

Statistics briefing: emotional abuse

This briefing looks at what data and statistics are available about emotional abuse to help professionals, and the organisations they work for, make evidence-based decisions.

April 2024

Introduction

This briefing introduces a range of datasets available in the UK that relate to emotional abuse. Research provides estimates of the prevalence of emotional abuse and data is available on children who are receiving support or are known to services because of emotional abuse. Statistics can help professionals and the organisations they work for make evidence-based decisions about how best to meet the needs of children who have experienced emotional abuse.

What does the data tell us?

- Around 1 in 15 children in the UK have been emotionally abused by a parent or carer.
- Most forms of abuse include an emotional element, but it is recorded as a

specific concern for over 1 in 3 children who are the subject of a child protection plan or on a child protection register in the UK.

- There were over 7,000 contacts to the NSPCC's Helpline and over 2,700 Childline counselling sessions in 2022/23 about emotional abuse.
- There were over 61,000 police-recorded offences related to emotional abuse in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2022/23. Data for Scotland is not available.

What is emotional abuse?

Emotional abuse is emotional maltreatment of a child, which has a severe and persistent negative effect on the child's emotional development. It's also known as psychological abuse.

Most forms of abuse include an emotional element, but emotional abuse can also happen on its own.

(Sources: Department for Education, 2023a; Department of Health, 2017; Scottish Government, 2023a; Wales Safeguarding Procedures, 2020)

➤ [Visit NSPCC Learning for more information about emotional abuse](#)

What data is available?

Data about emotional abuse is available from a number of sources. Information covered includes:

- the prevalence of self-reported experiences of emotional abuse

- the number of children who were subject to a child protection plan or on a child protection register because of concerns about emotional abuse
- the number of police recorded offences related to emotional abuse
- the number of children talking to Childline about emotional abuse, and the number of concerned adults talking to the NSPCC Helpline about emotional abuse
- the number of case reviews highlighting emotional abuse as a concern.

Throughout this briefing, figures given are the most up-to-date at the time of publication.

How can the data be used?

Data can only ever tell part of the story. It's important to bear in mind the limitations of the data available.

You can use this data to:	But you can't use it to:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Get a sense of how many children experience emotional abuse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Definitely say how widespread emotional abuse is.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Say how many emotional abuse cases are known to and recorded by services. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Equate figures from services with the prevalence of emotional abuse.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Identify the most common characteristics amongst children who experience emotional abuse. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ State that children who have these characteristics are the only ones who experience emotional abuse.

What does the data tell us about the scale of the issue?

We don't know exactly how many children in the UK experience emotional abuse. Adults in the child's life may not recognise the signs that they are being emotionally abused and the child may not know they are being emotionally abused or may be too young, too scared or too ashamed to tell anyone what is happening to them. However, there are a number of different sources of information, including data from services which work with children and research into children's and adults' self-reported experiences, which help build up a picture of the scale of emotional abuse.

Around 1 in 15 children in the UK have been emotionally abused by a parent or carer

An NSPCC study (Radford et al., 2011) asked over 6,000 adults, children and parents about child maltreatment. The findings were reported as three subsets:

- parents of the under 11s
- children aged 11-17
- adults aged 18-24.

The study asked 2,275 children aged 11-17 about their experiences of abuse or neglect. 6.8% of 11- to 17-year olds (8.0% of girls and 5.5% of boys) reported experiencing emotional abuse by a parent or guardian at some point in their lives.

The study also asked 1,761 young adults aged 18-24 about their experiences of abuse or neglect during childhood. 6.9% of young adults (9.6% of women and 4.3% of men) reported experiencing emotional abuse by a parent or guardian before the age of 18.

Different surveys have different methodologies, and therefore provide different estimates of the prevalence of emotional abuse

Every research study asks different samples of people different questions using different definitions, so it is always difficult to make comparisons between research studies.

The Crime Survey for **England** and **Wales** in 2019 asked a representative sample of adults aged 18-74 about their experiences of emotional abuse and neglect before the age of 16.

- 9.3% of adults aged 18- to 74-years experienced emotional abuse or emotional neglect before the age of 16-years (11.8% of women and 6.8% of men).

This study asked different questions of a different cohort to the NSPCC's Radford study, so is not directly comparable.

