ISOLATION AND LONELINESS
"No more popping round the corner to talk to mum."

A report by Parentline Plus
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Isolation and loneliness
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"I feel totally exhausted – my toddler never sleeps and I feel so alone. I was in care and now I am bringing up the kid on my own. I just don't know how to be a good mum and no one is here to help me."

Over the years, callers to the Parentline Plus helpline have consistently highlighted how alone they are – how there is no one to turn to with whom to share problems, sorrows and joys in their family life. 45% of all calls to the helpline are from parents saying they are lonely and isolated. The vast majority of those stated lack of family support as the reason for their loneliness. Nearly half were lone parents.

Family life is in a state of change - rates of separation and divorce are very high; the traditional concept of the extended family supporting each other within a given community is the exception now rather than the rule. Families are often on the move because of work or change in finances and the sense of local community is weakened.   Families are more divergent – with some (on lower incomes) having children very young, and many others having children at a later age. It is unsurprising that parents sometimes feel out of their depth as they struggle to bring up their children without the traditional recourse to supportive informal networks of families and friends.

Generally parents see the help offered by informal family and social networks as the best way to tackle problems, because family and friends understand and can help quickly and practically. However it often involves a level of give and take - trading support when and if it is needed. This enables the family to see themselves as continuing to be in charge and so independent of the more directive form of formal support.

However research shows that where the problems are more complex or where a parent is not embedded into a community, the less informal networks are not used or seen as useful. Research also shows that if parents get support from their informal networks they are more likely to use formal and semi informal services more effectively. This in turn indicates long term positive outcomes for their children.

We at Parentline Plus therefore are deeply concerned about the fact that parents without the very basic informal networks could be facing enormous difficulties in ensuring their children are happy and safe. We urge that family support goes beyond the universal and formal and enables local, community based services to echo the values and responsive practical support available through family and friends.

" I am a Muslim, in an arranged marriage with four children.. it's not working, but in my culture there is no divorce and I am finding it difficult to cope. My family will not help – they told me to get on with it. I have no help from husband - all he does is shout, and then slam out. I can't drive and it takes hours to get the children ready to go out or to go shopping. I have no friends."
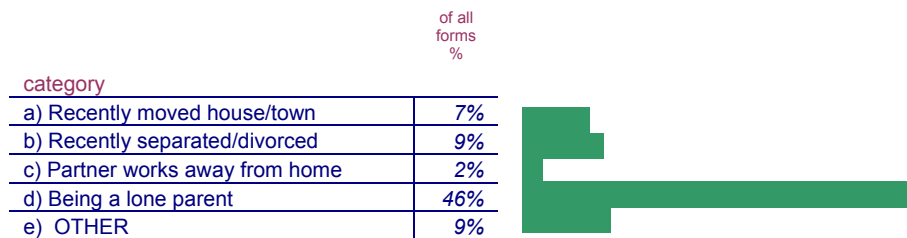
Findings

We have data on 45,000 calls where parents mention isolation and loneliness. For this report we looked in depth at 18,000 calls from parents who indicated that lack of family support was the main reason for their isolation.

- 66% of these parents were bringing up their children on their own
- 50% were worried about issues concerning divorce and separation
- There were very high rates of self identified emotional and mental health problems – nearly 80% of all callers talked about their stress and anxiety
- 35% were worried about finances. The average recorded across all calls of parents worried about money is considerably lower at 14%
- 82% were worried about their child's emotional state
- Conflict between parent and child and between siblings were higher than average (when compared to rates recorded across all calls)
- Figures around abuse, and in particular emotional abuse and domestic violence both past and present, are worryingly high

" My son's behaviour is making me so upset. I have no family to turn to and don't trust my friends. If he continues to abuse me I want him taken away – I can't go on living with him. Where do I turn to next?"

Isolation and parenting
The context

category	of all forms %
a) Recently moved house/town	7%
b) Recently separated/divorced	9%
c) Partner works away from home	2%
d) Being a lone parent	46%
e) OTHER	9%

Although all parents, whether or not partnered, may experience loneliness and a sense of isolation, those who are lone parents are likely to be even more at risk of experiencing a lack of support networks. The figures in this report speak for themselves – with nearly 50% of calls coming from lone parents. It must be emphasised however that most lone parents are like other parents - with families and friends to call upon, and working full-time or part-time. Like most parents therefore they can make the most of the full range of support and social networks available.

