



# What children are telling us about bullying

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Childline bullying report 2015/16

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# Foreword

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Providing a listening ear, advice, and support to children and young people who have experienced bullying continues to be a key role for Childline. This report, published in Childline's 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, describes the nature of bullying endured by young people contacting Childline. Sadly, bullying is as much problem in 2016 as it was thirty years ago. It continues to have a devastating impact on young lives.

When Childline was set up children used to phone us about physical bullying. While this continues to be significant problem today, recent years have seen the emergence of bullying in the online world. In the early days of Childline bullying might be left at the school gate and young people could get some respite from the treatment they experienced during the school day. But today's digital world means that the bullying can be relentless, 24 hours a day, following children into their home, the very place where they should feel safe.

Last year, Childline carried out over 25,000 counselling sessions with children and young people about bullying. Probably no other organisation is in touch with such a large number of young people. So this report provides a unique insight into the different types of bullying that young people experience and what young people think about how adults respond to reports of bullying. Worryingly, one of the reasons why young people are contacting Childline is because bullying is not being taken seriously by the adults they have told.

Many of the young people who contact Childline are doing so because they are in a state of desperation. They have tried various ways to get the bullying to stop and failed. They may have tried to tell someone and been ignored and not heard. There can still be a view that bullying is taken for granted or seen as an inevitable "part of growing up".

There will be many cases of bullying behaviour that Childline does not get to hear about. Some of these will be satisfactorily resolved and we need to learn from that good practice. However, the fact that so many children are still contacting Childline every year indicates the need for us all to be constantly vigilant and responsive to the risks of bullying. We need to raise awareness of bullying with each new cohort of children and ensure that both children and adults know what to do. As teachers are the adults that children often tell, schools in particular need to have effective policies that are actively implemented.

Encouragingly, there are glimmers of hope. This report is also published to coincide with Anti-Bullying Week 2016 which has as its theme *Power for Good*. Childline found that a significant number of young people were prepared to act as a 'power for good'. Some contacted Childline for advice on how to help another child who is being bullied. Others used the Childline message boards to share their experiences in dealing with bullying, express empathy, and suggest strategies that their peers could use. This support was hugely valued. Even though it feels frightening and difficult, the importance of speaking out is emphasised in these messages. The voice of young people is a powerful, influential medium. In tackling bullying, we need to consider how we can build confidence in all children and young people to enable them to be a power for good.

**Christopher Cloke**  
**Head of Safeguarding in Communities, NSPCC**

# Introduction

Thousands of children and young people contact Childline every year for advice and support on how to deal with bullying. It is one of the most common issues that children talk to us about. In 2015/16, we delivered over 25,700 counselling sessions<sup>1</sup> about bullying.

Bullying is not a new problem. Many of the stories that we hear are sadly all too familiar, but we are seeing changes in how, when and where children are being bullied.

Young people have talked to us about being bullied on online gaming sites, being subjected to sexual bullying online and being targeted for racist and faith-related bullying following recent high profile terrorist attacks.

Bullying is an issue that younger children are more likely to talk to us about than older children. It is also an issue that boys are more likely to talk to us about than girls.<sup>2</sup>

Bullying can have serious and life-long effects on a child. The impact of bullying can be devastating for some children. In the immediate term, it can affect academic performance and is linked to mental and physical health problems. In a quarter of our counselling sessions about bullying, the young person also talked about mental health and wellbeing issues.

Most organisations working with children understand how important it is to have anti-bullying strategies in place. When children report bullying to teachers, schools have clear procedures to follow to respond to the incident and support the children involved.

However, as this report highlights, some children still feel unable or unwilling to report bullying to teachers or other adults.

Many of the other young people who talk to us have told someone else about the bullying, but they did not feel that things had got any better for them.

But we also hear from young people who have spoken out about being bullied and say that telling an adult is the best way to tackle the problem. Furthermore, we look at the advice and support from

young people shared via Childline's online message boards. One of the most powerful messages shared by children and young people who have experienced bullying is that people being bullied are not alone and that things will get better.

This report aims to:

- increase awareness and understanding of what bullying looks like for some young people today;
- help schools and other organisations working with children think about how to ensure that young people have confidence that reporting bullying behaviour will make a difference;
- highlight the importance for young people of receiving support from their peers.

## Childline

Childline is a national helpline for young people, which provides a safe and

- confidential space for them to work through a wide range of issues. Our trained volunteer
- counsellors are available 24/7, and can be contacted by phone on **0800 1111**, email or 1-2-1 chat at **childline.org.uk**

The quotes in this report come from real Childline counselling sessions. All names and potentially identifying details have been changed to protect the identity of the child or young person. Case studies are created from real Childline counselling sessions but are not necessarily direct quotes from the young person. Due to the confidential nature of the Childline service, young people do not always disclose personal information, such as their age and gender.

This report was produced by the NSPCC Knowledge and Information Service. For more information about this report, please contact us at **help@nspcc.org.uk**

1 Childline delivered over 300,000 in-depth counselling sessions to children and young people in 2015/16. Our volunteer counsellors provide advice and support to young people over the phone, by email and through our online 1-2-1 chat.

2 Overall, Childline provides many more counselling sessions to girls than to boys. Although we provide more counselling sessions about bullying to girls, it is a more common concern among the boys who do contact us.

# Key findings

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- Bullying remains one of the most common reasons why children contact Childline (the second most common reason for boys and the third most common reason for girls) and makes up 9 per cent of all counselling sessions (25,740 sessions in 2015/16).
- Bullying is the most common reason for children aged 11 and under to contact us (almost 1 in 4 sessions with this age group were about bullying). Those aged 11 and under also saw the largest year-on-year increase in counselling about bullying – up 12 per cent when compared with 2014/15.
- Bullying has been one of the top five concerns every year since 1989.
- While overall, levels of counselling about bullying remain high, the way in which children are being bullied and what they are bullied about has changed over time.
- Physical bullying is the top bullying concern for children aged 11 and under; peer pressure is top for 12–15 year olds and online bullying for 16–18 year olds.
- We provided more counselling sessions about face-to-face bullying than online bullying last year. However, we have seen an 88 per cent increase in counselling about online bullying over the past 5 years.
- Bullying affects academic performance and is linked to mental and physical health problems. In a quarter of counselling sessions about bullying, children also talked about mental health and wellbeing issues.
- We also provide counselling to children who are worried about a friend or sibling who is being bullied, and to young people who are taking part in bullying behaviour themselves and seeking help on how to stop.
- Despite efforts from schools and organisations to respond to and reduce bullying, some children are contacting us because they are afraid to speak out or because they have seen that speaking out can make things worse. Other children have told us that speaking out is the only way to tackle the problem.

