

# Evaluation of the Parentline Plus helpline: key findings

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# Evaluation of the Parentline Plus helpline: *Executive Summary*

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## **Aims of the evaluation**

This report describes an evaluation of the Parentline helpline, carried out in 2006. It builds on the findings of an earlier evaluation, conducted by the authors between August 2002 and March 2003. The current evaluation focused on callers' perceptions of the helpline service, in order to determine whether the characteristics of callers using the service, and their reported perceptions of using the helpline, differed from callers interviewed in our original evaluation four years ago. More broadly, the evaluation aimed to inform the future development of Parentline services, by gathering detailed information on the extent to which callers' perceived needs were met by the universal helpline service.

## **Methods**

The 2006 evaluation involved a single telephone interview (of about 30 minutes duration, on average) with a sample of 99 callers who used the helpline at least once between July and September 2006. Interviews with helpline callers addressed the following specific areas:

- the caller's use of the helpline service on this and other occasions;
- reasons for calling the helpline, and hoped-for outcomes of calling;
- other help-seeking activities;
- perceptions of problem severity;
- the caller's views of the call;
- experiences of onward signposting;
- perceived impact of call on feelings and situation;
- caller and family characteristics (family structure; marital status; nationality; ethnicity; language; occupational status); and
- support networks.

## **Key findings**

### **Characteristics of the sample interviewed**

The characteristics of the interviewed sample were similar to those interviewed in the 2002-03 evaluation, and to those recorded by Parentline call takers in relation to all 'long' calls to the helpline<sup>1</sup>:

- the majority of the interviewed sample was female: most were mothers calling about one or more of their children with whom they lived;
- most callers were from two-parent or single-parent households; and
- the majority were born in the UK, and from white ethnic backgrounds.

Compared to the previous evaluation, a slightly higher proportion of callers in the sample were in professional or intermediate/managerial occupations, but a fifth of callers in 2006 lived in households with no wage earner.

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<sup>1</sup> Parentline Plus Quarterly Report to the Department for Education and Skills, October – December 2006.

### **Callers' social support and networks**

Callers interviewed in 2006 appeared to have better social support networks than those who took part in the 2002-3 evaluation. A greater proportion said they had a close friend or confidante in whom they could confide, and callers were more likely to report having someone they could turn to for help in an emergency. That said, there remained evidence of isolation among a large subgroup of callers – just over one quarter of callers reported no face-to-face contact with people in their social network during the previous week.

While the present sample of callers appeared to be relatively less isolated than those who took part in the previous evaluation, interviewees indicated that (as before) they used the helpline when unable – for various reasons – to access help within their usual network of support, for example, if customary confidantes were unavailable, or in cases where the nature of the problem made it difficult to share.

Patterns of help seeking were similar to those described in the previous evaluation, with the majority of callers having sought help from a health professional (usually the GP) or someone at a child's school (usually a teacher) in the previous year. A quarter of callers had used other helplines, one in five in relation to the problem they called the helpline about.

### **Use of Parentline**

As in the previous evaluation, for almost two-thirds of those interviewed, the evaluated call was the first they had made to the Parentline Plus helpline. In relation to the evaluated call, nearly eight out of ten said they had got through to the helpline on their first attempt – a figure consistent with Parentline Plus's own reported successful call rates. A small proportion were very frequent callers – six callers estimated they had called more than 15 times in the last year, almost all of whom were dealing with significant and complex issues. These included Social Services involvement; children in public care; significant mental health problems, including depression and bipolar disorder; bereavement; and maternal history of abuse.

### **What had precipitated the call to Parentline Plus**

In line with Parentline's own recording of caller issues, and with the findings of the previous evaluation, most callers called the helpline in relation to significant and complex chronic and acute concerns:

- almost two-thirds of calls were made as a result of chronic problems that had built up over time;
- for nearly a third of callers, the call was triggered by a significant acute event or crisis situation, including a 'last straw' situation with an acute event occurring in a chronically difficult situation.

The issues called about differed to some extent from our previous evaluation:

- callers in 2006 more often reported concerns about challenging behaviour in the child and child mental health;
- however, as before, about one quarter were concerned about educational issues;
- a new category of concern – child emotional state – was recorded for over a third of calls in 2006 (making it the second most frequently occurring category);
- emotional state was also rated as an adult issue in over half of all calls in 2006, compared with one in ten calls in the previous evaluation, and mental health

issues, and loneliness or isolation were also more frequently rated as issues relevant to the call.

Most callers considered their concerns to be very serious. On a scale from 0 (not serious) to 5 (as serious as it could be), over 80% rated their problems as 4 or 5.

### **Calling the helpline**

Callers' aims in calling were similar to those reported in the previous evaluation:

- three-quarters said they were hoping for advice;
- half were seeking information;
- half wanted the chance to talk about their concerns;
- forty per cent were seeking reassurance.

There was considerable overlap between these categories – for example, many callers seeking advice were also looking for reassurance and/or the chance to talk about their problems. As in the previous evaluation, callers felt there was a good match between what they wanted and what they felt they got from the call, with many callers also recognising that they got more than they had been seeking.

Almost two-thirds felt they had been given advice by the call takers. Although the Parentline helpline does not aim to offer specific advice to callers, this distinction may be lost on callers, who perceive that call takers have given them advice, and who value the advice they feel they are given.

Signposting has remained a key facet of the helpline's work, and over half of callers reported that the call taker had recommended they contact other organisations that might be able to help, and most of those had already made contact with the organisation recommended by the call taker.

### **Callers' overall evaluation of the helpline.**

The great majority of callers were very positive about the helpline service. For example:

- almost nine out of ten rated the call's helpfulness as good or very good;
- over 85% thought the call helped improve their feelings or mood;
- eight out of ten reported that their situation had improved as a result of the call;
- almost all callers (97%) praised call takers' listening skills;
- three-quarters said they would use the helpline again;
- almost nine out of ten rated the service as good or very good.

## **Conclusions**

The findings indicate that – as in 2002-03, the Parentline helpline continues to provide a valued service to callers from diverse backgrounds socio-economic backgrounds and household types.

Many callers have significant and complex problems, both chronic and acute, and most were concerned about multiple (although often related) issues when they made the call. Almost all callers judged their problems to be very serious at the time of calling, and most reported calling in crisis, or after a chronic build-up of events.

Almost all the callers interviewed were highly satisfied with the service. They described a helpful source of advice and information, and an opportunity to talk, and almost all said

they would recommend the service to others and would use the helpline again if necessary. As in our previous evaluation, they particularly valued the listening. Approval ratings on all these measures were in excess of 85%, and had improved since the last evaluation. These last conclusions are particularly important given that the service has expanded substantially since 2002-03 – indicating that the helpline has improved in quality as well as in capacity since our last evaluation.