But for a significant minority, as can be seen in this report, parenting can occur in isolation, with no family links and with no friends with whom the parent feels able to share, and with no facilities in the immediate area which the parent feels able to use.

We are using the 'lone parent' to include single parents, never married, as well as those who are separated, divorced or widowed. There has been a doubling in the proportion of households headed by a lone parent with dependent children in the UK since the early 1970s, to 6 per cent in 2002. Up to the mid-1980s much of the rise was due to divorce but more recently, the number of single, lone mothers has grown at a faster rate, because of the rise in the proportion of births outside marriage. Lone mothers headed the majority of lone parent families in spring 2002, with just one in ten headed by a lone father[1].

In Autumn 2002, there were 707,000 workless lone parent households[2]. Many therefore live in poverty, and many live on low incomes. Although divorce can improve outcomes for

children where there is conflict in the home[3], it remains the case that separation or divorce often means relocation to a new area where support networks are unknown, and a fall in household income, putting families at greater risk of poverty.
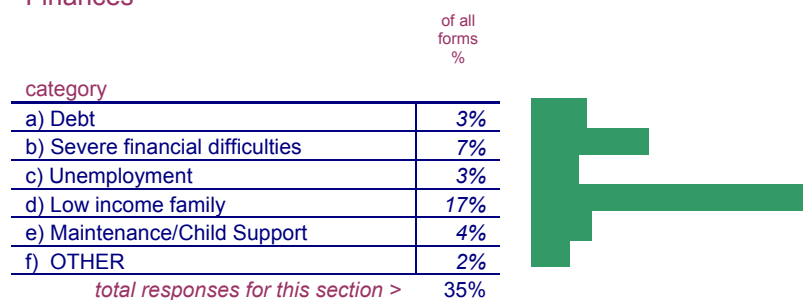
We know from the research that social isolation and lack of support is associated with poorer outcomes for children. Whilst some women may choose not to work when their children are young, and may have good local support networks of friends and/or family, for those without family links or friends, work can offer a means not only of raising the family out of poverty, but also of opening up channels of communication that in turn can predicate friendship and support.

For many, however, there remain barriers to the workplace. For some, their own or their children's mental or physical health may militate against working; for some the cost or availability of childcare (particularly where there are no friends or family to offer shared or free care) may mean that the cost of working is too great; for others the difficulty, cost and logistics of arranging childcare for several small children together with the travel costs and suitability of work are a factor, and for yet others the stress and strain of organising their families to meet low-paid work commitments may simply not be worth the money[4].

"I have just left my partner – and moved into a flat. But it's so difficult – I would like to work but can't find a job, can't find childcare, and now my rent has been increased by £180. I hated my life with him and what it was doing to me and my kids, but if I had known what it would be like I might have stayed."

In this research, over a third of parents talked about their finances. The effect of low income on lone parents cannot be underestimated. In terms of isolation, for example, it reduces the ability to access leisure and sports facilities, to carry out voluntary work, or to live in a community of choice. Those on low incomes often cannot afford childcare, and for those without other support networks of family or friends, the opportunities to get out and meet other parents are limited.

Finances

category	of all forms %
a) Debt	3%
b) Severe financial difficulties	7%
c) Unemployment	3%
d) Low income family	17%
e) Maintenance/Child Support	4%
f) OTHER	2%
total responses for this section >	35%

Ford and Millar (1998)[5] note that lone parents spend almost as much on their children as do married parents and try to protect their children from poverty by spending less on themselves. At the same time, those on Income Support are the most personally deprived and the most stressed by their financial circumstances, yet have no partner with whom to share decision-making, leading to a heavy burden of responsibility. They are also more likely to have restricted social networks, and to feel uncomfortable about being unable to return favours and support.

The effect of isolation on the children

"I am really worried about my abusive son. He isn't just verbally abusive but breaks glass each time. He has had behaviour problems since 18 months old but is well behaved at school. I feel I have no life of my own."

