybody down by becoming unwell again.”

The child helpline counsellor attempted to relieve the girl’s anxiety and empathised with her. The girl was provided with information on mental health and recovery processes, and she was encouraged to seek help again. She was also offered the child helpline’s support and assistance in seeking help in the future. If she was comfortable with the idea, the counsellor offered to get in touch with the youth psychiatric care professionals and assist her in getting the help that she needed.

“I wish I had a normal life – everything’s my fault…”

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“I’m a disappointment to my parents...”

A 14-year-old girl contacted the child helpline about a boy she had met through a social media platform and subsequently started a relationship with. Fearing that he would otherwise break up with her she agreed to have sex with him, even though she did not feel ready to do so. After a short time, they separated. Now, she felt very sad about the separation and about the fact that she had sex with him so hastily, but also because her parents had found out about it. She felt that she had disappointed them. Her parents had separated, and she found it very difficult to share her feelings and thoughts with them.

The child helpline counsellor explained that it is entirely normal to feel upset about such things but advised her that it would be helpful if she could talk to somebody she knew, so she could express her feelings and receive support. They talked about how the girl appeared to be withdrawing into herself because of her fears about how her parents might react to what she tells them. They discussed how it might help for her to nevertheless talk to her parents about how she is feeling lonely and exposed, and that this could help strengthen her relationship with them.
Violence was the second largest reason for contact reported by child helplines in the EU in 2019. Many contacts our child helpline members responded to concerned violence. 16.1% of all contacts that led to counselling were related to some form of violence.

In 2019, over a third of the children and young people who contacted the child helplines in the EU about violence wanted to discuss bullying. Other main reasons for making contact were physical violence, sexual violence and mental/emotional violence. These contacts account for more than four out of every five violence-related contacts (85.5%).

### Violence: Reasons for making contact

- **Bullying**: 35.6%
- **Unspecified/other**: 6.6%
- **Physical violence**: 17.3%
- **Sexual violence**: 16.8%
- **Mental/emotional violence**: 15.8%
- **All other reasons**: 7.8%
Contacts by gender

Child helplines in the EU recorded more contacts from girls than from boys for all reasons relating to violence.
“I just said I would talk with him, but then he raped me…”

A 14-year-old girl called the child helpline and told them she had been raped by an adult friend an hour ago. She had agreed to talk with him but he raped her in his car. She had been so scared that she was unable to defend herself at all, and she had completely frozen. She said that she was bleeding, as this had been her first sexual experience. Nobody knew about what had just happened, and her parents were still asleep. The girl described her feelings of shame and guilt and was afraid to tell her mother about the incident.

The child helpline counsellor validated her feelings and reassured her that what had happened was definitely not her fault. The child helpline counsellor explained that the body has a natural response to extreme situations such as this, so she should not feel guilty that she could not defend herself from the man. The counsellor told the girl that she had been very brave for finding the courage to talk about it with them. They also talked about the medical care possibilities that were available for her. The girl was tired and just wanted to sleep now, but she felt relieved that she could call the child helpline again if she needed.

“Something has to change – I feel like I’m about to explode…”

A boy contacted the child helpline chat, as he couldn’t bear living with his parents anymore. He said that he felt constantly degraded and criticised, that his parents were making bad decisions about his education, and that he had been the victim of psychological abuse and occasionally physical violence as well. His brother had also been strongly affected by their parents’ behaviour – in the end, he stole from his workplace, lost his job and was now out of contact with the family. The boy wanted things to change, and said that he felt like he was about to explode.

The child helpline counsellor told him about the anonymous counselling services he could obtain from local municipal authorities, and where he could learn more about what the authorities could do to help. The boy felt reassured that he had a right to receive help and was very happy to know that there was somebody he could get in touch with about his situation.
I’m a disappointment to my parents…”

A 14-year-old girl contacted the child helpline about a boy she had met through a social media platform and subsequently started a relationship with. Fearing that he would otherwise break up with her she agreed to have sex with him, even though she did not feel ready to do so. After a short time, they separated. Now, she felt very sad about the separation and about the fact that she had sex with him so hastily, but also because her parents had found out about it. She felt that she had disappointed them. Her parents had separated, and she found it very difficult to share her feelings and thoughts with them.