# What is bullying?

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Bullying can mean different things:

- being called names
- being teased, put down or humiliated
- being pushed or pulled about
- having money and other stuff taken
- having rumours spread about you
- being ignored and left out
- being hit, kicked or physically hurt
- being threatened or intimidated
- being bullied through your phone or online.

Bullying can also be part of other forms of abuse, including neglect, emotional, physical and sexual abuse.

Source: From the Childline website – [childline.org.uk/info-advice/bullying-abuse-safety/types-bullying/bullying/](https://childline.org.uk/info-advice/bullying-abuse-safety/types-bullying/bullying/)



# How children are being bullied

Bullying can take many different forms and increasingly different types of bullying can overlap, making it difficult for the young person to find even temporary escape. This section focuses on the three most common aspects that children talk to us about: physical bullying, online bullying and peer pressure/blackmail.

## Physical bullying

Over recent years, the growth in online bullying has been the focus of much discussion around how to respond to and prevent bullying via mobile phones and on social networking sites. However, many children still experience face-to-face bullying and last year we provided more counselling sessions about physical bullying (4,723 sessions) than online bullying (4,541 sessions).

Children talked to us about experiencing kicking, hitting, biting, pinching, hair pulling and making threats. This often occurred after a period of ongoing verbal bullying.

Physical bullying usually took place somewhere out of sight of adults (school toilets were often mentioned) or outside school, such as in local parks and in the street while walking to or from school. Children can find it difficult to report incidents like this because they fear it will be “their word against the bully’s word”.

“Today I was walking home from school and some boys from my school ran up behind me and asked me how I was. I could tell by how they were behaving that they were not being friendly so I ignored them and kept walking and then one of them took out a knife, put it to my neck and said ‘Talk to me or we will cut your throat and kill your family’. I ran into a busy street so they gave up and went off in another direction but I am terrified. Nobody else saw what happened and who will believe me if I tell?” (Boy, aged 13)

Recently we have heard from a number of young people that videos of them or another child being physically bullied had been posted on social media. Despite video evidence, the victims of these incidences are often still reluctant to report it. This highlights an interesting contradiction between bullying taking place when there are no witnesses to see it, but then sharing the videos online.

“A kid at my school calls me hurtful names every day and today he repeatedly hit me really hard in my face. It happened outside of school and another kid took a video of me being hit and has posted it on Instagram. I want it removed because now other people are being nasty to me online. I have reported it but they haven’t taken it off yet. I don’t want to involve the police or my family. I just want to deal with this on my own.” (Boy, aged 14)

## Online bullying

In 2015/16, we delivered 4,541 counselling sessions about online bullying, up 13 per cent on the previous year. In the last five years, counselling about online bullying has increased by 88 per cent.

Young people described malicious and hurtful messages being posted about them on their profiles, blogs, online pictures or posts. The negative messages ranged from bullying and abusive comments about how the young person looked, to directly telling the young person they should go and kill themselves. In some situations, forums or pages on networking sites were set up about the young person as a place to post bullying content. Young people spoke to us about feeling isolated and not understanding how people could hate them so much.

“I am being bullied by a girl at school. She has taken photos of me and posted them on Snapchat calling me fat and ugly and how I will never have a boyfriend. I have been having suicidal thoughts as this girl is really popular and she has turned my whole year against me.” (Girl, aged 14)

Young people told us that they usually knew the people posting these messages, who were often pupils from their school. The online bullying often led to verbal and physical bullying at school. Young people talked about feeling trapped because the bullies could reach them anywhere.

“Every day I wake up scared to go to school, scared about the comments people will make and scared about walking home. Then I get in and log onto my social networking site and there are horrible messages everywhere. It’s like there’s no escaping the bullies. I’m struggling to cope with how upset I feel so sometimes I cut myself just to have a release but it’s not enough. I can’t go on like this.” (Girl, aged 13)

## Peer pressure and blackmail

In some of our counselling sessions, young people are worried about being bullied in the future, if they don't do something that others want them to do. This behaviour ranges from peer pressure to blackmail.

We delivered 4,725 counselling sessions about peer pressure in 2015/16, up 2 per cent on the previous year. Young people talked to us about feeling pressured by friends to do something they did not want to do, such as drinking alcohol, behaving inappropriately, taking part in sexual activity or bullying another young person. They are worried that if they do not do these things, then they will be bullied themselves.

Young people talked to us about being pressured into sharing sexual images (sexting), viewing adult pornographic images, and carrying out sexual acts on and offline. We also hear from young girls who believe that all their peers are engaging in sexual activities and they are worried that they will not be popular if they are not doing the same.

"A boy likes me at school but I don't like him. He is pressuring me into having sex. It started last year and it is still going on. It happens every day and I can't avoid him as he is in a lot of my classes. He asked me if I wanted to 'do it' and to go to his house. I sometimes feel like I should because other people do it and I feel a bit left out but it makes me feel uncomfortable and awkward and I don't really want to." (Girl, aged 15)

Other common themes of peer pressure include: drinking, smoking, taking drugs/legal highs, bullying others, fighting, criminal/anti-social behaviour, misbehaving at school, playing truant and joining a gang.

Often, young people who are being pressured by their peers tell us how they want to stop hanging out with the group, but do not feel they can for fear of repercussion. Frequently, they have witnessed other young people being bullied, often physically, for joining new friendship groups.





One young person who was being pressured by her peers to behave badly, stay out late and generally disrespect her family and teachers told us: *“I hate who my friends have made me become. I want out of the group I am in but I am scared. I feel like there is no way out and feel so alone.”*

In 2015/16, we delivered over 100 counselling sessions with young people seeking advice on how they could stop their own bullying behaviour.