Friends, neighbours and relatives can be sources of support, childcare and emotional warmth and their absence, almost by definition, points to loneliness, lack of support, and lack of communication. Wahler (1980) found that the frequency of contacts that a mother had with her friends was inversely related to the number of problems that she had at home with her child, and with her skill in dealing with them. On days when a parent had increased social contacts with others, her interactions with the child were also found to be more positive.
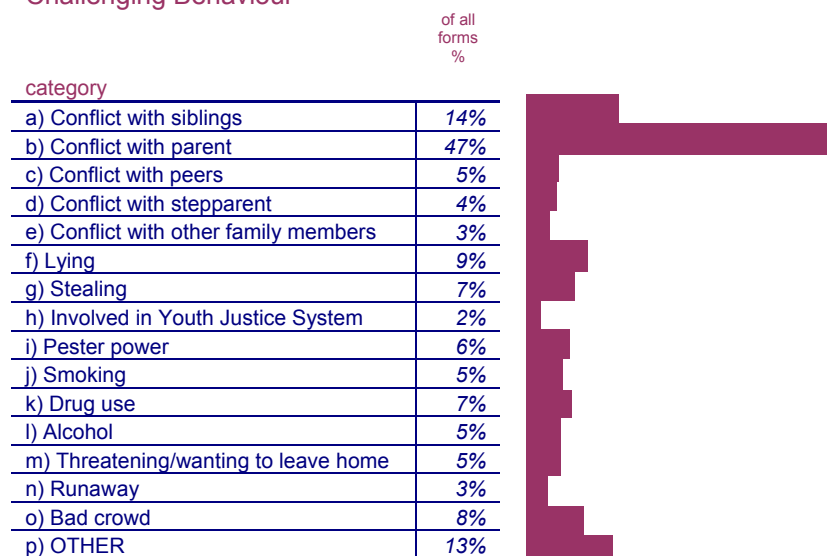
Social isolation can be seen as a risk factor for child abuse. However it is more commonly identified as being linked to lack of parenting support, increased stress, low self-esteem, social alienation (Sheras, 1998). We know that a child's well-being is associated not only with confident parenting and lack of deprivation, but also with the wider context within which the child lives. Where parents are socially isolated, there is a risk that neither parent nor child is able to access fully the support systems available in the wider than home environment.

The effect of social isolation on the child is demonstrated in our research, with parents often concerned about their children's depression and anxiety. Nearly 7,000 talked about the anxiety and stress levels they saw in their children. It is clear from research, and acknowledged by government, that the well being of families lies in secure and positive social interactions and networks. Where a parent or parents are isolated from their immediate familial and social environment, their child's own well-being will be heavily influenced. At Parentline Plus we believe that those who ring us understand the effect their own problems are having on their child and can visualise a knock-on effect – where their child in turn is hampered by social isolation.

Whilst socialisation in the form of reaction to others of similar age can be identified even in infancy (Parke and Asher, 1983), by the teenage years it has become an important part of social and emotional development and of the acquisition of social competence (Ary et al, 1999; O'Koon, 1997). An absence of friends or peers, particularly during the early teenage years, can lead to stress and low self esteem, with Buhrmester (1990) reporting that an unmet need for friendship can lead to loneliness, psychosocial disturbance and alienation.

Parentline Plus research into the concerns of parents who had no family support networks demonstrates high levels of challenging behaviour perceived in their children. Nearly 25,000 parents raised this issue, with the majority talking about the behaviour of their teenagers.

Challenging Behaviour

category	of all forms %
a) Conflict with siblings	14%
b) Conflict with parent	47%
c) Conflict with peers	5%
d) Conflict with stepparent	4%
e) Conflict with other family members	3%
f) Lying	9%
g) Stealing	7%
h) Involved in Youth Justice System	2%
i) Pester power	6%
j) Smoking	5%
k) Drug use	7%
l) Alcohol	5%
m) Threatening/wanting to leave home	5%
n) Runaway	3%
o) Bad crowd	8%
p) OTHER	13%

Feelings of alienation and psychosocial disturbance are also reflected in our findings. 82% of parents talked of worries about their children's emotional state. This is demonstrated in the following table.