The child helpline counsellor explained that it is entirely normal to feel upset about such things but advised her that it would be helpful if she could talk to somebody she knew, so she could express her feelings and receive support. They talked about how the girl appeared to be withdrawing into herself because of her fears about how her parents might react to what she tells them. They discussed how it might help for her to nevertheless talk to her parents about how she is feeling lonely and exposed, and that this could help strengthen her relationship with them.

“Even as a kid, I knew there was something not very nice about my stepfather…”

A 17-year-old boy contacted the child helpline and told them about the abuse that had started happening to him 14 years ago, when his mother met his stepfather. Even as a kid, he felt something was odd about his stepfather and he had never felt comfortable around him. From the moment that he and his mother had moved in with the man, emotional and physical abuse began. Although the physical abuse stopped three years ago, the emotional abuse continues. His maternal grandmother had noticed bruising when he was younger and had wanted to report the abuse. The grandparents confronted the boy’s mother but she refused to listen to them and threatened to commit suicide if they went to the authorities, so eventually they had given up. The boy’s grandfather had now passed away, and his stepfather had forbidden him to see anyone else in the family.

Reaching out to the child helpline had been the first time the boy had opened up and shared his story. The child helpline counsellor told him how important it was that he inform the Centre for Social Welfare, so that he could get the help he needed, and to talk with a mental health professional who could help provide him with stable support. He said that he planned to move out soon, but the advice the counsellor had given him made him feel much stronger and in control of his situation.
Concerns about peer relationships were the third largest reason for contact reported by child helplines in the EU in 2019. Contacts relating to peer relationships represented 13.9% of all counselling contacts in the EU.

The two main reasons for contacts in the peer relationship category were friends and friendships and romantic relationships. These two subjects alone account for nearly all (95.7%) peer relationship contacts.

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<th>Reason for Contact</th>
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<td>Friends and friendships</td>
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<tr>
<td>Romantic relationships</td>
<td>46.6%</td>
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<td>Unspecified/other</td>
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Contacts by gender

According to our data, girls contacted child helplines in the EU more than in boys for all reasons relating to peer relationships. It can be noted, however, that contacts of unknown gender accounted for the most contacts relating to unspecified/other issues.
“I am really heartbroken that he doesn’t want to see me anymore…”

A 16-year-old girl called the child helpline and asked for counselling because she had broken up with her boyfriend. She did not know how to deal with this change and the feelings it was causing. She explained that this was her first romantic relationship: “I am really heartbroken that he doesn’t want to see me anymore.” She described how the situation had affected her – for example, she now felt very depressed all the time, and she had lost her appetite.

The counsellor helped her to understand the intense feelings and reactions she was experiencing as part of a “grief process”. They discussed ways for her to take time and continue her life after the end of this relationship. She told the counsellor that she now felt much more empowered thanks to their discussion.
“I need to help her, even if means we stop being friends…”

A girl contacted the child helpline because she was worried about a friend who had changed a lot lately. She had promised her friend not to tell anyone about it, but was clearly worried and wanted to get help for the friend.

The child helpline counselor talked with the girl about her worries and what it meant to be a good friend to somebody. They came up with a plan together. She will talk to an adult she trusts about the situation, so that she can get help for her friend even if it means their friendship is damaged as a result. The counsellor helped her to figure out who to talk to, and how to explain the situation, and they finished the discussion with a good plan that the girl was going to put into action as soon as she could.

“I’m worried what my other friends are thinking about me now…”

A girl called the child helpline because she was being bullied by a friend she had been friends with for four years. They have fallen out several times before, but usually always start having fun together again. This time, she found out that her friend was spreading gossip about her everywhere. She said she felt emotional about the situation and was afraid of what her other friends might now be thinking of her because of the stories the other girl had been telling them. She told the child counsellor that she had even been thinking about taking her own life.

The child helpline counsellor explained to her that thoughts of suicide meant that the situation had indeed become very serious and demanding for her. The counsellor empathised with her and helped validate her feelings. The girl had already spoken to a school psychologist, as had her mother. She was considering ignoring her friend or reporting her behaviour to their teacher at school. The girl went on to mention other problems that were going on, in her family. She was solving these problems, but there was a lot of things for her to think about right now. The counsellor told her that she was always able to call the child helpline, especially when she was having suicidal thoughts, due to any problems she was having with the friend or her own family.
Concerns about family relationships were the fourth largest reason for contact reported by child helplines in the EU in 2019. Contacts relating to family relationships represented 12.1% of all the counselling contacts in the EU.

