

# Children's Experiences & Perceptions of Caring for Themselves

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## INTRODUCTION

Kids Help Line is a national, 24 hour, free counselling service for children and young people aged between 5 and 18. The demand for this service is very high as evidenced by the 30,000 calls made to the service every week. The 70 professionally trained, paid counsellors who staff the service respond to about half of these calls weekly. Kids Help Line is funded by BoysTown National Community Projects through its Art Union lotteries.

Kids Help Line has several unique features. Telephone counselling allows each client to remain anonymous and able to end the counselling interaction whenever they want. Confidentiality is also a key aspect of the service. The principle value underpinning the service is that of empowerment - counsellors work with each caller to identify and clarify their concerns, formulate options for change and understand the consequences of particular courses of action. Clients are encouraged to have a belief in themselves and their personal strengths. Respect is accorded for each client's individuality, feelings and the right to make personal decisions. At the same time KHL encourages productive relationships with parents, teachers and other significant people in the callers life.

Non-identifying information is recorded after each call, including the type and severity of the problem and the age and gender of the caller. This information is unique and valuable in that it provides a direct window into the issues that concern children and young people. Kids Help Line is committed to disseminating this information to the wider community where it can be used to develop policies at all levels within government and community-based services.

## ADVOCACY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

One of Kids Help Line's organisational goals is that of advocating on behalf of young people where their interests are ignored, minimised or unrepresented. Kids Help Line believes a child-centred approach to advocacy is essential - that advocacy be in the interests of children and young people and based on what they tell us. All too often information about children is obtained from everyone except children themselves. Kids Help Line at all times is directed by the children and young people who are our clients. Concurrent with this approach is the recognition that, for the majority of young Australians, their family is of prime importance. Therefore when advocating for children KHL attempts to recognise and support the excellent job done by the majority of parents, and provide information that parents find useful.

## BACKGROUND TO THE ISSUE

At KHL, 40% of calls are received between the hours of 3 and 5pm. School holidays are also very busy times when the number of calls made to the service can rise as high as 40,000 per week. Over a period of time it became evident that a proportion of KHL clients were at home without adult supervision.

Estimates made by the Australian Institute of family studies in the early 80's found that 8% of primary children (aged 8-9 years) and 20% of adolescents (15-16 years) came home to an empty house. Given that the proportion of families in which both parents work has increased during the last decade, and that childcare can be expensive or unavailable, it is logical to

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assume that the proportion of children who spend time caring for themselves has also increased.

Very little in the way of research or resources has been dedicated to children who care for themselves, and of those publications that do exist, none focus on how self-care is perceived and experienced by children themselves. Kids Help Line believed that a child-centred approach to the issue focussing on the child's perception and expression of his or her needs in the self-care situation would provide relevant and useful information that could be used to improve the quality and management of self-care arrangements.

## **METHOD**

During April and May 1995 KHL surveyed those callers who said they were at home alone in order to gain an understanding of young people's perceptions of caring for themselves. The purpose of this research was to identify the specific issues of concern to young people at home alone and assist them, their parents and the wider community in managing self-care more effectively.

For a two month period counsellors were asked to fill in a survey form whenever they identified a caller as being at home without adult supervision and where questioning the caller about the arrangement was both appropriate and not disruptive to the counselling process. Not every caller at home alone was or could be identified.

The survey was designed to gather information in two areas. Firstly, quantitative information about the self-care situation in terms of the frequency and length of time the child spent self-caring; whether the caller was alone or responsible for younger siblings; how the young person spent their time; where the parent/s or carers were; what arrangements or rules were in place; and whether the child could contact their parents.

Secondly, qualitative data examining the child's feelings and perceptions about the self-care situation was gathered. Specifically, counsellors asked how the caller felt about the situation; what he or she liked or disliked about self-caring; whether they would prefer to be supervised; the reason for phoning Kids Help Line and whether this was directly related to self-caring.

Across the two month period, which included the Easter school holidays, a total of 200 callers from all states were identified as being at home without adult supervision and survey forms filled in. All callers were asked and agreed to partake in the research.