# Between Evaluation of the Parentline Plus helpline: *Key findings*

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## 1. Background

### Supporting families

A key facet of government policy over recent years has been the provision of universal support services for parents and families, in addition to the crisis intervention and support offered, for example, by providers of Social Services. The importance of such support has been emphasised in documents such as *Every Child Matters*<sup>2</sup> and the National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services (NSF)<sup>3</sup>. *Every Child Matters*, which highlights five key outcome objectives for children and young people, states that support for families and carers is 'at the heart of its approach to improving children's lives' (p 8). Similarly, Standard 2 of the National Service Framework is focused on supporting parenting, and includes the following statements:

'We want to see ... Appropriate help and support for parents or carers who find it hard to access services and professionals.' (p 65)

'Good, high quality, timely support for parents as their children grow up is likely to improve outcomes for children and young people in terms of their health, social and educational development and well-being.' (p 67)

Henricson and Roker<sup>4</sup> pointed to the potential value of telephone support in achieving wider access to advice and information for parents. This evidence is pertinent to the concerns set out in policy documents the NSF and *Every Child Matters*, given that some groups of parents – for example, those from low-income families – appear less likely to utilise face-to-face sources of help<sup>5</sup>.

### Parentline Plus

Against this background, Parentline Plus provide a national freephone helpline for parents (or those with parenting concerns), which is funded by the Department for Education and Skills<sup>6</sup>. This helpline was established to provide an accessible universal service, available through one national freephone number, offering 'information and support, and the chance to talk through the issues facing parents'<sup>7</sup>, and where

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<sup>2</sup> Department for Education and Skills (2003) *Every Child Matters*. London: Department for Education and Skills.

<sup>3</sup> Department of Health (2004) *National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services*. London: Department of Health.

<sup>4</sup> Henricson, C., and Roker, D. (2000) Support for the parents of adolescents: a review. *Journal of Adolescence*, 23, 763-783.

<sup>5</sup> Keller, J., and McDade, K. (2000) Attitudes of low-income parents towards seeking help with parenting: implications for practice. *Child Welfare*, 79, 285-312.

<sup>6</sup> Previously funded by the Home Office, as part of their *Supporting Families* initiative.

<sup>7</sup> Parentline Plus website, accessed 8 March 2007; <http://www.parentlineplus.org.uk/index.php?id=331>

appropriate, signposting and referring callers to other sources of advice, information or support.

## Evaluating Parentline

Between August 2002 and March 2003, we conducted an evaluation of the Parentline helpline, using methods including interviews with call takers, analysis of tape-recorded calls to the helpline, and interviews with callers. That evaluation was designed to investigate whether the helpline was an efficient and effective way of providing support to parents, and whether it made a positive impact on families using the service. It concluded that Parentline Plus was providing a good quality helpline service, which at that time was used by over 5,000 callers a month. Most of the callers to the helpline felt satisfied with the service they received, and felt 'helped' by having made the call. A significant group said it had impacted positively on their feelings about the problem, and in some cases, more directly on the problem. The 2002-3 evaluation also highlighted the complex and severe nature of the problems that many callers telephoned about, noting that the helpline was dealing with a far higher level of need, and of otherwise unmet need, than had been envisaged when it was set up. About a third of the callers telephoned in crisis situations, and many others called about complex, chronic, and entrenched difficulties.

As part of the evaluation, we analysed British Telecom (BT) data on calls to the helpline, and noted that while a minority of attempted calls were getting through at that time, there was a clear and steady increase in the number of successful calls (those that reached a call taker) over the 15 months to the end of December 2002. Since then, data provided by Parentline Plus indicate that this growth in successful call volume has continued, with a higher proportion of callers getting through first time. For example, during the three months from October 2001, the number of calls reaching a call taker was 8,924, compared to 15,434 in the same three months of 2002, and 26,406<sup>8</sup> in the same three months of 2006.

This report describes our second evaluation of the Parentline helpline, carried out in 2006. This new work built on the findings of that earlier evaluation, but focused in particular on callers' perceptions of the helpline service. One key objective was to determine whether the characteristics of callers using the service, and their reported perceptions of using the helpline, differed from callers interviewed in our original evaluation four years ago. Overall, the present evaluation aimed to inform the future development of Parentline services, by gathering detailed information on the extent to which callers' perceived needs were met by the universal helpline service.

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<sup>8</sup> This figure includes all calls that successfully reached a call taker, including silent calls and hang-ups, as well as 12,635 'long' and 6,595 'short' calls to the helpline. Data provided by Parentline Plus from British Telecom records of answered calls.

## 2. Methods

The 2006 evaluation involved a single telephone interview (of about 30 minutes duration, on average) with a sample of 99 callers who used the helpline at least once between July and September 2006.

### Sample and sample recruitment

The sample for this part of the evaluation was recruited from all seven Parentline call centres: Croydon, Hadleigh, Hertfordshire, Kentish Town, Newcastle, Nottingham, and Stamford. The procedure for recruiting callers to the research was as follows. All call takers during an agreed shift in each centre were asked to seek permission for a researcher to make contact, from all calls taken during the sample shift<sup>9</sup>. Call takers used their own words to seek permission from callers, but were provided with a list of points they should cover (e.g. explaining confidentiality and what the research would involve, and checking for any times a researcher should *not* call, and whether the researcher could leave a message; see Appendix One). The call takers then recorded the caller's response (whether or not they agreed to participate, and contact details if given) on a standardised form. With the caller's permission, contact details were passed on to the research team, and a researcher telephoned the caller in the next few weeks to explain the research, and – if the caller agreed – to carry out a telephone interview of approximately 30 minutes duration.

In total, 247 callers provided contact details for the research team. A further 70 callers either declined to be contacted by the research team, or were not asked by the call taker, or agreed but the call ended before they provided contact details. Of the 247 who agreed to be contacted, a random sample of 141 callers was drawn from the 247 callers who agreed to be interviewed, and was allocated to the research interviewers. Of this allocated sample, interviews were completed with 99 callers (the remainder were unreachable within a few weeks of the helpline call<sup>10</sup>, or declined to take part when contacted by a researcher).

### Interviews

Callers were asked how they evaluated the service and advice or information they received, as well as whether this had made any changes (or was anticipated to make changes) in any aspect of their behaviour or thinking. Parents' or other callers' perceptions of whether they felt 'helped' as a result of their call, and their views on any impact on their children, were also an important part of this element of the evaluation. Interviews with helpline callers addressed the following specific areas:

- the caller's use of the helpline service on this and other occasions;
- reasons for calling the helpline, and hoped-for outcomes of calling;
- other help-seeking activities;
- perceptions of problem severity;
- the caller's views of the call;

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<sup>9</sup> It should, however, be noted that callers who were judged to be too distressed at the start of the call to 'interrupt their flow' by telling them about the evaluation, are likely to be one group from whom permission would not be sought, and are therefore likely to be excluded from the evaluation

<sup>10</sup> The fact that interviews had to be conducted within a short time window after the original call will act to disproportionately exclude some callers with more disorganised or chaotic lives, who may be more difficult to contact within the timescale.