The child or young person’s relationship with parents (65.3%) was the largest reason for family relationships contacts reported by the child helplines in the EU. It accounts for over half of the total family relationships contacts received. Unspecified or other reasons were the second largest reason in this category, accounting for over a quarter of the contacts. These reasons include, for example, relationships with other family members such as grandparents or cousins.

It is interesting that the largest reason for family-related issues concerns the parental relationship. This corresponds with our findings that 91.4% of children and young people contacting child helplines in the EU are living with their parent(s) or guardians and 58.3% of the contacts are reported to be living at home with these parent(s) or guardians. This is also consistent with our findings at the global level, that the main areas for concern for children and young people who contacted child helplines in 2019 was about something that was happening in their own home.
Contacts by gender

Child helplines in the EU received more contacts from girls than boys for all reasons relating to family relationships. More specifically, girls contacted more than twice as often as boys concerning their relationship with parents.
“I’m always fighting with my sister, and I just want some peace and quiet...”

A child contacted the child helpline for some support and the chance to have some time for themselves. They had been having issues with their sister, with whom they had recently been fighting a lot. The fighting always started because of something small but then quickly escalated. The child often had to go to a friend’s house, just to get a bit of peace and quiet. The parents know about the situation but offer no help and don’t anything to try to stop it. They work all day and don’t have much time for either of their children.

The counsellor takes the child seriously, and talks about their needs and feelings. Together they discuss the various options available for dealing with the situation, for example talking to the sister about how they feel, or talking to the parents again and making sure they discuss it seriously. The child is happy to be told that they can always call again if they need further support.

“She told me I was abnormal. I don’t feel loved anymore...”

A 16-year-old girl contacted the child helpline’s chat about the latest fight she’d had with her mother. The girl had previously found the courage to talk to her mother about her sexuality, and the fact that she liked other girls. She had given her mother some time to take this in, but things had not worked out well. “A few months later she told me I was abnormal, and that all she really wanted was a normal daughter.” From that moment on, the girl had felt unable to share anything with her mother. “I don’t trust her. I don’t feel loved anymore. I feel ignored.” The girl explained that, more recently, she been feeling unwell and lots of little things were triggering her, and pushing her towards self-harm.

With the child helpline counsellor, they discussed her desires and struggles, and the fact that she feels that her mother doesn’t understand her. Thanks to the non-judgemental help provided by the counsellor, it became possible to build a bond of trust and lay the foundations for the girl getting more practical help, as she not felt much calmer about talking to and involving social services. She hoped that, with their help, she would be able to build a peaceful relationship with her mother and that her mother would be able to fully accept her as she is.
A mother called in tears to ask for advice and support concerning an issue with her 8-year-old son. A few days ago, her mother and baby nephew were killed in a hit-and-run incident, which her son had witnessed. He was incredibly close to his grandmother and every day since he has been staring at her photo in secret, whispering that he misses her. He was having nightmares. He never talks about his grandmother with his mother, and he hasn’t cried in front of her once since the tragic event. Now he has said that he does not want to go to the funeral.

After listening to the mother, the child helpline counsellor expressed condolences. She explained that the death of a loved one is difficult, and that children feel the loss particularly strongly. The counsellor explained that children may be reluctant to talk about the recent death of a loved one, especially because they are trying to avoid upsetting family members by asking them questions or talking about their feelings. She recommended expressing her feelings freely in front of the child to encourage the child to express his emotions in return.
Concerns about sexuality were the fifth largest reason for contact reported by child helplines in the EU in 2019. Our child helpline members responded to a high number of contacts relating to sexuality, representing 8.3% of all counselling contacts in the EU.

When children and young people contacted the child helplines in the EU to talk about sexuality, they mainly wanted to talk about sexual behaviours. Over a quarter of the contacts wanted to talk about sexuality and gender identity.

### Sexuality: Reasons for making contact

- **Sexual behaviours**: 72%
- **Sexuality and gender identity**: 26.8%
- **Unspecified/other**: 1.2%
Contacts by gender

It is interesting to note that the child helplines in the EU received nearly twice as many counselling contacts from boys than from girls about issues concerning sexuality. This is one of only two reasons for contact where boys were contacting child helplines more than girls.