Emotional State

category	of all forms %
a) Anxiety	22%
b) Stress	19%
c) Anger	31%
d) Bereavement	3%
e) OTHER	7%
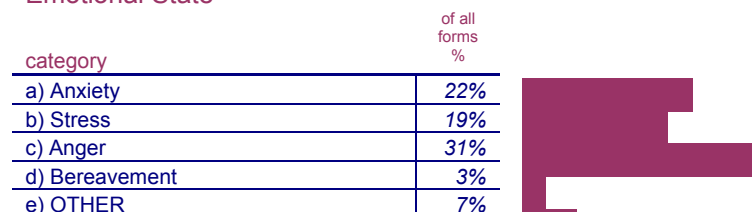
Looking for help

" I have been very depressed because of not having support from the people I have asked for help from. They seem to be judgemental rather than giving support needed. You have made me feel very much more confident after exploring my difficulties with me. "

This briefing paper emphasises the knock-on effect of social isolation – where a parent lacks this level of support, they often make little good use of the more formal services available to them. As they often lack the feeling of being one of many - because they cannot share their problems or compare their child's behaviour with other parents - they can feel very stigmatised when asking for help. Parents often tell Parentline Plus that they thought they were the only ones feeling out of their depth and how talking to other parents helped them find solutions to their problems. Parents without such opportunities feel they have failed themselves and their children if they cannot cope.

Parents also tell us about how they are often pushed from pillar to post when they do go to services for help. When we analyse the services these parents have used – there are higher

rates than average of those being in touch with their GP, Social Services, their child's school and the police – both currently and in the past.

Who is, or has been involved in this family

category	Research sample	Average of all calls
a1) GP	21%	10%
b1) School	14%	13%
c1) Social Services	13%	7%
d1) Police	6%	5%
e1) Solicitor	6%	4%
f1) Health Visitor	5%	2%
g1) Education Welfare	2%	1%
h1) Court Welfare/CAFCASS	2%	1%
i1) CSA	1%	1%
j1) Youth Service	0%	0%
k1) Youth Offending Team	0%	0%
l1) Family mediation	0%	0%
m1) Family therapist	1%	0%
n1) Psychiatrist	3%	1%
o1) Educational Psychologist	1%	0%
p1) Private counselling/therapy	2%	1%
q1) State counselling/therapy	5%	2%
r1) OTHER	5%	3%

How can isolation be reduced?

Investment in practical and social improvements
Access to a job, to decent housing, and to childcare all contribute to a better quality of life. A job provides an income and social contacts, decent housing provides a very important feeling of security, access to childcare helps parents feel more in control of their lives and opens up other choices to them. At a policy level, then, much still needs to be done to increase wealth and lifestyle choices for those on low incomes, and for those who are not only parents but also carers, frequently tied to the home with little or no respite and with children or co-dependants with such complex or demanding disabilities that friends or older parents simply cannot share the burden.

As more and more women move into the workplace, there is the likelihood that sources of community and skills support, such as playgroups, mother and toddler groups and the easy availability of neighbours with similar aged children, will ebb away in favour of nurseries, nannies and paid carers, leaving those with perhaps the most complex needs even more vulnerable to isolation.

We welcome the plans for children's centres and extended schools in every community and see that by developing these initiatives, many parents will find it much easier to secure help and information for both their children and themselves. However without investment in outreach and other community based approaches built into the change programmes, the most excluded may well miss out or will continue to feel stigmatised by their need to ask for help in the first place.

Investment in social capital
A key element in developing mechanisms with which to support those isolated both socially and emotionally is to invest in community social capital. This can comprise education and

schooling, as well as other families in the community.   If family-school-community links are strong and good resources are available, children's social capital is increased and their well-being improved. Social capital is thus seen as enabling stronger associations between family relations, community links and outcomes for young people.

Conclusion

The far reaching and innovative changes heralded in *Every Child Matters* promise much for families. What must not be overlooked in the rush to streamline and enhance services for children and their families is the essential role of community based support. The voluntary and community sector have long-standing understanding of the needs of the most isolated families and a key need is to replicate support in the form of the 'virtual family'.