The results were collated very simply by scoring the frequency of response for each question and converting this into percentages. Results were reported on two age groups - those callers aged between 6 and 12, and those aged 13 to 16. This age breakdown was selected for two reasons. Firstly it generally defines the transition between primary and high school, when formal after-school care ends. Secondly, it seems a natural boundary between early and middle childhood and adolescent/teenagerhood.

The age range of callers was 6 to 16, with a mean age of 11. Fifty-four percent were younger than 12 and 46% were aged between 13 and 16.

Females made 59% of calls and males 41%. This gender breakdown closely matches the gender ratio for all calls to KHL.

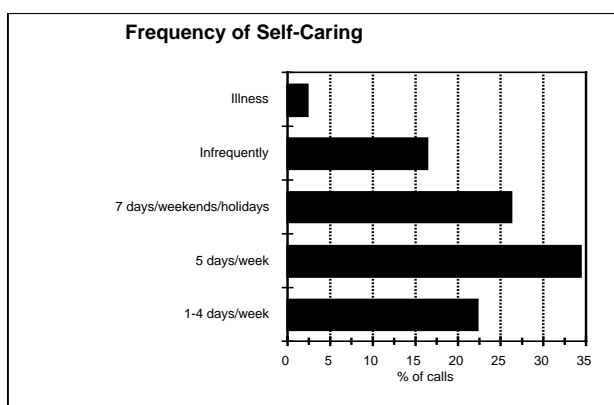
## **RESULTS**

## PART 1: Self-Caring - The Practical Arrangement

Of the 200 callers identified as being without adult supervision, just over half (53%) were at home on their own. A further 26% of callers were either cared for at home by older siblings or had a sibling near their own age at home with them. The remaining 21% of children and young people surveyed were responsible for younger siblings. Of these, all but five were older than 10.

### How long & how often do children self-care?

More than half of the callers surveyed were at home without adult supervision five days a week for between one and three hours. The frequency and length of time callers were without adult supervision varied with age. Older callers cared for themselves more frequently and for longer periods of time than younger children. Most of these children were without adult supervision from when they arrived home from school until their parent/s returned from work.

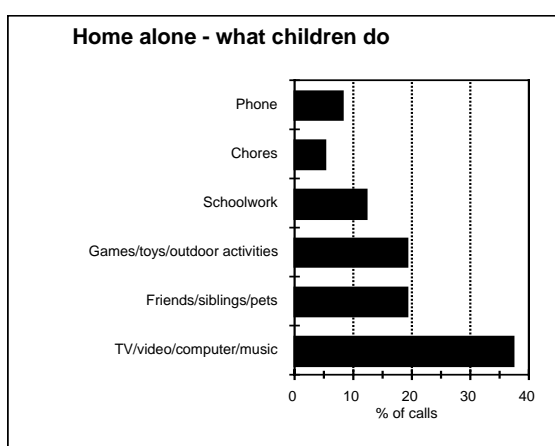


Just over 25% of callers cared for themselves on weekends and/or during school holidays. Almost 90% of these children were at home without adult supervision all day.

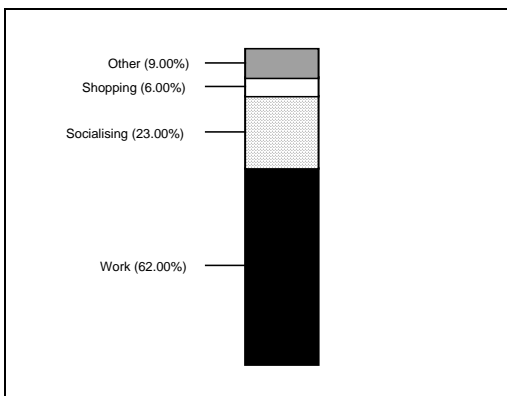
Of the callers at home on weekends and in holidays, just over 30% were responsible for younger siblings.

### What do children do when they are at home alone?

There was very little variation across age groups in terms of how children and young people spend their time when at home without adults.