- experiences of onward signposting;
- perceived impact of call on feelings and situation;
- caller and family characteristics (family structure; marital status; nationality; ethnicity; language; occupational status); and
- support networks.

### 3. Findings

#### Characteristics of the sample interviewed

Table 1, below, reports the characteristics of the callers interviewed, which were broadly similar to those who took part in our earlier evaluation. As in the 2002-3 evaluation, most of the 2006 sample were mothers calling about one or more of their children who they lived with (67 mothers and 10 fathers in 2006). Five other relatives called, three grandmothers and two aunts: in each case the direct concerns were with their (adult) children or their children's partners or ex-partners, and the impact of this on their grandchildren. Two other callers were concerned about friends' children, or in one case their friend's grandchildren.

**Table 1: Characteristics of the interviewed sample (N=99)**

	N
Female	84
Male	15
Calling about ...	
eldest child	51
second child	21
third or subsequent child	10
Cause of concern was:	
Caller's child	67
Caller's children	10
Caller (themselves)	41
Partner	7
Ex-partner	5
Other adult	3
Other child	6
Other	3

The marital or civil status of the callers is shown in Table 2. The largest group of callers were from 'nuclear families': overall, 40 callers were living in two parent households, 36 callers in single parent households, and seven callers were from step-parent households. Fourteen callers lived in other types of households. This group included parents of non-resident children, including non-resident fathers, and parents of children in public care, as well as friends and relatives (as indicated above). In the 2002-3 evaluation, 30 of the 99 interviewees lived in 'nuclear families', with 40 callers from single adult households.

Most callers (88/99) were born in the UK, and English was the first language of all but five of the interviewed callers. Just over 15% came from non-white ethnic backgrounds, and the ethnic groups most commonly reported were white British (79 callers), other white (4), and mixed origin (4). The age range of callers (based on their year of birth) was from 22 to 76 years, average 41 years. This range was slightly broader than in the previous evaluation, where callers' age ranged from 23 to 62 years.

**Table 2. Marital status and family composition (N=99)**

	Nuclear family	Lone parent household	Step-parent household	Other	Total
married	39	0	6	2	47
single	0	17	0	4	21
separated/divorced	0	16	0	6	22
widowed	0	2	0	2	4
cohabiting	1	0	1	0	2
ongoing relationship without cohabiting	0	1	0	0	1
not known	.	.	.	.	2
<i>Total</i>	40	36	7	14	99

Over half the callers (59) were currently in paid employment. Of those (40) currently without employment, five were students, 16 were 'economically inactive' and not seeking work, six were unemployed, and three were unsupported non-working parents. Table 3 shows the social class classification of callers and their partners, utilising information on callers' past occupation for those who were not currently employed. Eleven callers had never been in paid employment. Compared to the previous evaluation, a slightly higher proportion of callers in the sample were in professional or intermediate/managerial occupations (33/99, compared with 22/99 in 2002-3). That said, a fifth of callers (22) lived in households with no wage earner, 14 of whom were lone parents, while four had partners and four lived in 'other' households (e.g. grandmothers, non-resident fathers).

Parentline Plus provide quarterly data summaries for their funder, the Department for Education and Skills, derived from information collected by call takers on call monitoring forms. These data, provided by Parentline Plus for the nine months from April to December 2006<sup>11</sup>, indicate that the evaluation sample were broadly representative of helpline users. Within the nine month period for which data were available, 45% of helpline calls were from people in two-parent households, including 'nuclear' families, cohabiting and step-family households, (compared to 40% in the evaluation sample) and 89% came from white ethnic backgrounds (84% in the evaluation sample).

**Table 3. Socio-economic classification of callers and their partners (where applicable)**

	Caller N	Partner N
(I) Professional	7	2
(II) Intermediate/managerial	26	17
(III <sub>n</sub> ) Skilled non-manual	20	5
(III <sub>m</sub> ) Skilled manual	10	13
(IV) Partially skilled	8	1
(V) Unskilled	12	.
economically inactive - including student	6	7
unemployed	3	1
not known	7	4
not applicable - no partner	.	49
<i>Total</i>	99	99

<sup>11</sup> Parentline Plus Quarterly Report to the Department for Education and Skills, October - December 2006. Parentline Plus do not routinely collect data on callers' employment status.

## **Callers' social support and networks**

Although difficult to evaluate as there is no comparable information available for a representative community population, it was of interest to know whether callers had other sorts of social support, such as someone they could talk to or confide in; whether they had someone they felt they could turn to in an emergency; and their social networks, in terms of contact with family, friends and others. It was also of interest to know what other sources of help callers to the helpline had used in the past year for advice or information about their children, or family concerns (but not necessarily about the current problem or concern).

### **Confiding**

Nearly three quarters of callers (74% compared with 63% in the previous evaluation) said that they had a close friend or confidante who they could confide in. Five callers said that they only had their partner to confide in; eleven more said they had a possible or potential confidante; but nine said they had nobody to talk to if they were worried about something. Callers were then asked if they had actually put this in practice and confided in someone else about a problem such as the one they were calling about. Just over half (56 callers) said that they had, 29 had talked in a limited way with someone else, and 11 callers said that they had not been able to talk to anyone.

### **Crisis support**

Callers who had resident children (85) were asked about whether there was anyone they could turn to for help in an emergency. Six callers (compared with 14 in the previous evaluation) said that they had no one they could turn to for help in an emergency. Nearly a third of callers (26, 31%) felt that there was probably someone, such as a family member, friend or neighbour, who would help out if needed, and 53 callers (62%) had experience of this occurring, and had been able to find someone to help out. This is a higher proportion that was found in our previous evaluation, where only 22 callers had experience of accessing crisis support.

There was some overlap between the lack of a confidante and the lack of crisis support. Of those (8) who said they had no confidante, or were unsure if there was someone they could talk to about their problems, four also said they had no one to turn to in an emergency or were dubious about whether there was anyone they could turn to. None of this group could actually identify an occasion when they had asked someone else to help out in a tricky situation.

### **Social networks**

Table 4 shows callers' social contacts in the week before the interview took place. Nearly a third had seen their own parents in the preceding week and over 70% had seen or spoken to them. Nearly a quarter (24%) had met with their siblings. Four fifths of callers (80%) had seen or spoken to a close friend in the previous week. Callers were most likely to have met friends or acquaintances (such as other mothers at the school gates, or colleagues at work).

Investigation of the pattern of contacts showed that only one caller had not had contact (including speaking) with any of these people in the previous week, but for just over one quarter of the callers (27), contact with any of these people, where there had been some, had been confined to telephone contact only. The remainder of the callers had actually met at least one of these different types of people in the previous week, but those who

this applied to had usually met people in several different categories. This pattern is consistent with findings in relation to confiding and crisis support, in suggesting lower levels of social isolation among callers than were apparent in our 2002-3 evaluation. At that time, half the callers reported no face-to-face contact with people in their social networks during the preceding week.

