

## Family Relationships 2006

### Definition

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

### Why is family important?

For the past 15 years, family relationships have consistently remained the most common reason children and young people contact Kids Help Line. One in every five young people contacting Kids Help Line seeks help or support for family-related issues, such as family conflict, disruption, breakdown and concerns about family members. These figures do not include contacts about other types of family-related problems such as child abuse, domestic violence, being forced out of home, physical health, mental health or death of family members.

Research conducted by Mission Australia (2006) found that family relationships are the most valued aspect of young people's lives. The research also shows that families remain important across all age groups of children and young people, including those in early adulthood.

These findings highlight the crucial role that families play in the well-being of children and young people.

***Family is a major influence on the identity, beliefs and values formed by children and young people.***

Family can therefore be a major strength in young people's lives, but it can also be their greatest source of concern and distress.

A study undertaken by Kids Help Line confirms the importance of families to young Australians aged between 8 and 15 years (Dangar, 1999). When asked, children reported that their 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 when they are more likely to talk with their friends.

Research conducted by the Australian Childhood Foundation (2006) found that young people most often nominate parents as their role models and the people they look up to and admire. Almost three quarters (73%) nominated their mum or dad, 12% nominated an older brother or sister with 9% nominating a grandparent. Only 6% picked a sports star or pop culture identity as their main role model.

However, the greatest cause of unhappiness for Australian kids is conflict within their family. Indeed, family conflict was found to be the number one concern for children and young people in Mission Australia's survey of over 14,000 young people in 2006.

***Strong positive relationships with parents and other family members help children to feel a sense of belonging and connectedness with their family.***

Children also feel heard, understood, loved, important and valued.

Good relationships with parents assist children to develop high self-esteem, positive self-image and a sense of optimism. Children also learn to be resilient and socially and emotionally competent, enabling them to cope with adversity.

Strong family relationships can also reduce a young person's vulnerability to suicide, mental health problems, drug use, eating disorders, weight management, pregnancy, HIV and/or sexually transmitted diseases, tobacco use, delinquency, and risk-taking behaviour

*A 12 year-old male caller's parents had recently separated and his sister is unhappy about having to spend every second night with their dad. He wanted to know how he could help his sister to tell their dad.*

## How many young people contact Kids Help Line about Family Relationships?

During 2005, Kids Help Line counsellors responded to 9,567 contacts from children and young people aged between 5 and 25 years with concerns about their families. This accounted for 17% of all counselling contacts across telephone, web and email during the year.

**Family relationships are the most common concern presented in telephone counselling with 7,948 young people calling Kids Help Line with concerns about their family during 2005 - accounting for 18% of calls.**

A further 1,619 young people contacted Kids Help Line via email or webcounselling, accounting for 13% of all online counselling contacts and making this issue the third most common concern presented via online counselling.

### Why do they call?

Many young people contact Kids Help Line after attempts to speak to parents and family members have failed, either through being ignored or minimised. Some young people find it difficult to raise problems with their family, others need help to clarify their concerns before approaching family members. However, a small number of young people contact Kids Help Line because they have no-where else to turn.

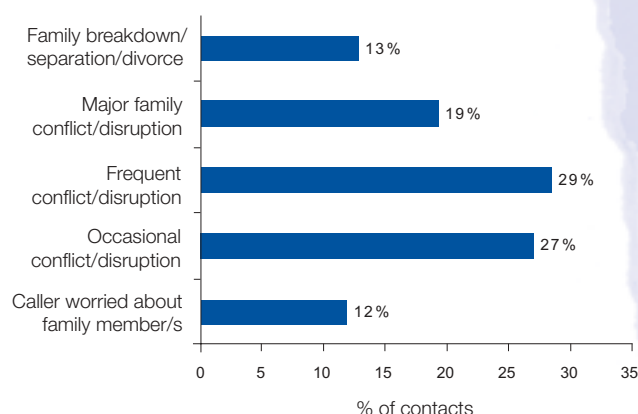
Of contacts concerning family relationships, 13% are from children and young people experiencing family breakdown, separation or divorce. These young people often talk through their feelings of distress, confusion and grief. Deciding which parent to live with, unhappiness with custody or access arrangements and breakdown in relationships with a parent are frequent concerns.

**Almost half (48%) of family relationship contacts are about major or frequent conflict or disruption.**

A further 27% are concerned about occasional conflict or disruption. Figure 1 shows the nature

of the counselling sessions about family relationships.

Figure 1



The types of concerns raised by young people about family relationships are similar across telephone and online counselling. However, almost double the proportion of young people call to discuss concerns about a family member than use online counselling. Table 1 shows the nature of telephone and online counselling contacts dealing with family relationships.