Most time is spent in front of a screen of some type (either TV, video or computer) or listening to music. Equal amounts of time is spent either with siblings and/or friends or with games, toys and outdoor activities such as trampolines, swimming pools, bike riding etc. A further 12% of time is spent doing homework, with those aged between 10 and 12 reporting spending more time on these activities. Household jobs account for 5% of time, with the amount of time doing chores decreasing with age. Conversely, the amount of time spent on the phone increases with age, but accounting for 8% across age groups.



### Where are parents?

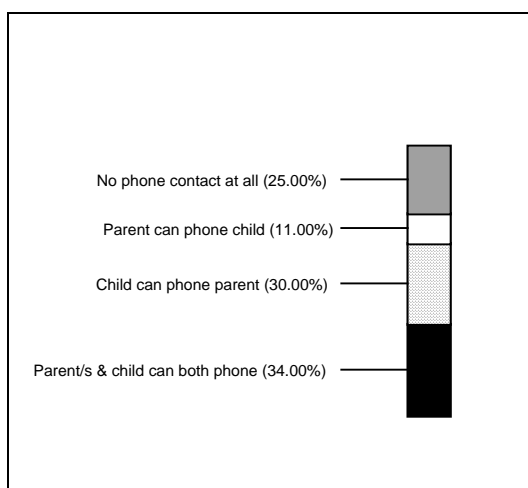
Almost two thirds of parents were at work. The remainder were either out socialising, shopping or doing other activities such as sport and attending appointments etc. Disturbingly, of callers aged 12 and younger, 6% did not know where their parents were.

### Can children phone their parents?

75% of callers were able to have phone contact with their parent/s. The remainder were unable to have any phone contact whatsoever.

The breakdown across the two age groups shows that just under half of those under 12 could phone their parents whereas 80% of older callers could access their parents by phone. A proportion of younger callers did not know their parent's contact number.

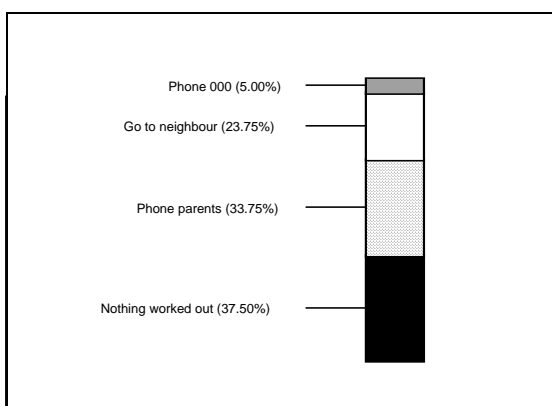
Of those parents who were able to phone their children, 60% phoned at least once each time the child was at home without an adult. The remainder phoned home occasionally.



### Rules for the self-care situation

The young people surveyed were also asked about what rules and arrangements were in place. Three quarters of under 12's and 60% of older children had set rules for when they were without adult supervision. The rules pertained mostly to safety and behaviour, for example, "not allowed to use the oven or play with matches", "keep the music down", "no fighting", "stay at home" etc.

### Emergency situations



**feelings about self-caring**

Callers were also asked what they would do in case of an emergency such as fire, accident or intruder. Just over 70% of the children surveyed were unsure of what to do and had no strategy worked out, although half said they would call their parents. The remainder said they would go to their neighbours or phone 000.

**PART II: Children's perception and**

The reason young people at home alone phoned Kids Help Line varied with age. Although the majority of callers phoned because they were lonely, loneliness decreased with age with 60% of under 10's feeling lonely compared with only 35% of older children.

A further 24% of callers phoned because they wanted to chat or were bored - this increased with age with only 13% of those younger than 10 feeling bored, but 30% of those older than 13 expressing boredom.

The remainder of callers phoned about other problems, in particular family relationships. 75% of calls were directly related to the self-care situation.

**How do children feel about self-caring?**

Almost 60% of callers younger than 10 had negative feelings about the arrangement - these negative feelings reduced with age so that only a quarter of children older than 13 felt negatively about the arrangement. Older callers tended to express neutral feelings about caring for themselves - their responses showed that they understood and accepted self-care as a fact of life.