**Table 4. Callers' social contacts in the previous week (N=99)\***

	NA/not seen or spoken N	spoken N	seen and spoken N
own parents	27	39	30
own siblings	29	44	23
partner's immediate family	66	17	12
close friends	19	38	39
other relatives	67	18	11
acquaintances	16	26	54
professional contacts	41	19	36

\* Categories do not sum to N; callers may have multiple contacts.

#### Other sources of help

Callers were asked, from a list of possible sources of support, help or advice, which, if any of them, they had been in touch with in the previous 12 months, for advice or help to do with their children or family problems. Table 5 details their responses, which showed very similar patterns of help-seeking to those reported in our previous evaluation.

Nearly three quarters (72%) of callers had talked to their family doctor about children's or family problems in the previous year, and only slightly fewer (68%) had sought help from someone (usually the teacher) in the child's school. It was notable that over a quarter of callers to the Parentline Plus helpline had called other telephone helplines about their children or family's problems. These included ChildLine; CAB; Crisis; Connexions, Gingerbread; Government Legal helpline; Lone Parent helpline; NHS Direct; NSPCC, Samaritans; Saneline; Victim Support; and Women's Refuge Project.

**Table 4. Other sources of help sought by callers in the past year (N=96)\***

	N	%
GP	69	72
Health visitor or nurse	33	34
Midwife	12	12
Social worker	23	24
Religious leader or organisation	11	11
Child's school or college	65	68
Parenting group or class	14	15
Voluntary or community organisations	17	18
National Family and Parenting Institute	4	4
Youth Offending Team	3	3
Child and Adolescent Mental health Services	14	15
Other telephone helplines	26	27

\* Categories do not sum to N; callers may use multiple sources of help.

### **Previous calls to Parentline**

For 60 callers, the evaluated call was the first they had made to the Parentline Plus helpline, but 38 had used the helpline before (similar proportions to those reported in the previous evaluation). Those who had called before were asked to estimate how many times they had spoken to someone at Parentline in the previous twelve months (callers were asked to give the actual number of calls, but obviously for those who had made large numbers of calls this is likely to be an estimate). Twelve had called once before, twelve had called between three and five times; and eight had called between five and 15 times in the last year. Six callers estimated they had called more than 15 times, with one caller estimating having called 70 times, and three reported making more than 100 calls. Some of these callers clearly made very large numbers of calls. One, a father separated from his children, and trying to get access, said, *'I don't know exactly – maybe around 500 times...'*. Another frequent caller with emotional and mental health problems, and whose children had been taken into care, said, *'I don't know, but I call about two or three times a week'*.

In considering those callers who had used the helpline more than 10 times in the last year, almost all were dealing with significant and complex issues. These included Social Services involvement; children in public care; significant mental health problems, including depression and bipolar disorder; bereavement; and maternal history of abuse. For two, with concerns that might be deemed less serious, their repeated use of the helpline reflected their perceptions of its effectiveness. One, who summed up her feelings as follows:

*'I feel isolated. [I have] no one to talk to. My family don't understand me. I am of Asian origin but born in UK, and I struggle between the two cultures. I called Parentline before and I felt much better, so that's why I keep on calling them.'*

As a related issue, while the present sample of callers appeared to be relatively less isolated than those who took part in the previous evaluation, interviewees' comments indicated that (as before) people used the helpline when unable – for various reasons – to access help within their usual network of support. As the following quotes indicate, callers may use the helpline when their customary confidantes are unavailable, but also, in cases where the nature of the problem makes it difficult to share:

*'I felt overwhelmed enough to phone Parentline at lunchtime, when I knew my friends were at work and unavailable. It's great that Parentline is 24 hours and free.'*

*'family and colleagues are difficult to talk to about this'*

*'Just to have someone to talk to whenever you need to is very helpful. You know it isn't often that people around you are ready to listen or take in your problems.'*

*'if you talk to family they are judging you or your daughter'*

*'I needed to speak to someone objective... someone who wouldn't say 'there, there' like friends can do, or brush it aside.'*

*'Ten years I've been going for Social Services and I didn't know that they record it every time when I said I couldn't cope.'*

## Calling Parentline

### 'Getting through'

According to the interviewed callers, and in relation to the evaluated call, nearly eight out of ten (78%) said they had got through to the helpline on their first attempt. Of those who remembered making more than one attempt to get through, most said that had got through to the helpline in two or three attempts, and only 8% estimated that they were unsuccessful in getting through on more occasions than this. These figures indicate some improvement since the previous evaluation, where one outlier estimated 50 attempts before getting through. In the present evaluation, the highest number of attempted calls (reported by one interviewee) was seven.

### Other sources of help

We were interested in whether callers had tried other sources of help before they called the helpline. Table 5 shows the people or organisations that callers had talked to (or in some cases attempted to talk to) about their current concerns, before they called the helpline.

Just over a fifth (21 callers) had not sought help from any other source before calling the helpline; this compared with 15 callers in the previous evaluation. The majority of callers had at least discussed their concerns with someone else: a third with their partner and/or a close friend. Many callers had tried multiple sources (up to a maximum of seven out of 13 possible categories) in order to try to obtain help with their problem. The average number of other people or organisations that had been tried before calling the helpline was two (standard deviation = 1.7). One in five (19 callers) had tried calling other telephone helplines in relation to their current problem.

**Table 5. Other sources of help tried, before calling the helpline (N=98)\***

partner	31
ex-partner	9
close friend	32
acquaintance	8
health care provider (e.g. GP, psychiatrist, nurse)	22
education provider (e.g. head teacher, teacher)	24
social services	22
religious organisation	4
local parenting organisation	4
other national voluntary organisation (e.g. CAB, Relate)	5
other telephone helpline	19
other	24 <sup>12</sup>

\* Categories do not sum to N; callers may have tried multiple sources of help.

### What had precipitated the call to Parentline Plus

Overall, the most common description of situations that had caused the call to be made was of chronic problems that had built up over time (63%). For nearly a third of callers (N=32), however, the reason given for the call was a significant acute event or crisis situation – and for some callers it was a 'last straw' situation with an acute event

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<sup>12</sup> Included in this category were other family members; counsellors; solicitors; police; the youth offending team; and the internet.

occurring in a chronically difficult situation (the categories were not mutually exclusive, and several could apply). For example:

*'I needed help in that moment to help me gain control of the situation... She calmed me down, advised me to put my son on the phone and she spoke to him.'*

*'I'd been awake all night following an argument between my husband and [our child]. I found the [Parentline] number in the Yellow Pages at 4am. I'd come home to them arguing again and it felt like the last straw.'*

Other interviewees said that they had called because they had been unsuccessful in obtaining help elsewhere (17), or because they had been advised by someone else to call Parentline (12). For nearly a quarter of callers, the fact that they had called before was relevant to explain why they had called on this occasion.