“I am the bully at school and I want some advice on how to stop. I got into a crowd a few years ago because I was new and they were the bullies so I felt if I became friends with them it would stop me from getting bullied for being the new boy. I am worried that if I stop bullying, my friends will turn on me. I mainly call people names and push them about but I don’t want to hurt people’s feelings anymore. I can’t talk to anyone at school as I have such a bad reputation but I really want advice on how to stop.” (Boy, aged 16)

Peer pressure is often associated with a feeling that if the young person does not conform to expectations, they will be bullied. Blackmail is a much more overt threat where if they refuse to do something specific, for example, share naked photos, then something bad will happen.

We delivered 282 counselling sessions about blackmail in 2015/16 (up from 220 sessions in the previous year) and have seen an increase in children talking to us about being blackmailed online, linked to the overall increase in counselling sessions about online abuse. Often, young people tell us they are pressured into sharing sexually explicit images of themselves. Then having got the images, the blackmailer threatens to post them online unless the young person shares more images. Or sometimes the blackmailer wants money.

“A few months ago I started talking to someone on the internet. One thing led to another and I ended up sending him some nude photos of myself. Now they are blackmailing me and saying that if I don’t send more he will put the photos online so that my mum and everyone in my school can see. I’m so ashamed at what I have done and I have been cutting myself to cope.” (Girl, aged 13)

# What children are bullied about

Children are bullied about all sorts of things. This section looks at a few of the more common things young people talk to us about.

Just as physical bullying continues to be an issue for children, so does being bullied about their appearance. We are also seeing bullying stemming from issues in the wider world, with spikes in counselling about racist and faith-related bullying following terrorist attacks.

## Physical appearance

Young people tell us they are being bullied about being too fat, too thin, having acne, their clothes, their hair, their height, wearing glasses, not wearing make-up or the early or late onset of puberty.

Being bullied about their weight can lead to young people restricting their eating, dieting or binge eating. When these extreme measures get out of control, an eating disorder may develop.

Worryingly, children as young as seven are contacting us because they are being bullied about their appearance.

“Children in the year above me at school are bullying me. They call me fatty and chubby, and push and pull me around. I have not eaten much since it started a few weeks ago. I feel like I need to change so I have put myself on a diet. I want to lose weight so they stop bullying me.” (Girl, aged seven)

Being bullied about how they look can contribute to depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and poor body image. In the most serious cases, it can lead to self-harming and suicidal thoughts. In 2015/16, Childline provided 2,618 counselling sessions about body image issues, up 17 per cent on the previous year.

## Sexual bullying

Young people talked to us about being bullied about their physical appearance when they'd gone through puberty. They talked to us about sexualised name calling, uninvited touching, sexually explicit things said to them, rumours of a sexual nature being spread, and feeling pressured into doing something they did not want to do.



We heard from girls who were feeling vulnerable, anxious and confused about being pressurised for sex by boys at school. They were bullied and called names for being 'prudish'. In some cases, they had been threatened with physical violence if they refused, and had rumours and lies spread about them. In cases where the girl had given in to the pressure and reluctantly agreed to sexual activity, the rumours and bullying did not stop.

The 2015/16 Childline Annual Review highlighted the increase in young people talking to us about sharing sexual images online. Sexual bullying often occurred at school after a sexual image had been shared more widely among pupils.

"I did something and I don't know what to do about it. I was playing dares with a boy from my school then he dared me to send nudes and I did. I feel ashamed and embarrassed and I don't know why I did it. Now I have fallen out with him he has sent the photo to everyone all over Instagram and Facebook and Snapchat and I keep getting abuse at school and online saying I'm rotten and a slag. I can't tell my parents because I know they will react badly towards this. I just want it to stop!"  
(Girl, aged 12)

Although most of our counselling sessions about sexual bullying were with girls, some boys talked about being targeted.

"I have been chatting to a girl from school online. She showed me inappropriate pictures of herself. I felt really uncomfortable with it and I am scared I will get into trouble. I told her how it made me feel but she didn't listen and kept sending me more. She laughed at me and called me names and now everyone at school thinks there is something wrong with me and says mean things."  
(Boy, aged 14)

## Racist/faith-related bullying

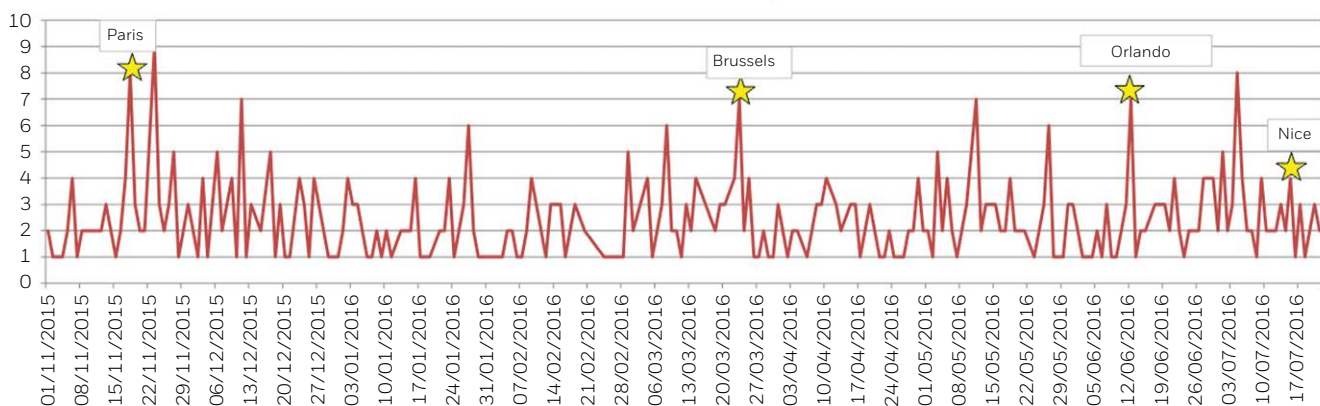
In 2015/16, we provided 981 counselling sessions about racist/faith-related bullying and saw increases in counselling about racist/faith-related bullying following high profile terrorist attacks. In November 2015, when the Paris attacks occurred, we provided almost 120 counselling sessions with children and young people who had concerns about racist bullying. We saw similar peaks in the numbers of counselling sessions about this issue after the Brussels attack in March and the Orlando attack in June.

