

Family Relationships

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Definition

Problems in the caller's family including parents and siblings (birth/foster/adoptive/step/de facto/separated), extended family members or significant others (not peers or partners).

The Importance of Family

During its 12 years of operation, family relationships have consistently remained the most common reason children and young people contact Kids Help Line, with one in every five callers seeking help or support for family-related issues. These figures do not include calls about other types of family-related problems such as child abuse, domestic violence, the physical or mental health or death of family members, or being forced out of home.

The demand on the service highlights the crucial role families play in the well-being of children and young people. Given that the family is the primary group of significant others, it follows that a young person's identity and existence is strongly influenced by the family system. It is not surprising that for many children and young people, family relationships are both their strongest support and also a source of concern and distress.

A study jointly commissioned by Kids Help Line and Kellogg confirms the importance of families to young Australians aged between 8 and 15 years (Dangar, 1999). When asked, children reported that families are for the most part, positive, loving and supportive of their needs. Children say they feel proud when they receive parental approval and regularly seek advice from their families when they are worried about something. The only exception is when children are concerned about their parents' separating or divorcing. They are then more likely to talk to friends or siblings.

Young people most often nominate parents and other relatives as their role models and who they look up to. Almost half (43%) nominated their parents, with a further quarter (27%) nominating a relative – usually an older brother or sister or grandparent. Only 20% picked a sports star or pop culture identity as their main role model (Dangar, 1999).

However, according to the study, the greatest cause of unhappiness for Australian kids is conflict within their family (Dangar, 1999). When asked about the things that make them unhappy, they offered arguing and fighting as the main sources: 44% mentioned arguments at home with 5% going further and volunteering divorce or separation. Furthermore, the study found young people worry most about getting into trouble with their parents (70%); about family problems (53%); and about their parents splitting up (44%).

Strong positive relationships with parents and other family members help children to feel heard, valued, loved, understood, important, connected to their family, wanted and that they belong.

Good relationships between parents and children assist children to be socially and emotionally competent, resilient, able to cope with adversity, facilitates a sense of optimism, positive self-image and high self-esteem.

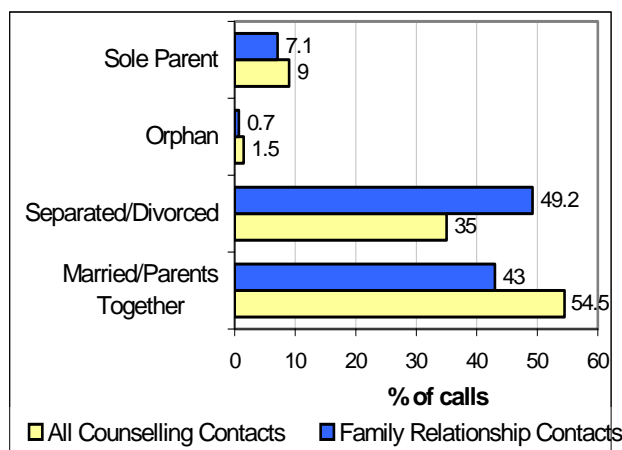
Strong family relationships are also a very powerful protective factor and can reduce a young person's vulnerability to suicide, mental health problems, drug use, eating disorders, weight management, pregnancy, HIV/STDs, tobacco use, delinquency and risk-taking behaviour. This influence of family connectedness has been well documented in theoretical and empirical literature (see Resnick, et al., 1997; Neumark-Sztainer, et al, 1997).

Kids Help Line Caller Data

During 2003, Kids Help Line counsellors responded to 14,377 contacts from children and young people with concerns about their families. This accounted for 17% of all counselling contacts across telephone, web and email.