### **The nature of callers' concerns**

Our previous evaluation analysed recordings of interviewees' calls to the helpline, providing an opportunity to examine concurrently the nature of their concerns at the time of the call. The present evaluation focused solely on interviews with callers, and is therefore restricted to callers' retrospective accounts of the concerns they had called about some weeks earlier. Given that (based on current accounts from callers as well as evidence from our previous evaluation) many callers may have been in crisis situations when they called, their perception of the seriousness of their concerns may have diminished or changed as time since the crisis (and the call) has passed – particularly, if the call was effective in impacting on their feelings and on the situation. This caveat should be borne in mind when interpreting the data presented in Table 6, which shows the types of problems called about in 2002-3 (from analyses of taped calls) and in 2006 (based on caller's accounts, from interviews conducted some weeks after the call), from the research evaluation.

This table is not identical with that presented in the first evaluation, as the method of ascertainment for these data differed (as noted above), as well as some of the categories coded. Despite these changes, as before, challenging behaviour in the child, educational problems, and mental health, are three of the four categories accounting for the largest proportions of concerns relating to children, with the new category of emotional state being recorded for over a third of calls in 2006 (making it the second most frequently occurring category). It is, however, notable that parents' retrospective accounts of their concerns appear to demonstrate a higher level of concern about children's challenging behaviour than researchers rated from recorded calls in the first evaluation. In 2006, challenging behaviour was cited as a concern by over half of callers, compared with just over a quarter of calls analysed in 2002-3. However, within the category of challenging behaviour were calls about diverse issues, and, as in 2002-3, many were characterised by multiple complex issues. On average, interviewees cited 3.8 different child and/or adult issues as prompting their call to the helpline, with 82 of the 99 callers raising more than one issue.



**Table 6. Children/young people and adult issues called about\***

	N=120	%	N=99
<u>Children/young people issues</u>			
challenging behaviour	31	26	53
emotional state	.	.	38
mental health	19	16	31
education concerns	24	20	25
physical health	11	9	19
bullying	9	7	10
child abuse	10	8	9
separation/divorce	.	.	9
early child development	1	1	8
“sex issues”	4	3	4
<u>Adult problems or issues</u>			
emotional state	11	9	56
isolation/loneliness	9	7	38
mental health	13	11	29
separation/divorce	17	14	11
adult abuse	4	3	9
domestic violence	.	.	8
parental conflict	21	17	7
physical health	3	2	6
history/early development	.	.	2
“sex issues”	.	.	1

\* Categories do not sum to N; callers may cite multiple issues.

The following extracts from researchers' notes of callers' main concerns, as reported in the interviews, are illustrative of some of the challenging behaviour problems called about (rather than representing a 'typical' call):

*'The sleep patterns of my two-year-old, [who is] waking about four times a night. My husband and I are feeling very sleep-deprived, as we also have a six-month-old baby. Was there anything left for us to try, were we missing something?'*

*'My son acts out – it is only he and I. He's getting bullied at school, he misbehaves, he gets anxious. I'm all alone – I have no contact with my abusive family. They made me feel guilty about everything. We shout at each other often, and sometimes I smack him.'*

*'My son is nine. [I called about his] aggressive behaviour. [He's] bullying and claims to be bullied. [He's] up and down emotionally. I left his father when he was a young baby, his father used to hit me. Now when my son comes back from weekends with his father he gets violent and aggressive and uses bad language.'*

*'[My] 12 year old son – he self harms, bangs his head against the wall - threatens to stab himself. He kicked me in the nose. He has hurt me before, but not seriously. [He has] ADHD and dyslexia. [I am] looking for assistance and for a proper diagnosis. We're fighting to get the help we need.'*

*'[I am] confused by my daughter. [She] is using dope and stealing from home. It's teenage stuff. She's angry and rebelling and I feel impotent about it. I've been fearful about the state she's in, worried she's going in with the wrong people, and I needed to talk to someone.'*

Another area where the pattern of calls appeared to be different was the categorisation of adult issues relevant to the call. Based on callers' retrospective accounts, emotional state was rated as an issue in over half of all calls in 2006, compared with one in ten calls in the previous study. Mental health issues, and loneliness or isolation were also more frequently rated as issues relevant to the call. Again, such issues were often inter-related. For example, one parent commented: *'I'm a bit depressed myself - I wanted advice on how to cope'*, while another reflected, *'I felt shut out [by my child] and lonely'*.

### Severity of callers' problems

Callers were asked to rate how serious a problem their concerns were on a Likert scale (from 0 to 5), and Figure 1 shows the proportion at each point on the scale. Perhaps not surprisingly, given that many calls were made when callers were in moments of crisis or 'final straw', more than half the callers rated their problems as very serious (5 on the Likert scale, so as serious as they could be), and only 2% rated them as not at all serious (0) or only mildly serious (1).

**Figure 1. Perceived problem severity (N=99)**

Not at all Serious 0	1	2	3	4	Very Serious 5
1.0	1.0	6.1	10.1	25.3	55.6 (% of callers)

### The aim of calling

Callers were asked, *'So, what were you hoping to get from the call? What did you want from calling? What did you think they could do?'* Just as in the previous evaluation, most callers (74/97) said they were hoping for advice, and half (48) were seeking information or what we have termed 'ventilation' – the chance to talk about their concerns (48). Four out of ten callers (40%) sought reassurance from the call taker. In line with findings from the last evaluation, a small minority had called seeking resolution of the problem (10 callers) or ongoing support (8). Once again, there was considerable overlap between the categories, and many callers seeking advice were also looking for reassurance and/or the chance to talk about their problems, as is illustrated by the following quotes:

*'I saw it as a crisis helpline. I wanted a resolution – I wanted to say, "I need help!" to someone, without complications – without being worried, or fear of being judged. I couldn't function at that point – I needed someone to tell me what to do, as I was in a catatonic state – I really wanted advice.'*

*'I wanted reassurance that I wasn't over-reacting for being so concerned. I wanted information and advice and just wanted to talk about what's going on... I got all that I wanted, it was very helpful'.*

### **What the caller felt they got from the call**

As in the previous evaluation, callers felt there was a good match between what they wanted and what they felt they got from the call, with many callers also recognising that they got more than they had been seeking. This was summed up by one, who called about a serious issue involving her 13 year old daughter's behaviour, and observed, *'I got all that I wanted and more – I didn't expect to get specific advice, which was great.'*

Just over half of callers (56) felt they had been given the opportunity to 'ventilate', by talking about their concerns, and only two of those seeking ventilation did not feel that had got that from the call. The value of ventilation was summed up by one caller as follows:

*'she was really lovely. She had a very calming voice. I babbled on, and she let it all spill out and helped feed back my ideas and thoughts.'*

Half of the callers interviewed (51) said they felt reassured by the call, and only three did not find the reassurance they were seeking from the call. Almost half (45) said they had been provided with information by the call taker, although 10 of those seeking information did not feel they had got that from the call. Seven callers said the call had provided ongoing support, all but one of whom had used the helpline on previous occasions. Five felt their call to Parentline had led to resolution of the problem, and it is interesting to note that these interviewees had not called the helpline about minor issues – for example, two calls related to a child's mental health problems, and one to a child's possible suspension from school.