Young people who contacted us during these times talked about bullying both in and out of school that has made them feel increasingly isolated and withdrawn from society.

Young girls, particularly, felt victimised by others where they dressed in the hijab or wore a headscarf.

"Ever since the Paris attacks, I have been getting bullied really badly at school. I wear a headscarf and the bullies think that just because I am Muslim that I support ISIS. It's gotten so bad that I have started to miss school, which I never do. The teachers can see what's happening but they don't seem to want to get involved or do anything about it. I just want to be treated like a human being and the same as everyone else."  
(Girl, aged 15)

## Racial bullying counselling trends



In many cases, the constant abuse and negative stereotyping resulted in low self-worth and young people frequently blamed themselves, wishing to change who they were. Others were very angry and frustrated by the bullying, and felt increasingly resentful towards others. Many also told us that they did not feel that schools were doing enough to combat the racist abuse, so were in some cases resorting to skipping school.

“Ever since I came to the UK, I have been bullied about where I am from. They accuse me of being from ISIS and say that my family are terrorists. Sometimes, it makes me so angry and I lash out at them. I’ve gotten into trouble before, but sometimes I can’t help it and I feel like I need to defend myself. I don’t want to go back to school anymore as no one seems to do anything about it and the bullying keeps getting worse.”  
(Boy, aged 14)

## Bullying about sexual or gender identity

Young people told us they were bullied because of their actual or perceived sexual or gender identity. People may be a target of this type of bullying because of their appearance, behaviour or physical traits.

In 2015/16, there were nearly 450 counselling sessions with young people who were being bullied for being LGBTQ+.

Young people who identified as LGBTQ+ were scared of coming out, partly because of a fear of prejudice and being bullied. One young person said “*I am worried about coming out to my friends as they have called me a gay twat in the past and I am frightened at how they would react.*” Having seen how other young people who had already come out had been bullied, many were afraid of telling their peers or being found out.

Young people who had found the courage to come out told us how they had been bullied at school, on social networking sites and at home. Some young people had received support and positive responses from family and friends, but many had received a negative reaction from their parents, siblings, close friends or peers. This was very confusing for the young person involved and left some wishing that they had never come out.

“I came out yesterday online because I was fed up with hiding it and wanted people to know. Coming out was both relieving and sickening. Mum got in a rage because of how I came out and dad reacted badly too. Some people have supported me, but others who I thought were good friends have blocked me online, stopped talking to me and have been really judgemental. Everyone keeps saying I am too young to be sure about my sexuality – nobody understands! It is making me feel really depressed and I have nobody to talk to about this.” (Girl, aged 12)

Young people felt that society's negative perceptions of being LGBTQ+ contributed to bullying. Many described having low self-esteem and mental health issues. They talked about how the bullying had made them ashamed of who they were and led to feelings of self-loathing.

Many young people who had experienced bullying at school skipped classes or did not go to school at all in order to avoid the abuse. Some young people said they felt that their school did not know how to adequately support them, leaving them feeling they had nowhere to turn.

"I have been skipping classes because of homophobic comments I am getting in. I am the one who has got into trouble because I have been caught walking around the school. I tried to explain to the teacher why but nothing has happened. Sometimes, I can ignore the comments I am getting but other times they can really hurt and I go home and cut. I have been cutting for a while now to cope with the bullying and I fear I have become addicted. I want to be the bigger person and realise my education is important but I am feeling so depressed."

(Boy, aged 15)

## **Bullying about disability and chronic health conditions**

Some young people with disabilities or chronic health conditions told us they had been subjected to nasty and hurtful comments. Autism/Asperger's, ADHD/ADD and dyslexia/dyspraxia were the conditions that were mentioned most often during counselling sessions.

Children and young people who are on the autistic spectrum talked about finding it hard to read facial expressions and body language, and, therefore, were not always able to tell when someone was being friendly or if they were trying to hurt them. Some were bullied for doing or saying 'odd' things. They were sometimes seen as easy targets as they may not have a group of friends to protect them.

Some young people on the autistic spectrum talked to us about being manipulated into bullying others.

"These two boys are meant to be my friends but they keep telling me to hit this other girl. I have done it once but they keep telling me to do it again. I don't want to hurt her again but feel I have to in case they won't be friends with me anymore. I am autistic and have ADHD and I don't really know what it means, but I think that is why I think I have to do what they say. They have messaged her telling her I am going to get her."

(Girl, aged 16)

Other common forms of bullying across all disabilities included: being made fun of; being called hurtful names such as "freak", "weirdo" or "retard"; being excluded and isolated due to communication problems; being excluded from sports due to physical constraints; having their disability mimicked; being laughed at when unable to complete class work/achieving low grades; being stolen from; and being set up in a situation where their disability becomes more obvious or highlighted.

# Bullying on online gaming sites

In 2015/16, there were 1,420 counselling sessions with young people talking about bullying on social networking and gaming sites, up 34 per cent on the previous year.

Children and young people talked about being ganged up on, excluded and verbally abused while on gaming sites. Bullying often occurred when the young person's gaming skills were not as good as the other gamers or when they had done something "wrong" within the game, such as being unable to complete a task or objective.

"It might sound like not much of a problem but there's this group of people I play with online and they told me to kill myself. I won't kill myself but it upsets me. My parents don't realise how upset it's making me and they tell me to stand up for myself or just not play anymore but they don't know how hard that is! They don't understand why I want to play with people who are not friends, but to me they are. I don't know why they have just suddenly started picking on me but it hurts so much." (Girl, aged 12)

Children as young as seven told us how upset they were about their accounts having been hacked and their game spoilt. To them, this felt as real as having their pocket money stolen by another child in the playground. Users of the online game Minecraft call this type of bullying "*griefing*". Griefing is when someone damages a person's buildings, sets harmful traps, or steals all of their items on purpose, just to be mean.