This report emphasises that support, whether from family, friends or neighbours, is vital if stress is to be reduced and parents are enabled to do their best for their children. For those unable – for whatever reason - to be part of a family or social network, there must be responsive and flexible services that fill this role. This can take the form of home visiting, outreach, and more intensive one to one support for the most vulnerable. This in turn can lead to parents having the confidence and trust to attend parenting groups or other community based groups. Every area should be enabled to develop services for those with no networks that are appropriate to a locality and to the parents' needs.

The setting up of children's trusts will no doubt improve access to appropriate services for all members of the family. But those who are wary of statutory services may well never get this far – or even recognise that these services exist for them. Investing in 'virtual family' community based services that build trust and signpost vulnerable families to other sources of help, must therefore be an essential element of the change programme.   Where funding is available, it must not be so hide bound by stringent targets and outcomes measures that community workers give up before they have even started.

The Minister for Children, Young People and Families has stated, "This government is committed to improving outcomes for children and young people through the Children Act 2004 and the linked Every Child Matters: Change for Children programme. We know that to do this we must engage all those who have an impact on their lives. And we believe that voluntary and community organisations have a crucial role to play…they are not only major providers of services to children, young people and families, they have significant expertise to offer in developing strategy and planning these services".

Let us hope that such commitment is targeted at the small scale and organic community level as well as at more overarching, nationally and regionally based services. We hope that local authorities will rise to the challenge and see consultation, planning and partnership with those working in the community as an essential element of the change process.

Recommendations

What parents want from services

Parentline Plus regularly consults with parents, both those who use our services and those who have not as yet contacted us. As part of our partnership in the Family Policy Alliance, which brings together the Family Welfare Association and the Family Rights Group and Parentline Plus, we have been asking service users about what they need from services and

what would help them access such support. All our consultations demonstrate that parents have clear ideas about how services should be developed and what they should provide.

These include:

- Recognition by service providers and policy makers that parents are key to positive outcomes for their children. Parents are in essence the number one service provider to children and young people.
- Accessible, respectful, responsive and flexible services - adaptable to the family's needs and for use if and when a parent or family needs them. Services should be welcoming, locally and community based, including in people's own homes, preferably free or affordable and available at weekends and in the evening offering a one stop shop level of support so that parents do not have to go from pillar to post.
- 'Owned' by parents and families. Parents should be involved in developing services within their community and involved in managing and monitoring these services.
- Available so readily that parents and society feel it is the norm rather than the exception to ask for help and information on parenting children. Messages about parenting in the media should reinforce the idea of how normal it is to turn to others for help and information on parenting, rather than reinforcing punitive and blaming views.
- Affordable. Many parents voice concerns about the costs of accessing support services. Thought should be given to providing free or subsidised travel, crèches/childcare, especially in rural areas. Attention should be given to alternative and free or low cost access to support services, such as providing these via the telephone.
- Delivered in partnership. Parents value workers who listen to them and work with them as partners. Professionals need to have good quality training about working with parents, as well as support and supervision and sufficient time to listen to families and work alongside them.
- Multi layered, to cover different ages and stages and different needs and challenges. Services need to offer age appropriate information and help to cover child development, education and health matters. Services need to cover different levels of need and difficulty, including mental health, sexual health, and relationships between the parents. There should be many levels of support depending on the individual need of a parent or family to give the family choice about what is best for them.
- Well signposted and seamless.   Parents currently feel they are sent from pillar to post and have constantly to go over their details again and again. Services need to work together and to help parents access additional services in a seamless way.

[1] www.statistics.gov.uk
[2] Bivand, P., 2002, *Labour Market Report,* Working Brief No.25, Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion, www.cesi.org.uk
[3] See, for example, Pryor, J & Rodgers, B., 2001, *Children in Changing Families: Life after Parental Separation*, Blackwell Publishers
[4] See, for example, Casebourne J, Britton L, and Morrin M, 2004, *Lone Parents, Health and Work,* DWP Research Report 214
[5] Ford, R and Millar, J., 1998, *Private lives and public responses: lone parenthood and future policy*, JRF Foundation, www.jrf.org.uk