In addition, for those child helplines who record and report non-binary contacts, we noted that a comparatively higher number of contacts relating to sexuality and gender identity were being made in this group. This would indicate that sexuality and gender identity is a key reason for non-binary children and young people making contact with a child helpline.
“I don’t know what gender I am…”

A young person contacted the child helpline, wanting to talk about their feelings and thoughts on gender identity. They were unsure what their gender was. They lived in a small town where everybody knew one another. Friends had voiced concern, already perceiving that the young person was constantly withdrawn and shutting everyone out. They felt that their body was wrong and they wanted more masculine features, but at the same time they didn’t want to take any medical steps. They found it difficult to even imagine talking about any of this with their family, who were opposed to LGBTQI+ people. They felt that if they told their parents how they felt, they’d be kicked out of the house and excluded from their family. They felt very confused and anxious and needed someone to talk to, someone who wouldn’t judge and who would understand.

The counsellor told the young person that it was okay to feel confused and that there was no rush to come to a conclusion. The counsellor explained that sometimes sorting out big things like this takes a lot of time and energy, but that’s fine. The counsellor supported the young person’s self-esteem by complimenting them for contacting the child helpline and seeking help, and encouraged them to make contact again whenever they needed to. The counsellor informed them about the national LGBTQI+ NGO and their youth activities, which the youth was interested to hear more about. They also talked about the parents and their abusive behaviour towards minorities and thought about where the young person could get additional support to help with their home situation.

“I’ve known I’m gay for five years now, but I’ve never talked about it before…”

A 17-year-old contacts the child helpline saying he is into other boys and he needs advice about how he can tell his parents. He said that he felt terrible, and felt an intense pressure on his chest. He was very afraid that his parents would reject him and no longer want to have anything to do with him. He eventually mentioned that he was thinking about suicide.

The counsellor gave him space to talk, and then asked about his emotions. The boy has known that he was gay for about five years but had never told anyone about it before. Until this call he had never told anyone about his suicidal thoughts either. The counsellor appreciates his openness, and the courage it has taken to him to be able to talk about it. The counsellor talks about gay people, explaining that they are a normal and ordinary part of society. The boy found this very valuable to hear, as nobody had ever talked with him about homosexuality in this way before.
"Because nobody knows I’m bisexual, I couldn’t turn to anyone for help…"

The child helpline heard from a father who called about his 19-year-old autistic son. The young man had exchanged nude pictures of himself on Grindr, a dating app for gay men, and now these were being used for blackmail purposes, with the threat of publication online if he did not pay large sums of money. The boy was bisexual but was afraid to come out. "Because nobody knows I’m bisexual, I couldn’t turn to anyone for help." Before finally telling his father about his problem, he had paid over €1,000 to the blackmailer. After his son had opened up to him, his father made a formal report to the bank hosting the blackmailer’s account, and contacted the police, providing them with information to help track down the perpetrator. The young man was now extremely distressed and suicidal, and the father wanted to know how he could best help him. The child helpline counsellor congratulated the father for handling the situation well, and for being there for his son. ¬The counsellor gave them information about LGBTQI+ organisations that could give further advice to his son, help him with his feelings and support him in coming out, if that was what he wanted to do.
A young person who contacted the child helpline needed to talk to someone about Covid-19. They were extremely anxious about catching the virus because they were living with a person in the high-risk category. The young person didn’t dare to leave the house. They were having anxiety attacks and palpitations, and found themselves crying often: “I can’t get any sleep because of the nightmares I’m having about the virus.” They wanted advice on how to feel calmer and how to feel they were able to properly function during the pandemic.

The counsellor provided some information to try to help the young person feel calmer. They explained if everyone followed the guidelines as set out by the government, the risk of becoming infected was quite small. They reassured the young person that many people had been able to recover from the virus. The counsellor advised the young person to talk about their anxiety and to share their feelings with a friend or family member. Finally, they suggested the young person could try to do the things they enjoyed, such as drawing or writing, to distract themselves from the situation and thus feel much more at ease.
“He gets drunk, and he’s downstairs hitting mum right now...”