"My parents bought me Minecraft and I have been playing online. Another user has been mean to me and using swear words. He destroyed a building I spent a lot of time building. I am feeling really sad and don't want to repeat the bad words and tell my mum or dad and I don't want to be mean back. What can I do?" (Girl, aged eight)

Young people repeatedly told counsellors that they did not want to tell their parents, mainly because they were worried that their parents would ban them from playing online. They did not want to stop playing, just to avoid the bullying.

"My friends from school persuaded me to get this new free game on my tablet so I did and it turned out to be really fun. We made a clan on the site, which allows us to chat outside school. A person who we didn't know joined and we asked him nicely to leave because we only wanted friends in the clan. He started swearing and getting abusive. We ended up kicking him off the site then he came back calling us all horrible names. We changed our settings but somehow he hacked in and came back to insult us one by one. We don't want to start a new clan or stop playing but we don't know how to stop him from being so abusive to us." (Gender and age unknown)

Many young people talked about gaming as a way of being able to relax and escape stressful situations in their life. For some who were struggling with suicidal feelings, gaming acted as a distraction and helped them to cope. For those who found it difficult to make friends at school, they found they could be themselves online and that their fellow gaming friends accepted and liked them.

The fear that their parents would stop them playing online if they reported the bullying was the main reason why they did not want to tell. Young people told us that their parents do not understand how important these online friends are and so would not offer the support they might have had it been a "real-life" friend.

# Bullying in gangs

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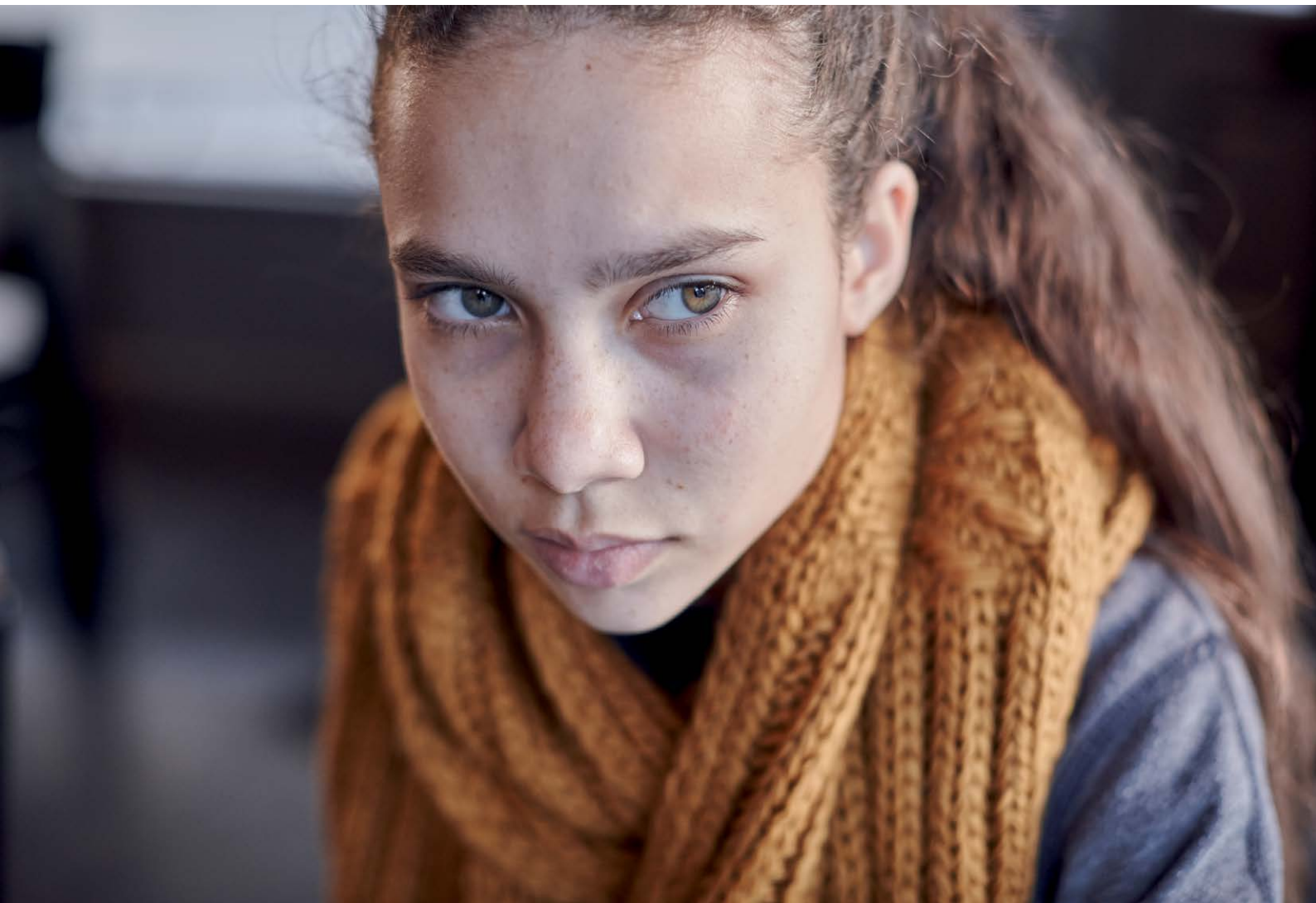
Another place where young people experience bullying is in gangs. Gangs were mentioned in 1,043 counselling sessions during 2015/16. Young people contacting Childline about being in a gang mainly talked about wanting to get out of the gang or wishing they had never joined.

For some, joining a gang had been a way for them to fit in and avoid being bullied themselves. Young people described being part of a gang as giving them a sense of protection and power.

“I joined a gang so I would stop being bullied, but some of the things other gang members do have started to really bother me. They say really offensive things to people and steal stuff. I don't know who I can talk to about all this. I'm worried. I want to get out.” (Girl, aged 17)

Young people spoke of a sense of shame about the gang's activities and regretted the part they had played. They felt trapped and unsure of what to do. Many recognised that their education, relationships and future was being adversely affected by their involvement with a gang.