- The NSPCC study includes experiences of emotional abuse before the age of 18 across the UK. It includes responses from both young adults recollecting childhood experiences of abuse and from children reporting experiences of physical abuse. It looks at both lifetime and past year experiences of abuse. It focuses on figures for emotional abuse perpetrated by a parent or carer, to best reflect how this form of abuse occurs in a child protection context.
- The Crime survey for **England** and **Wales'** survey of adults' experiences of childhood abuse combines prevalence of both emotional abuse and emotional neglect. It looks at emotional abuse or neglect perpetrated by anyone aged 16 or over, as opposed to focusing on parents or carers. It only includes experiences of emotional abuse and neglect before the age of 16. It only includes responses from adults recollecting experiences of emotional abuse or

neglect during their childhood. It also only covers **England** and **Wales**, as opposed to the whole of the UK.

The NSPCC consistently uses data from the Radford study relating to 11- to 17-year-olds when talking about the prevalence of emotional abuse. This is because it tells us what children have said about their own experiences, rather than asking adults to remember what happened to them during their childhood. Until another study is undertaken directly with children it remains the best and most up to date picture we have of children's experiences of abuse and neglect.

(Sources: Radford, 2011 and ONS, 2020)

Emotional abuse is recorded as a concern for over 1 in 3 children who are the subject of a child protection plan or on a child protection register in the UK

Most forms of abuse include an emotional element, but emotional abuse can also happen on its own. In **England** emotional abuse is recorded when it is the sole or main form of abuse (Department for Education, 2023b), in **Northern Ireland** it is only recorded as a concern for children on a child protection register when it occurs in isolation (Department of Health, 2023), in **Scotland** when it is identified as a specific concern at the case conferences of children on the child protection register (Scottish Government, 2023b) and in **Wales** emotional abuse can be recorded as a sole concern or a combination of concerns; for example neglect and emotional abuse are often recorded together.

Over 20,000 children across the UK were the subject of a child protection plan or on a child protection register under the concern of emotional abuse in 2022, making it a recorded concern for 38% of children on a plan or register.

Emotional abuse is the most commonly recorded concern in **Wales**, the second most commonly recorded abuse-related concern in **England** and **Scotland**, and the third most commonly recorded sole concern in **Northern Ireland**.

	England 31 March 2022	N. Ireland 31 March 2022	Scotland 31 July 2022	Wales 31 March 2022	UK 2022
Number of children who were the subject of a child protection plan (CPP)/on a child protection register (CPR) under the sole category of emotional abuse	19,480	367	N/A	1,130	21,668
Number of children who were the subject of a CPP/on a CPR where emotional abuse was one of multiple concerns identified	N/A	N/A	N/A	30	30
Total number of children who were the subject of a CPP/on a CPR where emotional abuse was a concern	19,480	367	691	1,160	21,698

Proportion of all children who were the subject of a CPP/on a CPR under the category of emotional abuse	38%	16%	34%	47%	38%
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(Sources: DfE, 2023a; DoH, 2023; Scottish Government, 2023a; Welsh Government, 2023)

There were over 61,000 police-recorded offences related to emotional abuse in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2022/23

Emotional abuse is not counted as a separate offence in police recorded crime data. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) identified harassment and stalking offences where the victim was under the age of 18 years as the best available indicator of child emotional abuse recorded by the police (ONS, 2020). Unlike emotional abuse captured in child protection statistics, these offences are most likely to be perpetrated by people outside the child’s home. Stalking and harassment offences will not cover all emotional abuse cases handled by the police. Other offences may include an element of emotional abuse, but cannot be separately identified.

Police recorded crime figures for harassment offences are available broken down by age for **England, Wales** and **Northern Ireland**. In **Scotland**, where crimes are recorded differently, data is not available.

Stalking was introduced as an offence in **Scotland** in 2010 and in **England** and **Wales** in 2012. There is no specific offence of stalking in **Northern Ireland**, where it is dealt with under the Protection from Harassment Order 1997. Figures for stalking offences broken down by age are available for **England** and **Wales**. In **Scotland**, where crimes are recorded differently, data is not available.

	England 2022/23	N. Ireland 2022/23	Wales 2022/23
Total stalking and/or harassment offences against children	56,032	1,252	4,136
Total stalking and/or harassment offence rate per 10,000 under-18-year-olds	47.1	28.7	66.7

(Sources: Home Office Data Hub information provided to the NSPCC, 2024; PSNI, 2023)

Although all child abuse includes an element of emotional abuse, it is rarely named as a key concern in serious incident notifications and case reviews

When a child dies or is seriously harmed as a result of abuse or neglect, a review may be conducted to identify ways that professionals and organisations can improve the way they work together to safeguard children and prevent similar incidents from occurring.