A young girl contacted the child helpline in great distress. Her father had lost his job due to Covid-19. He had started drinking more and more often at home and this was making him become very aggressive. She was worried that he was going to hit her and her younger siblings. He’d already hit her mother once earlier in the day, and now her parents were fighting downstairs while she was making the call to the child helpline.

The counsellor informed the girl about her rights, and she decided to give her details to the child helpline so they could pass these on to the appropriate authorities. The counsellor told the girl she had been very brave to talk to someone about this and ask for help. The girl felt much more in control after her talk with the child helpline, and she made contact again a couple of days later to let them know that a social worker had paid a visit and spoken with her parents, who afterwards sat down with her and her siblings and talked things through as a family.

“Studying at home is overwhelming...”

A 15-year-old girl contacted the helpline to talk about the stress and anxiety she was feeling about studying at home. She felt that the schoolwork she had to get through was overwhelming, and that none of her teachers were aware of the sheer amount of work each other was giving to her. She enjoyed getting active feedback from her teachers about her schoolwork but right now she wasn’t getting much, which made her very unsure and uncertain about how everything was going. The girl also said she felt very lonely, as her parents both worked in social and health care, and because they were working such long hours during the pandemic, she was alone at home most of the time.

The counsellor listened to her and tried to comfort her. She said she had good relationships with her parents and didn’t want to burden them with her problems because they were so stressed about everything going on at the moment. The girl and the counsellor talked about how her parents cared for her, and how they would be very much concerned for her own wellbeing at this time, and she agreed to talk with them about her feelings. They also thought of ways she could talk with her teachers about her school workload and of practical solutions for reducing this so that she could address her levels of stress.
Conclusions: Key recommendations

Every child and young person has the right to be heard, the right to protection and the right to access essential services, free from bias or other barriers. Child helplines play a critical role in the promotion and realisation of children’s rights globally, as they provide a safe and accessible platform for children and young people across the globe to receive the support they need through immediate counselling and referral services.

The following key recommendations ensure that child helplines can continue to play this vital role.

#1: Every child should have free and unrestricted access to child helpline services, including particularly vulnerable children

In order for this to happen:

• Child helplines require reliable long-term funding to do their crucial work, including sustainable funding during times of emergency, such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

• Child helplines need effective technical solutions such as chat, call, forums and accessible website information to cater for a diverse group of children with different communication needs and preferences.

• Children, including those who are particularly vulnerable, need to be made aware of the services of child helplines through the communication channels they trust and prefer. Targeted efforts should be made for particularly vulnerable groups, and the 116 111 number should be promoted.

• Child helplines require sufficient resources to focus on ongoing, internal capacity-building to cater for the specific needs of particularly vulnerable children.

#2: Child participation through the inclusion of children and young people’s voices is essential for relevant and impactful policymaking and practice on all levels

Child helplines can support this goal, therefore:

• Child helplines require long-term financial investments in technology and knowledge for reliable, efficient and confidential data collection, analysis and management.

• Reliable and confidential child helpline data should be recognised by partners and policy makers as a resource to properly inform children’s rights policymaking.
Mental health remains the main reason for contact in the EU during 2019, which reaffirms not only the importance of child helplines in supporting children on mental health issues, but also the need to continue to prioritise prevention and support for children’s mental health issues. Child helplines must be acknowledged as a key partner in preventing and tackling mental health, both as a service, and as a key source of data on children’s experiences.

Violence also unfortunately remains a major reason for contacting a child helpline in the EU, indicating the important role of child helplines in protecting children from harm. Structured partnerships and collaborations have a crucial role to play in eradicating violence against all children by working to shape an integrated protection response. We align with Sustainable Development Goal 16.2 – to end the abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against children, and with the EU Strategy for more a more effective fight against child abuse.

To improve child mental health in Europe, ENOC, the European Ombudspersons for Children, make the specific recommendation to “Establish direct access information and advice services such as toll free helplines that provide non-directive mental health support and referral to appropriate services” (ENOC, 2018, p.5). http://enoc.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/ENOC-2018-statement-Child-Mental-Health-MODIF-1.pdf

The EU Strategy for a more effective fight against child abuse states that “children need to feel secure and empowered to speak up, react and report (…). They also need to have access to safe, accessible and age-appropriate channels to report the abuse without fear.” (2020, p.11): https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-security/20200724_com-2020-607-commission-communication_en.pdf

Call to Action!
What can you do to help?