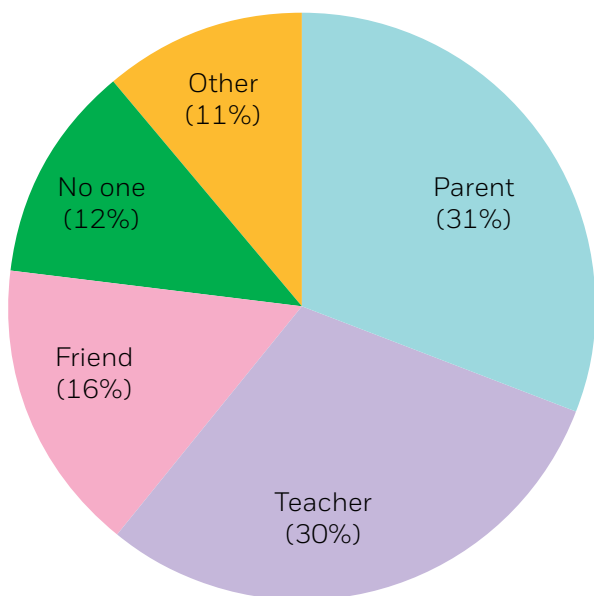
“I've been part of a gang for a while now but I want to get out. I'm so ashamed about some of the things I've done. It was stupid and horrible of me. I've been in trouble with the police too, which caused arguments at home. I want to get out but I'm scared about what will happen to me if I try.” (Girl, aged 16)



# Speaking out about bullying

Of the children who contacted Childline about bullying, 12 per cent said they had not told anyone else about it.

The young people who had told someone else were most likely to have told a parent (31 per cent), a teacher (30 per cent) or a friend (16 per cent).



## What stops children speaking out?

Young people often tell us how difficult it is for them to tell someone about the bullying they are experiencing. Some children are not sure whether they are indeed being bullied. Young people worry about the reaction from the adults they tell, from not being believed to being blamed, to parents overreacting and making a scene. They worry that telling will make the bullying worse. Or they worry that speaking out will make no difference, so there is no point.

Some young people are afraid to speak out because they have seen others speak out about bullying and they have a negative view of how the situation was dealt with.

## How do adults react?

Often, telling an adult is the only way to stop the bullying. Talking to Childline, or to parents or teachers means that the young person is no longer having to manage this problem by themselves. Childline can give young people the confidence to tell a trusted adult they know. Parents and teachers can take action to tackle the bullying. Young people who have been bullied are using the message boards on the Childline website to clearly say that speaking out is the best thing to do.

Unfortunately, some young people are contacting Childline because, having found the courage to tell someone, they did not always receive the support and response from adults they had hoped for.

## Telling parents

"I just wanted to say a huge thank you to Childline for saving my life. I was feeling suicidal because of the bullying at school and didn't know who to talk to. Childline encouraged me to talk to trusted adults and I told my parents about the bullying. The bullying has stopped now and I feel so much better and happier. I don't know what I would have done if I didn't have Childline to talk to."  
(Boy, aged 14)

For some children, plucking up the courage to tell their parents meant that action was taken to stop the bullying. However, some young people did not feel that their parents understood the impact that the bullying was having on them. Some were told by their parents to "just ignore the bullies". Others were made to feel like they were creating a drama out of nothing or that they themselves must be to blame.

Some parents suggested being extra nice to the bullies. Some young people felt their parents were disinterested in their school life and only focused on their academic achievements.



## Telling teachers

“I just wanted to say thank you Childline. You gave me the confidence I needed to speak to a teacher at school about being bullied and they’re helping to resolve the issue now. I feel so much better!” (Girl, aged 13)

“I phoned Childline a few weeks ago because I was being bullied. The counsellor I spoke to suggested that I involved a teacher. I am phoning to say I did this and now things are great. Lots of people in my class defended me against the bully when he started on me yesterday so I want to thank Childline for changing my life.” (Girl, aged 11)

Many young people told us that they had spoken to a teacher about being bullied and in many cases this had helped. Some said talking to their teacher or school counsellor had helped them emotionally, but that the bullying had not stopped.

“I am getting teased at school for my marks and for self-harming. The other children tell me to kill myself and call me an attention seeker. I have spoken to my teacher, which helped a lot but they have just told me to ignore the mean comments. As great as my teacher is to talk to, this advice doesn’t work.” (Girl, aged 13)

“I want the bullying to stop! I’ve tried talking to a teacher, but he said unless he sees it happening there’s nothing he can do about it.” (Boy, aged 13)

## Reporting online bullying to site administrators

Many young people talked to us about trying to report malicious posts and indecent images to site moderators.

“I don’t know what to do! I have been bullied for the last month on a gaming site and I have tried contacting the moderators three times and all I get is an automatic email and no action taken. I am trying to sort this out but not getting any response is making me feel helpless, like I can’t do anything about the problem. I feel trapped and am bottling all my feelings inside. I get so overstressed that I either get sick or have an outburst and I can’t concentrate at school. Nobody knows I am being bullied online, what is the point of telling anyone, they can’t make it stop!” (Boy, aged 14)

Advice like blocking specific users and changing their account details was not always effective as users created new online accounts and reached young people this way. In some cases, young people were reluctant to block users as they would not be able to see the online bully’s activity and whether they have posted anything more about them.

Those who managed to report online bullying to the site were often told that the bullying behaviour did not breach their standards/rules. Or by the time the site administrators had responded, the post or image has been spread over so widely that it felt like it was “too late” and that the damage was already done.

## How young people support those being bullied

Young people are often aware that someone is being bullied but are unsure about the best way to help.

### Sticking up for a friend

In 2015/16, we provided 853 counselling sessions to young people who were seeking advice on how to help another child being bullied. Bullying is the main reason for children aged 11 and under to contact us with concerns about another child.

Watching a friend or sibling being bullied can be very upsetting and worrying. Young people in this situation can feel frustrated and find it hard to know how to help.

“My friend is being ganged up on at school. She has been getting called names, has received threats and has been physically hurt. I can’t stand watching her being hurt, it makes me angry because I really want to help her but I don’t know how to.” (Girl, aged 14)

We hear from young people who are frightened of being physically hurt if they stand up for their friend. Watching a friend being bullied and being too scared of the bullies to do anything can leave young people feeling extremely guilty.