### **Advice**

Almost two-thirds of callers (61) felt they had been given advice by the call takers, although this group did not include 18 callers who had hoped for advice when they made the call. The Parentline helpline does not aim to offer specific advice to callers, but rather to offer support, and the chance to talk through the issues. The findings of this and our previous evaluation suggest that this distinction may be lost on callers, who perceive that call takers have given them advice, and who value the advice they feel they are given. The subtleties of how 'advice' is defined or understood by callers are illustrated in the following quotes:

*'by talking to someone I put things right in my own mind... they can't give specific advice'*

*'[She] advised me to be assertive but not aggressive'*

*'They didn't tell me what to do. The call taker made some suggestions, like give [my daughter] some time, and she reassured me... We bounced ideas around during the call.'*

*'It was brilliant, a real breakthrough that day. The call made me see my part in the relationship problems with my son. I received good advice about looking at what I needed myself, and at my self-esteem and my adult relationship needs... The way I talked after with my son seems to have helped change the dynamic between us. It diffused the situation, me realising he wasn't being malicious.'*

*'I got the absolutely best advice I could have been given.'*

As these extracts indicate, most callers felt helped by the advice they thought they had received. Among those callers who felt they had been given advice, by the time of the evaluation interview 80% (49/61) reported that they had already acted successfully on the advice they had been given. Only 10 said they had been unsuccessful in following the advice given, while nine had not tried. Only three callers expressed dissatisfaction with the advice (or lack of advice) that they had received, with most others (46) describing themselves as highly satisfied with call takers' advice.

### ***Referrals and signposts to other organisations***

When government first funded Parentline as a national telephone helpline, one objective was that it should 'signpost' callers to other sources of help. Signposting has remained a key facet of the helpline's work, and over half of callers (57) reported that the call taker had recommended they contact other organisations that might be able to help<sup>13</sup>. Most (33) had already made contact with the organisation recommended by the call taker, although six others reported that they had been unsuccessful in trying to make contact. Others had not yet tried (7), or did not plan to do so (11). Of the 33 who had contacted other organisations, 24 were moderately or highly satisfied with that contact.

### **Callers' views of call takers' listening skills**

Callers were asked during the interview whether they felt 'listened to', and whether the person they spoke to heard what they said. Of the 97 interviewees who answered this question, only one answered 'no', two said they felt 'partly' listened to, and the remainder (94 callers; 97%) were definite in their praise for call takers' listening skills, as the following examples illustrate:

*'she really understood. She really understood and seemed to have an innate understanding of the parenting crisis I was at.'*

*'Yes, I did [feel listened to]. .....The person I spoke to was great.....she was actively listening to me.... She never interrupted me when I was speaking. ....I remember she had a very good understanding of what was happening and what I was going through.'*

*'[Parentline were] one of the few services that took me seriously – they really listened to me completely'*

*'She said she could hear the upset in my voice, and I was crying a lot, but she did hear what I was saying.'*

*'She fed back what I was saying ... and showed me she heard me and helped me hear myself.'*

### **Impact on the call on the caller's feelings and behaviour**

Callers were asked whether the call had had any impact on the situation that they called about, and secondly whether it had made any difference to the way they felt about things. In interpreting these findings, it is important to recognise that the time between the call

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<sup>13</sup> The organisations to which callers had been signposted included the following: ACE; A&E; Aimhigher; British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy; Childline; Citizens Advice Bureau; Connexions; Children's Legal Centre; Families Need Fathers; Family Planning Organisation; FRANK; Gingerbread; GP; Health Visitor; HomeStart; housing offices; local authority; mediation services; MIND; Parentline ITS service; police; school liaison officer; education services; Shelter; Social Services; solicitors; Victim Support; Youth Advisory Service; Youth to Youth.

and the interview was often very short – perhaps too short for any real impact on the situation to have taken place. Table 7 shows how callers felt that the call to the helpline had impacted on the situation and their feelings.

Very nearly half the callers (49%) felt that their call to the helpline had resulted in a marked improvement in their feelings or mood, and more than a third more thought that there had been at least a slight positive impact on their feelings. The difference calling had made to her feelings was summed up by two interviewees as follows:

*‘In a small way, I think the call made a lasting, significant, positive impression on my life. I now feel if the house is not tidy, I don’t sweat it. I feel [the call taker] helped me let myself off the hook – which I needed to hear.’*

*‘a helluva lot better – I actually slept’*

Although 13% of callers said the had made no difference to how they felt, only one caller reported that the impact of the call on their feelings was negative. As Table 7 shows, these figures represent a marked improvement from the previous evaluation, where almost a third of callers reported no change in their feelings as a result of the call.

**Table 7. Impact of the call on the situation, and on callers’ feelings**

	Impact on situation		Impact on feelings	
	2002-3 N	2006 N	2002-3 N	2006 N
Marked/definite improvement	28	44	39	48
Minor/slight improvement	26	34	26	35
No change	45	17	32	13
Negative change	0	2	2	1
<i>Total</i>	99	97	99	97

In relation to the impact of the call on the caller’s situation, the findings were very similar, with eight out of ten callers reporting that the situation was improved, and for 44 of these callers, markedly improved. While not necessarily representative of calls to the helpline, Box 1 presents three very different case studies that illustrate the impact of the helpline call on interviewees’ feelings and situation.

Two callers reported that their situation was worse as a result of the call, and seventeen reported that the situation was unchanged. This latter observation is perhaps not surprising given that many of these calls related to chronic ongoing issues (e.g., difficult teenage behaviour; mental health problems) or to situations outside the callers’ immediate control (e.g., concern about a child’s friends; a non-resident parent’s behaviour) – situations that are perhaps unlikely be resolved as the result of a call to a helpline. Further, it is relevant to note that 12 of these 17 callers rated the call as ‘helpful’ overall, as illustrated by one caller, who said, *‘it gave me hope – even if it did not change my situation.’*

## Box 1. Case study examples of calls to the helpline

### Case 1.

A mother of five children, partner has serious mental illness; teenage son's behaviour 'out of control' including expulsion from school and criminal behaviour. Prior to the call to Parentline, the caller had tried unsuccessfully to access help through Social Services: *'they weren't taking me seriously, even though I was saying that my husband and [son] were in desperate need of help'*.