Children and young people
Raise awareness of your local child helpline in your networks, speak up on issues facing children and young people in your community, and contact child helplines on any issue you might be facing.

Policymakers
Publicly acknowledge the importance of child helplines to promote children’s rights, provide sufficient funding for child helplines, consult national and regional child helpline data to inform policymaking, and help keep mental health and violence against children as key issues on the agenda.

Child rights organisations or agencies
Partner with child helplines – for referrals, knowledge exchange and campaigning, raise awareness of child helplines among the communities you work with, and help keep mental health and violence against children as key issues on the agenda.

Telecom providers
Waive fees for children and child helplines on your network and strike up a collaboration to support your local child helplines, financially or otherwise. Please read more here: https://www.gsma.com/publicpolicy/resources/child-helplines-mobile-operators-working-together-protect-childrens-rights.

Tech companies
Partner with child helplines and support with technical resources and guidance to maximise accessibility to support for children and for reliable data collection.

Academics
Use child helpline data in your research, and exchange knowledge on data collection practices.

Everybody
Make sure that the children around you are aware of the services of child helplines, and always report instances of violence.
116 111: Six digits to remember

116 111 is the number reserved for child helplines in the EU. This number is currently operational in 23 out of 27 Member States (and additionally seven other European states). The EU Commission has identified child helplines as a service of social value, and the harmonised 116 111 number is an important part of a reporting system to tackle abuse and exploitation of children and young people.

The Council of Europe has included child helplines in integrated national strategies to protect children from violence. For children and young people, having a short, easy-to-remember number is very important to make child helplines accessible. In 2017, the University of Suffolk and Child Helpline International conducted a study on the awareness of child helplines and the 116 111 number. The study concluded that between 25% and 50% of children were aware of child helplines and/or the 116 111 number. It is of the utmost importance that children and young people are aware of the existence of the 116 111 number. Further awareness raising is crucial. Governments, children’s rights partner organisations, telecoms and industry partners should use their platforms to promote awareness of the 116 111 number to make sure that every child is heard.

Check out our website www.116111.eu for more information.

Our Child Helpline members in the EU

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<th>Country</th>
<th>Service Name</th>
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<td>De Kindertelefoon</td>
<td>☎ 116 111 / 0800 0432</td>
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<td><a href="http://kindertelefoon.nl">http://kindertelefoon.nl</a></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Helpwanted.nl</td>
<td>☎ 31 20 261 5275</td>
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<td><a href="http://helpwanted.nl">http://helpwanted.nl</a></td>
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<td>Poland</td>
<td>Telefon Zaufania (Trust Phone for Children &amp; Youth)</td>
<td>☎ 116 111</td>
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<td><a href="http://www.fdds.pl">http://www.fdds.pl</a></td>
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<td>Portugal</td>
<td>SOS Criança</td>
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<td><a href="http://www.iacrianca.pt">http://www.iacrianca.pt</a></td>
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<td>Romania</td>
<td>Telefon Copilului</td>
<td>☎ 116 111</td>
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<td><a href="http://www.telefonulcopilului.ro">http://www.telefonulcopilului.ro</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>Linka Detskej Istoty</td>
<td>☎ 0800 112 112 / 116 111</td>
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<td><a href="http://www.ldi.sk">http://www.ldi.sk</a></td>
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<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>National Telephone Helpline - TOM</td>
<td>☎ 116 111</td>
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<td></td>
<td><a href="http://www.e-tom.si">http://www.e-tom.si</a></td>
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<td>Spain</td>
<td>Télefono ANAR de Ayuda a Niños y Adolescentes</td>
<td>☎ 116 111</td>
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<td><a href="http://www.anar.org">http://www.anar.org</a></td>
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<td>Sweden</td>
<td>BRIS</td>
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<td><a href="http://www.bris.se">http://www.bris.se</a></td>
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</table>
Every child has a voice.

No child should be left unheard.

Child Helpline International is a collective impact organisation with 168 members in 139 countries and territories around the world (as of December 2020).

We coordinate information, viewpoints, knowledge and data from our child helpline members, partners and external sources. This exceptional resource is used to help and support child protection systems globally, regionally and nationally, and to help our members advocate for the rights of children and amplify their voices.

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