“I feel so guilty because my friend is being bullied and I am usually there when it happens but I can’t really do anything because they are older and I know they will hit me as well. I know all of them but I can’t tell a teacher because my school is rubbish when it comes to bullying.” (Girl, aged 12)

Friends of those who are being bullied are often bullied themselves or are isolated for hanging around with the young person who is being bullied.

“My friend is being physically bullied and I feel like I can’t do anything. I get laughed at for hanging round with her and some of my friends have stopped talking to me. So I don’t know how to stand up for her without getting hurt myself. It must hurt her inside and I’m really worried about her, but how can I help?” (Girl, aged 11)

“I am being bullied at school and need someone to talk to. It’s been going on for a year now and it’s making me sad and depressed. My friend sticks up for me and now he gets bullied as well. Is this my fault?” (Boy, aged 11)

In some cases, where the friend of the young person being bullied had tried to tackle the bullies themselves, they found it had made things worse.

“I want to find out what I can do for my little brother who is getting verbally and physically bullied at the local park. He usually goes there every day but has been coming home in tears because there is a group of kids who gang up on

him and hit and kick him and steal things. I went to the park to try and sort it out but it made it worse. I don’t feel it’s fair to stop him from going out and playing as he has as much right to be in the park as the bullies, but I don’t know what to do as it has spiralled out of control.” (Boy, aged 16)

Sometimes, young people are put in a difficult position because they feel that they need to go against their friend’s wishes and tell someone.

“I need help because one of my friends is getting bullied and she doesn’t want me to tell anyone. She wants it to be a secret because she thinks there will be rumours about her snitching. I haven’t told her that I am contacting Childline. I want her to stay safe because if this carries on it might get worse. I’ve been through bullying and I know how it feels. If I stay quiet it would be like I am a bad friend and I don’t want to be like that. I was talking to her about it and she shared her feelings and cried. I tried to tell her to talk to Childline but she was too scared. That’s why I need your help as I don’t know what to do.” (Girl, aged 11)



## Peer support

The Childline website provides message boards where young people can share their experiences and get support from other young people. In 2015/16, there were over 67,000 message board posts about all sorts of issues, showing just how valuable this means of support is for young people.

There were nearly 15,000 visits to the message boards pages about bullying and discrimination, and just over 11,000 visits to the message boards pages about online bullying.

Young people are using the message boards to talk about their experiences of being bullied and, in doing so, are providing empathy, advice and reassurance to others. Their posts explain that despite the fear, speaking out had been the best thing to do.

*“I went through serious verbal bullying. It really prevented me from feeling happiness, I soon lost my friends and I was on the verge of suicide. I remember that one day I was so close to losing my life to my own hands that I had a snap decision to talk to Childline. I called and talked to a counsellor who really listened to me. For the first time in two years I felt truly happy. I was advised to tell someone and sure enough that night I did. I was telling my mum everything and it felt so good! The school took legal action and now the bully is out of my life. I am writing this for two reasons, to say thank you to Childline and to help anyone else suffering from this to learn from my experiences, so something good can come out of what I have faced.”*

*“For anyone being bullied, please tell someone and escape the pain. Don’t suffer endlessly in silence like I did. It will get better I promise. Tell your parents to go down the school and talk to the Head.”*

It is clear from young people’s responses just how helpful they find support from people of a similar age who have experienced similar issues.

*“Thank you so much, you have helped me so much. I posted my message in the middle of the night when I was bawling my eyes out! I can’t thank you enough! It’s nice that there is someone going through the same thing as me. You have helped me more than you know”.*

The message boards are full of suggestions of ways that young people can tell somebody about the bullying and take action to help protect themselves. The posts recognise that there is not a “one size fits all” solution.

One young person who was being bullied about her appearance turned to the message board for advice and said:

*“I am being bullied about my figure and how I look. What makes it worse is one of the people doing it is my best friend’s brother and his mates. They are so intimidating and I hate it and I just want to end everything...I’m scared if I tell my family or anyone it will make me look weak. I really need advice.”*

The response this young person received from another young person was hugely encouraging and gave her a strategy to try:

*“When I started school I was bullied because of my name and hair colour. It got so bad that even my friends turned against me. Eventually I found the courage to tell them how I felt and asked them why they were bullying me. We talked it over and they did not realise how bad they were making me feel. We ended up all being friends again and the bullying stopped.”*

Young people also post inspirational anti-bullying messages for other young people to draw strength and inspiration from. Examples include:

*“Being bullied is never your fault, don’t blame yourself.”*

*“Tell Childline or an adult you trust about bullying, and don’t change yourself because a bully says so; you are beautiful.”*

*“Just remember, you are not alone, talk it out and things WILL get better.”*

*“At sunset, you hold the brave flag, whilst the bullies hold the regret flag.”*

Young people also provided words of encouragement, positive feedback and suggestions on coping techniques for those who were feeling lonely or depressed.

These includes ideas like:

- creative writing
- listening/playing music
- relaxation exercises
- thinking about the good things in your life and about yourself
- finding a hobby you enjoy
- drawing
- singing
- cooking
- exercising
- talking to Childline

Suggestions from the message boards include:

- Tell an adult you can trust.
- Write a letter to your head teacher.
- Ask your parents to arrange a meeting with the parents of the person bullying you to establish the underlying problem.
- Report bullying to someone in authority or someone you trust, for example at school to a teacher, or a school counsellor – even if your friend begs you not to. They will thank you in the end.
- If the bullying is serious, report it to the police.
- Keep a diary of how you are bullied. Log dates and time and give a good description of what happened and give this diary to your parents and/or teachers.
- If you have a mobile phone, record conversations so you have concrete proof.
- Ensure you are always with someone else so if you are bullied you have someone as a witness.
- Make new friends.
- Do not let the person bullying you see that it is affecting you. They use weakness against you.
- Look confident and approachable.
- Do not react – take a deep breath and walk away! People who are bullying you want to take away your power and make you sad and scared. If you show them you are not, they will often lose interest.