#### **What made you call?**

*'desperation... the whole family has been in crisis for about a year'*

**Perceived severity of problem:** 5 (maximum on 0-5 severity rating)

#### **Impact of calling:**

Following advice from Parentline call taker, the teenage son had accessed Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). The caller commented: *'we are still struggling as a family, but at least my son is getting some help'*.

### Case 2.

A mother of three children, all under three years of age, called the helpline about problems with child behaviour and difficulty in communication with her husband.

#### **What made you call:**

*'I wanted advice on what I could do. I had no one to talk to.'*

**Perceived severity of problem:** 5 (maximum on 0-5 severity rating)

#### **Impact of calling:**

The caller was advised by the Parentline call taker to speak to her health visitor about *HomeStart*. At the time of the evaluation interview she had followed this advice, and by doing that had accessed a community mums' network. She also commented that the call had helped to improve communication with her husband about her stress. *'If it weren't for the [PLP] lady's advice I would be really stressed out.'*

### Case 3.

A mother with a young infant, who called the helpline because she was concerned that her child was not *'holding her milk down'*.

#### **What made you call?**

Parent had previously tried unsuccessfully to contact her health visitor *'but the phone kept switching to answer machine, and I thought NHS Direct would take too long. I found the PLP number in the Yellow Book for new parents – Yellow Brick Road... I was in a state so I needed to speak with someone.'*

**Perceived severity of problem:** 4

#### **Impact of calling:**

*'She reassured me, calmed me down, and advised me to take my daughter to A&E immediately. I went to A&E immediately after the call. It turned out my daughter was admitted to hospital for three days ...'*

## Callers' intentions to use the helpline again

Callers were asked if they would call the Parentline helpline again. Over three-quarters of those interviewed said that they definitely would use the helpline in the future, for example:

*'Oh yes!'*

*'Yes – I put the website in my 'favourites' and I gave the website to my neighbour who has four kids.'*

Another 20% said that they might call again – often expressing the hope that they would not need to call again:

*'It depends if I need any advice. Things feel better at present.'*

*'For sure, if I needed help or to talk.'*

Nineteen of the interviewed callers (including all those who were already frequent callers) had already made further calls to the helpline by the time of the evaluation interview. Only three callers said they would not use the helpline again.

The same large majority group of callers (76%) said they would definitely recommend the helpline to other parents, (with some adding that they had already done so) and 19% said that they probably would. Only four callers said they would not recommend the helpline to other parents.

#### **Callers' overall evaluation of PLP**

Callers were asked to gauge, overall, whether they felt they were helped by their call to the helpline. Almost all said they were: 87% rated the call's helpfulness as good or very good, and a further five per cent judged it adequate.

Five callers gave mixed assessments of the call's helpfulness, and only three judged it to be 'poor', and not surprisingly, these same three callers had said that the call had not helped their feelings or situation. While these callers' experiences are not representative of the great majority of those interviewed, it is worth examining these three cases in a little more detail to determine whether they are characterised by any common features.

In considering the experience of these callers, two issues appear to emerge. One is the extent to which the callers felt the call taker had listened to their concerns: only one of the three said she felt listened to by the call taker. The others commented, *'They just had me say my piece and got me off the phone'* and *'I felt dismissed, that she was watching the clock'*. These comments are exceptional, and should be considered in the context of the majority of callers who valued call takers' listening skills, and the opportunity to speak freely.

A second commonality relates to an apparent mismatch between what these callers had wanted from the call, and what they felt they got. Two of the three had called wanting information and advice, and perhaps for these callers, their dissatisfaction reflects a mismatch between what they wanted and got from the call. None reported having received advice or signposting information about other organisations:

*'He listened to me but didn't give me any workable advice.'*

*'I said what I wanted to say but got no practical tips... He told me to go on the internet and go on one of these courses for parenting...I don't have time to go on a parenting course.'*

Nevertheless, these negative comments are moderated by the observation that all three said that they would possibly (2) or definitely (1) call the helpline in future, and similarly, that they would possibly (2) or definitely (1) recommend it to a friend. They explained this by saying, for example: *'it could be I just got a not so good counsellor on the phone'* and *'Maybe I wasn't lucky when I called'*.

At the end of the interview, callers were asked to sum up what they thought of their call to Parentline. Table 8 shows how callers evaluated their calls overall, and again shows improvement since the last evaluation. While a small number of callers either had mixed feelings about the call, or felt that it had not been good, the great majority were very satisfied with the service. Eighty-six per cent of callers evaluated their call as good or very good, and a further seven felt that it had been at least adequate.

**Table 8. Callers' overall evaluation of their call to Parentline Plus**

	2002-3 N	2006 N
Good/very good	76	83
Adequate/all right	11	7
Mixed/ambivalent feelings	8	3
Poor/very poor	3	3
<i>Total</i>	99	96

One first time caller observed that *'the lady I spoke to was really superb – a lovely lady'*. Another first time caller, asked for his overall evaluation, said simply 'A1', while a third commented that she was *'very pleased – [it was] very helpful. I got more from the phone call than I anticipated.'*

Our previous evaluation had indicated that repeated callers were somewhat more critical of the helpline service than those calling for the first time, but there was no evidence of that pattern in the present research<sup>14</sup>. The three most frequent callers each evaluated the helpline very positively. One frequent caller said, *'[it's] brilliant – God bless everybody that works there'*. Another frequent caller, who described herself as *'a seasoned caller, as I'm a single parent'* said:

*'it's an excellent service. I would be lost without it ... I hope that they never shut the helpline down and that the service is always there'*.

In a similar vein, others observed:

*'it gives you strength when you feel worn down by a difficult situation'*

*'If Parentline can handle me, they can handle anybody'*

*'I ring so often that Parentline must be sick of me, but they never make me feel rushed. I feel good ringing them... I'm sure I would have had a mental breakdown if it wasn't for Parentline.'*

<sup>14</sup> Based on comparisons of caller rated helpfulness; impact on feelings; impact on situation; and overall evaluation of call; independent samples t-test.



## 4. Key messages

This evaluation has reported on the views of 99 callers to the Parentline helpline about their experiences of a single call. As such, it represents a small proportion of the many thousands of calls handled by the helpline each year. In contrast to our previous evaluation, we have not examined the quality of call taking, nor have we analysed Parentline's own call monitoring data. The context in which callers' views may be considered is thus inevitably constrained. Nevertheless, the evaluation findings are very clear, and – as in our previous research – the great majority of callers interviewed valued highly the service they received by calling Parentline. Several key points warrant particular attention.

### Caller characteristics

The profile of callers appeared to have changed somewhat since the first evaluation. A slightly higher proportion of interviewees lived in two-parent households than was the case in 2002-3, and more of the callers interviewed in 2006 had professional or managerial socio-economic status. Despite these slight changes, as in the previous evaluation, the helpline was clearly accessible to callers living in diverse socio-economic circumstances; for example, four out of ten callers were from lone parent households, and a fifth of callers in the present study lived in homes with no wage earner.