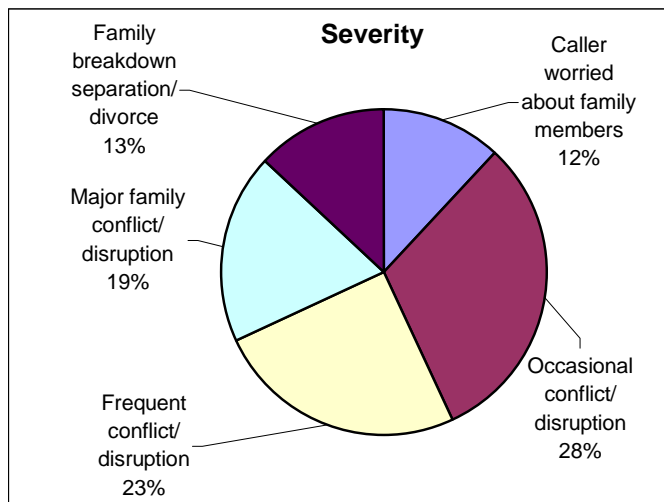
Many children contact KHL after attempts to speak to parents and family members have failed, either through being ignored or minimised. Other children find it difficult to raise problems with their family. Others need help to clarify their concerns before approaching family members. Some phone because there is no-one else to turn to. In each case, the positive aspects of the caller showing commitment to resolving their concerns is validated and reinforced.

Children and young people who contact KHL about family relationships are 40% more likely to have parents who are separated or divorced and less likely to have parents who are married or living together when compared with all clients.



Nature of Family Relationship Calls

Of contacts concerning family relationships made to Kids Help Line, 13% are from young people experiencing family breakdown, separation or divorce. These callers often talk through their feelings of distress, confusion and grief. Deciding which parent to live with, unhappiness with custody or access arrangements and breakdown in the caller's relationship with a parent are frequent concerns.



Almost half (42%) of family relationship calls are from children and young people experiencing major or frequent family conflict and disruption, with a further 28% about occasional family conflict or disruption.

The nature and severity of young people's concerns relating to family conflict and disruption vary widely. These concerns can be loosely grouped into the following issues:

- fighting and arguments between parents;
- sibling disputes over sharing resources or responsibilities;
- issues around discipline;
- the need for acknowledgment, time or affection from parents;
- 'getting into trouble' for various misdemeanours;
- teenagers seeking greater independence;
- and the myriad of other issues that arise in families over affections, responsibilities, resources and privacy.

The remaining 12% of the family relationship calls are from children and young people concerned about family members.

Whatever the level of severity or distress, counsellors work with each caller to find strategies that will assist the caller to deal more effectively with their family. Frequently this is aimed at finding new ways to communicate with the important people in their lives, and validation of their need to be recognised as important, contributing members of their families.

Age & Gender Differences

Females made the majority of calls concerning family relationships, representing 76% of the callers while the largest proportion of family relationship calls (64%) are from children aged between 5 and 14 years.

Family relationships are the most common or second most common concern across all age and genders. Peer relationships are the biggest concern for 10 to 14 year old girls while partner relationships are the biggest concern for boys aged between 15 and 18 years.

Conclusion

The family, in its endless and varying shapes and sizes, is the place where the existence and identity of children and young people is developed and shaped. Within the family social behaviour is learnt and transmitted from one generation to another - it is the unit in which both personality and society are forged. Strong positive relationships within the family are therefore the bedrock of present and future well-being for children, their carers, our communities and broader society.

This focus on families forms the platforms of State and Federal Government policy frameworks which now recognise the importance of promoting and supporting family health and well-being. Mental health policy frameworks across the nation also recognise the importance of early intervention, and focus on providing support to families before problems occur or risks arise.

References

- Dangar Research Group (1999). *Kids-on-Kids: Growing up in Australia* [Research Report]. Sydney.
- NSW Commission for Children and Young People (2002). *Report of an inquiry into the best means of assisting children and young people with no-one to turn to*. NSW CCYP: Sydney, Australia. Available: www.kids.nsw.gov.au/publications
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Children's Views on Positive Family Relationships

Children and young people can clearly articulate the qualities of positive relationships with their families. When the NSW Commission for Children and Young People met with young people, they consistently raised the following themes:

- spending time and being available;
- trust and privacy;
- listening, understanding and not being judgemental; and
- being able to give practical support and helpful suggestions when needed (NSW CCYP, 2002).

Children and young people say that spending time together with someone and, particularly, the availability of parents or carers over a long period are important in establishing feelings of closeness and trust. Children and young people identified family involvement such as families spending time together and parents having time to be involved in their children's school life or other activities as being profoundly important to them (NSW CCYP, 2002). Many adults may not realise quite how important children and young people think this is.

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