- Try drawing out the person bullying you to one side on their own and tell them how it is affecting you. Often, they do not realise just how much they are hurting you.
- Be ready with some clever comebacks, such as “If you’re talking about me behind my back, my life must be more interesting than yours”. Often, this disarms someone who is bullying you, especially if other kids have laughed at what you have said.

The children and young people on the message boards also share advice on how to avoid taking part in bullying behaviour:

- Make it clear to your friends that you will not be involved in bullying behaviour.
- Never stand by and watch or encourage bullying behaviour.
- Do not harass, tease or spread gossip about others, this includes on social networking sites like Facebook.
- Never forward on or respond to messages or photos that may be offensive or upsetting.
- Support others who are being bullied by encouraging them to ask for help, for example go with them to a place they can get help or provide them with information about where to go for help.

# Messages from this report

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There are a number of key messages that this report clearly highlights:

- Despite efforts from schools and organisations to respond to and reduce bullying, some children are contacting us because they are afraid to speak out or because they have seen that speaking out can make things worse. Other children have told us that speaking out is the only way to tackle the problem.
- Children who are experiencing bullying need to be confident that if they tell an adult, then they will get a supportive and understanding response, and that action will be taken to stop the bullying.
- We need to equip all young people with the skills to help and support their friends and peers who are experiencing bullying.
- Receiving support from peers or young people who have experienced bullying can be hugely beneficial both in terms of suggesting strategies that have worked and providing emotional support.



# Strategies that schools can use to tackle bullying

Here are some ways schools can help pupils have confidence that bullying will be responded to appropriately:

**Have an anti-bullying policy** in place that is regularly updated, widely available and promoted to the whole school community, children and parents. This should make it clear what action the school will take in the case of a bullying incident and what it regularly does to prevent bullying.

**Ensure students know how to report bullying behaviour** and that support is well publicised to pupils. Children should be encouraged to get involved in publicising anti-bullying messages around the school with posters, assemblies and role-plays. PHSE lessons can be used to explore the subject of bullying in all its forms and to discuss ways of preventing and dealing with it as a group. One example of a child-friendly anti-bullying message that many schools have now adopted is STOP (Several Times On Purpose/Start Telling Other People). It is easy to remember, a good reminder of what bullying is and what to do if it happens to you.

**Ensure children have confidence that schools will take reports of bullying seriously** and will take action to tackle problems. If they do not have confidence this will happen, they will be less likely to report it.

**Keep comprehensive records** of any bullying incidents in school, including what has taken place and any action taken by the school. These are useful to refer back to at a later date if further incidents take place.

**Have clear anti-bullying procedures** that both teachers and pupils know and understand. Keep communicating with teachers and pupils, checking in on whether the bullying is continuing or whether it has been resolved.

**Include the children experiencing bullying in decisions** on any action taken so they are not surprised by any action you take. Many children are reluctant to speak up as they fear the situation will get worse for them. It will help if they are prepared in advance for what action is taking place.

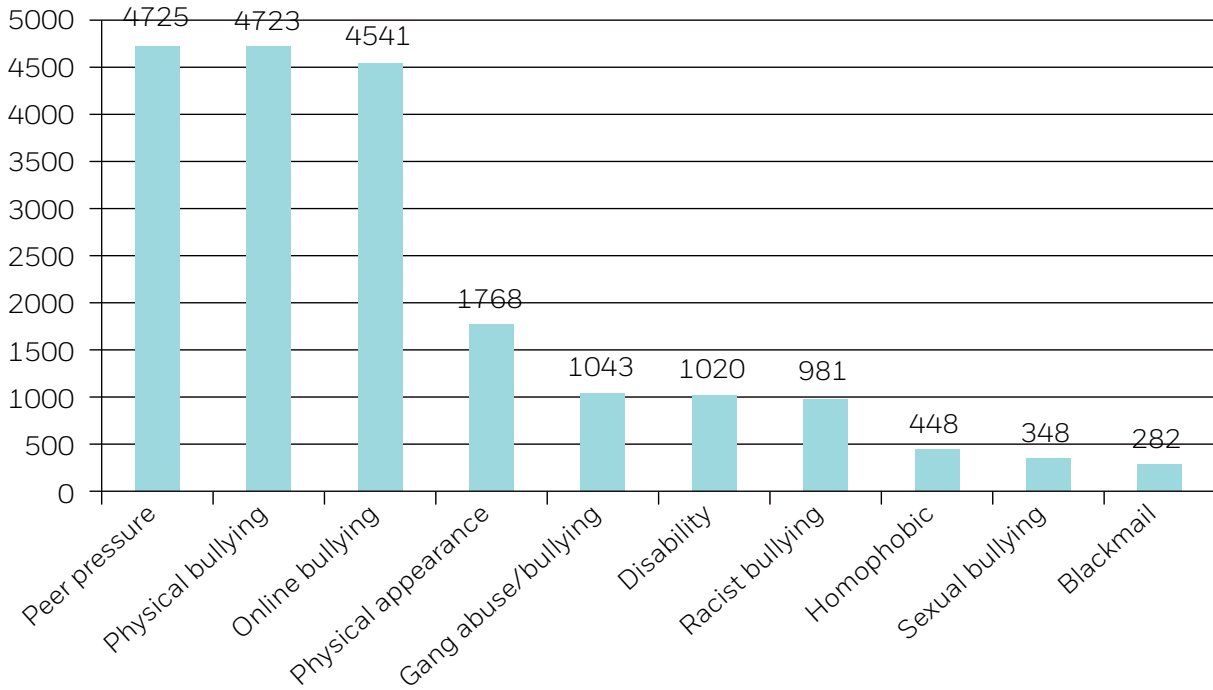
**Identify hot spot areas** in school where bullying is known to happen and introduce ways of patrolling or monitoring these areas.

**Understand how to report offensive or inappropriate online content** to the relevant social network and request how to remove it.

**Have IT acceptable use policies** to promote appropriate online behaviour to children and adults.

# Appendix

## Childline counselling sessions about bullying – 2015/16



\*Children can talk about more than one type of bullying during a counselling session.

Find out more about our work at  
**[nspcc.org.uk](https://www.nspcc.org.uk)**