### Support

Callers also appeared to be somewhat less socially isolated than was the case in the first evaluation, reporting – for example – larger social networks and better crisis support. That said, these social networks did not negate the need for the helpline service – as was highlighted by cases where the sensitivity of callers' concerns meant they felt '*ashamed*' or unable to confide in friends. Moreover, 38 of the 99 interviewees highlighted feelings of loneliness or isolation among the concerns prompting their calls, and over a quarter of the sample had no face-to-face contact with members of their social network in the last week.

These findings indicate that – as in the previous evaluation – the helpline service is reaching callers with otherwise unmet support needs.

### Callers' problems

Our previous evaluation analysed callers' concerns by listening to recordings of their calls to the helpline, whereas on this occasion we have focused on callers' retrospective accounts of the concerns they called about. Comparison over time in the nature of callers' concerns is therefore limited – essentially we are not comparing like with like. In spite of these caveats, some variations over time were striking, notably the increase in concerns about children's challenging behaviour and in adult emotional concerns. The concerns reported by interviewees in the evaluation were similar to those recorded by Parentline Plus, in their quarterly report to DfES<sup>15</sup>, suggesting that interviewees were representative of callers to the helpline.

Equally noteworthy, however, and illustrated in the examples presented in the preceding section, the helpline continues to provide a service for a great many callers with significant and complex problems, both chronic and acute. Most callers were concerned

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<sup>15</sup> Parentline Plus Quarterly Report to the Department for Education and Skills, October – December 2006.

about multiple (although often related) issues when they made the call. These included families with Social Services involvement, including parents of children in care, those whose children were engaged in high risk or criminal behaviour, and families where parents and/or children had serious mental health problems or special educational needs.

Interviewees' reported concerns did include some examples of what we have previously termed 'the worried well' – such as parents calling about young children's behaviour and sleep problems, but it is important to recognise that most of these parents rated their problems as '4' or '5' (the most severe), and reported calling in crisis, or after 'last straw' events. Arguably, one of the particular strengths of the Parentline helpline is that it offers non-judgemental user-led support, reflecting how serious problems 'feel' to the caller, at the time of the call – *'without being worried, or fear of being judged'*.

### **Caller satisfaction**

Callers' perceived significant benefits from using the service, in terms of their judgements of its helpfulness, its impact on their feelings and situation, the value of 'advice' and signposting, and approval ratings on all these measures were in excess of 85%. Just three callers felt they were not helped by calling. Callers described a helpful source of advice and information, and an opportunity to talk, and almost all said they would recommend the service to others and would use the helpline again if necessary. As in our previous evaluation, they particularly valued the listening. Ratings on many of these measures had improved since the last evaluation – a particularly important finding given that the service has expanded substantially since then.

### **Conclusions**

The Parentline helpline provides a service to callers from a range of socio-economic backgrounds and household types. Almost all callers judged their problems to be very serious at the time of calling, and most called after a chronic build-up or acute event. The service was judged more effective by more callers than was the case in the previous evaluation. Most callers felt that the call had helped with their situation and/or feelings, and many had already acted on information or ideas discussed during the call by the time of interview. Just as we concluded in our last evaluation, the Parentline helpline offers highly valued and evidently much-needed support to callers with significant chronic and acute concerns.

## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank all the parents and others who called Parentline and then consented to take part in this evaluation. In particular, we would like to thank those who we interviewed, and who provided information on their feelings and views, without which we could not have evaluated the helpline.

The large majority of the interviews for this evaluation were conducted by Maria Bakaroudis, Rayenne Dekhinet, Maria Morahan, Lisa Ruxton, Ekua Yankah and Maria Zuurmond, all of whom are research associates at Thomas Coram Research Unit. We would like to thank them for their help. Sharon Lawson provided comprehensive and steadfast administrative support throughout, and we are most grateful for her input.

## AN EVALUATION OF THE PARENTLINE HELPLINE

### Information for call takers to give to callers

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#### What is happening?

Parentline Plus have asked the Thomas Coram Research Unit at the Institute of Education (part of the University of London) to carry out an evaluation of their telephone helpline service.

#### Why?

The aim of the evaluation is to find out how well the service is working for parents, and so to learn ways in which Parentline can develop and improve their services in the future. The researchers hope to find out what Parentline Plus is doing well, what it could do better, and how the service can develop in the future.

#### What's involved in the research?

The researchers need to find out what callers think about the helpline service, and how useful it is. The research team would like to speak to one hundred people using the helpline, and so we are asking everyone that we speak to whether they would be willing to take part.

### Questions callers might ask

#### What would I have to do?

With your permission, we will pass your name and telephone number to the research team so that they can phone you to tell you more about the study. You can then decide whether or not you want to take part in the evaluation. If you did decide to take part, a researcher would call you within the next two weeks and speak to you for about half an hour. They would ask you about your experience of calling Parentline, and what you think about the helpline service. You can change your mind about taking part at any time.

#### What will happen?

If you agree that we can pass on your number, a researcher will phone you within the next two weeks. Please let us know if it would be all right for the researcher to leave a message (they will say they are calling about a study of services for parents and families, and won't mention Parentline) and if there are any times when it is **not convenient** for a researcher to call.

#### Confidentiality

If you decide to take part, everything that you tell them will be completely confidential, and only used for the evaluation of Parentline. Nothing that you tell the researchers about your experience of using this helpline will be passed back to us, and we will not keep a record of your phone number. Nobody outside the research team will have access to any information that you provide.

#### Who are the researchers?

The research team is:

**Janet Boddy, Marjorie Smith, Maria Morahan, Stephanie Jones and Ekua Yankah from the Thomas Coram Research Unit at the University of London Institute of Education**

If you would like to speak to a member of the research team, you can call Janet on 020-7612 6248 or email her at [j.boddy@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:j.boddy@ioe.ac.uk)

# Helpline Evaluation Checklist for call takers

Please complete one of these forms for every call to the helpline during this shift

1. Call monitoring form ID

2. Call centre:

3. Call taker initials:

4. Date of call (dd/mm/yy)

5. Start time of call (24 hour clock: hhmm)

**Caller should be asked about taking part in the evaluation**

**AT THE BEGINNING of the helpline call.**

6. Caller asked at beginning of call?

Yes  No (give reasons)  Not asked (give reasons)

7. Caller agreed to contact from research team?

Yes - agreed to provide telephone number  Agreed, then changed mind after,  
 No - declined (give reasons) or during call

IF CALLER AGREES:

8. Caller's contact name:

9. Caller telephone number (including dialling code)

10. Times when researcher should NOT call (e.g. daytime, evenings, weekends)

11. All right to leave a message (not mentioning Parentline)?

No message  
 All right to leave a message

**PLEASE NOTE ANY OTHER INFORMATION FOR THE RESEARCHERS OVER THE PAGE. THANK YOU.**

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