Table 1

	Telephone	Online
Family breakdown, separation or divorce	14%	10%
Major family conflict or disruption	18%	25%
Frequent family conflict or disruption	27%	37%
Occasional family conflict or disruption	28%	21%
Caller worried about family member/s	13%	7%
Total	100%	100%

*An 8 year-old female called concerned that her baby brother seems to get more attention than her. She said when she fell over her mum asked if she was ok but if her brother fell her mum makes more of a fuss. The caller was wondering why.*

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 and responsibilities
- issues around discipline
- the need for acknowledgement, time or affection from parents
- 'getting into trouble' for various misdemeanours
- teenagers seeking greater independence
- the myriad of other issues that arise in families.

Whatever the level of severity or distress, counsellors work with these children and young people to help them deal more effectively with their family. Frequently this is aimed at finding new ways for these young people to communicate with the important people in their lives, and recognising their need to be seen as important, contributing members of their family.

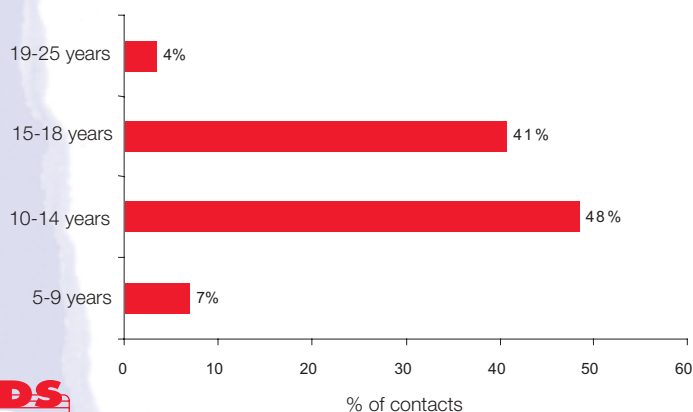
## Who calls?

Females make up 80% and males 20% of the contacts to Kids Help Line about family relationships.

**The largest proportion of family relationship contacts (90%) are from children and young people aged between 10 and 18 years.**

Figure 2 shows the proportion of family relationship concerns for each age group.

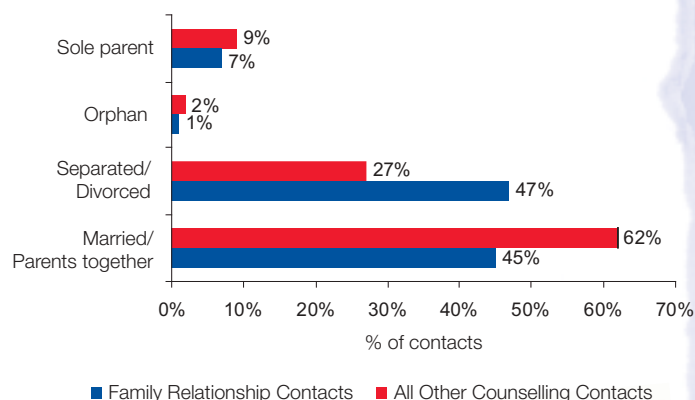
Figure 2



Family relationships are among the top three most common concerns across gender and age groups except for males aged between 19 and 25 years. Older adolescents and young adults tend to contact more often about partner relationships and mental health.

In terms of family structure, 47% of the young people contacting Kids Help Line about family relationships have parents who are separated or divorced, compared with a rate of 27% for other counselling concerns. Furthermore, only 45% of the young people concerned about family relationships have parents who are married or together compared to a rate of 62% for all other counselling contacts. Figure 3 compares the family structure of young people contacting Kids Help Line about family relationships with the family structure of all other counselling contacts.

Figure 3



*A 15 year-old female called worried about her mother, who is bipolar and has just come out of a program to stop drinking. Her mother had tried to stop drinking many times and the daughter was worried about moving back with her mum. She was worried about how her mum would react when she said no and wanted to talk through what to say so there would be more chance her mum would listen.*

## What are the outcomes?

Counsellors directly assist almost 80% of children and young people contacting Kids Help Line with concerns about their families. However, 9% are referred to another service for ongoing support and 8% are referred to a school guidance counsellor, social worker or other non-specific referral. Table 2 shows the outcomes of telephone and online counselling sessions focusing on family relationships.

**Table 2**

	Telephone	Online
No referral required	79%	78%
Non-specific referral	9%	4%
Referred and accepted	10%	2%
Unable to refer	2%	3%
Referred to telephone or web counselling (Email only)	N/A	13%
Total	100%	100%

## Conclusion

The family is the place where the identity, beliefs and values of children and young people are 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 culture are forged. Strong positive relationships within the family are the bedrock of present and future well-being for children, their carers, our communities and the broader society.

State and Federal Government policy frameworks 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.

## 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 (2002) met with young people, they consistently raised the following themes:

- spending time and being available
- trust and privacy
- being able to give practical support and helpful suggestions when needed.

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 closeness and trust. They 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 (NSW CCYP, 2002). Many adults may not realise quite how important this is to children and young people.

## References

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