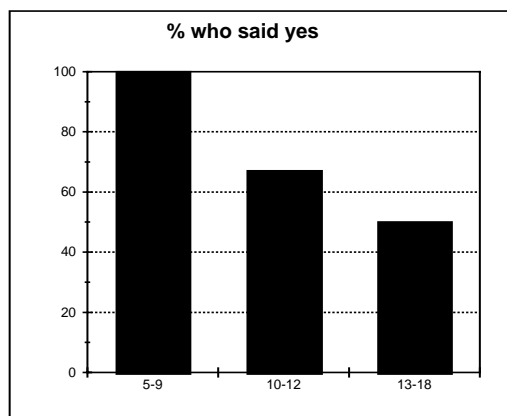
**What do children dislike about self-caring?**

Callers were asked what they disliked about the self-care situation. Over half said they were lonely and missed their parent's company. Over a quarter of those 12 and younger said they felt scared when at home without an adult. When asked what they were scared of, they named the dark, storms, attack, kidnap or expressed a general anxiety. Older callers, particularly females, were quite specific in their fear of intruders, unwanted visitors or phone calls. Some older callers also disliked the rules and restrictions placed on them while at home without adult supervision

**What do children like about self-caring?**

Despite their negative or neutral feelings about the arrangement, almost all callers were able to name several aspects of self-care they liked. Almost all said they liked the freedom and not

having any discipline. Older callers also liked the peace and privacy being at home alone provided them. Specifically, “playing music as loud as possible”, “eating what I like”, “not getting yelled at or bossed around”, “watching what I like on TV” and “talking on the phone to friends” were some of the comments young people made.



### Do children want supervision?

Finally, callers were asked whether, if they had a choice, they would prefer to be supervised. All of those younger than 10 said ‘yes’ to this question. The proportion of callers who responded affirmatively to this question decreased with age. However, half of the young people 13 and older said they would prefer to have a parent at home.

## SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATIONS

Research in 1989 by Cain & Hofferth identified, “The picture that is often presented of self-care is one of large numbers of children left alone for long periods of time in dangerous situations and experiencing high levels of fear.” This research has shown that this view of self-care, while true in a small number of cases, is certainly not the case for the majority of children and young people who spend time at home without adult supervision.

On the contrary, the majority of callers surveyed understood and accepted the situation and, in many cases preferred this arrangement to any other. Most of the children did not phone Kids Help Line in a state of distress - they called the service mainly to chat with counsellors, either because they were bored or lonely.

Several issues, however, are of concern. These include the proportion of children who had no way of contacting their parents and the lack of a clear safety strategy in the case of fire, accident or other emergency. In a small percentage of cases concern was raised by the callers about being responsible for younger siblings. The level of fear and anxiety expressed by some of the children surveyed is also disturbing.

Kids Help Line is calling for a community approach to dealing with these issues. Firstly, employers are asked to open the lines of communication into and out of the workplace. It is important that those employees whose children self-care are encouraged to phone their children after school or during holidays and to be reassured that it is OK to receive calls from their children while at work. Research has shown that concentration and productivity are negatively affected if workers are worried about their children. Encouraging employees to contact their children may reduce anxiety and allow a high level of productivity to be maintained.

Secondly, parents are encouraged to talk with their self-caring children about basic safety strategies to employ in the case of an emergency. Practical steps such as installing or checking fire extinguishers and alarms, having important telephone numbers displayed in a prominent position near the phone, talking with neighbours about children going to them in the case of an emergency, and setting basic rules can all work to help children feel more confident when self-caring. Having relatives call in on the parent’s behalf or developing informal shared care with other parents in the neighbourhood are also useful solutions.

While the many schools and other community organisations who run out-of-school hours care are to be highly commended and fully supported for the work they do, many of the children surveyed had been in some form of child-care and found it boring or irrelevant. Consulting

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with the consumers of such services, namely the children themselves, especially in the developmental stage of such services would do much to increase participation rates. A nationwide inquiry into the child-care system could also reveal structural flaws that currently keep many families outside this form of childcare.

Children and young people caring for themselves is now a reality for thousands of Australian families, most of whom have excellent back-up strategies and supports in place. Kids Help Line is continually impressed by the commitment shown by both the children who phone the service, and their parents, in maintaining intact and functioning families.

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