Each UK nation has its own terminology and guidance for carrying out and sharing the learning from the reviews. Cases that meet the criteria set out in the relevant guidance are reviewed by multi-agency panels.

➤ Learn more about case reviews

In **England**, the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel receives a notification each time a serious incident occurs and oversees the commissioning of reviews of serious child protection cases. The Panel received notification of 393 serious incidents which occurred between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023. Of those 393 notifications, 156 were in relation to child deaths, with the remaining 229 relating to non-fatal cases. One of the non-fatal cases featured emotional abuse.

(Source: Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2024)

In **Northern Ireland**, between January 2003 and December 2008 there were 24 case management reviews (CMRs) undertaken in Northern Ireland. None of the reviews were convened because of emotional abuse, but a family history of child emotional abuse was identified as an indicator of concern in two cases.

(Source: Devaney et al., 2013)

In **Scotland**, the Care Inspectorate received 82 notifications that initial case reviews (ICRs) had been undertaken between 2018-2021, of which 32 progressed to a significant case review (SCR). Analysis of the 50 ICRs that did not progress to a full SCR, 23 SCRs and two thematic learning reviews found that of the 70 children referred to in reviews which related to non-fatal harm, three were due to emotional harm and a further 21 were due to physical and/or emotional abuse.

(Source: Care Inspectorate, 2021)

In **Wales**, a thematic analysis of child practice reviews (CPRs) in 2023 found that out of the 33 CPRs analysed, one recorded non-fatal emotional abuse.

(Source: McManus, M.A, Ball, E. and Almond, L., 2023)

There were over 7,000 contacts to the NSPCC's Helpline in 2022/23 about emotional abuse

The NSPCC Helpline offers an advice and support service for anyone worried about the safety or welfare of a child. Data from the Helpline gives us an insight into the types of concerns people speak to the service about. In 2022/23 the NSPCC Helpline responded to a total of 59,282 contacts from people who were concerned about a child's welfare. 7,029 contacts related to concerns about emotional abuse, making it the fourth most discussed concern, after neglect, physical and sexual abuse.

(Source: NSPCC data, retrieved 2024)

There were over 2,700 Childline counselling sessions with children about emotional abuse

Childline is the UK's free helpline for children and young people. Information from Childline counselling sessions provide a unique insight into the types of worries children are speaking to the service about. In 2022/23 there were a total of 195,542 Childline counselling sessions. 2,752 Childline counselling sessions were about emotional abuse in 2022/23, making it the third most commonly discussed form of abuse, after sexual and physical abuse.

(Source: NSPCC data, retrieved 2024)

What does the data tell us about children who have been emotionally abused?

Older girls are more likely than older boys to say they have experienced emotional abuse

The Radford (2011) study found similar levels of lifetime experiences of emotional abuse by a parent or guardian reported for younger girls and boys, but higher prevalence among older girls than older boys.

Maltreatment type	Under 11s		11-17s		18-24s	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Men	Women
Lifetime emotional abuse by a parent or carer	3.7%	3.4%	5.5%	8.0%	4.3%	9.6%

(Source: Radford et al, 2011)

Child protection plan and child protection register data, available for England and Wales only, shows very little difference in the rates of boys and girls on a child protection plan or register because of emotional abuse.

	Boys on a child protection plan/register for emotional abuse		Girls on a child protection plan/register for emotional abuse	
	Number	Rate per 1,000 children	Number	Rate per 1,000 children
England	9,610	1.6	9,560	1.7
Wales	565	1.8	590	2.0

(Source: DfE, 2023a; Welsh Government, 2023)

The prevalence of emotional abuse varies by age

The Radford (2011) study found that older children were more likely to report having experienced emotional abuse in the past year than younger children.

Maltreatment type	Under 11s	11-17s
Past year emotional abuse by a parent or guardian	1.8%	3.0%

(Source: Radford et al, 2011)

Child protection plan data, available for **England** only, shows that at 31 March 2022, children aged 1-4, 5-9 or 10-15 were most likely to be on a child protection plan because of emotional abuse. The youngest and oldest children on a child protection plan were less likely to be on a plan for emotional abuse.

	Unborn	Under 1	1-4	5-9	10-15	16+
Number of children on a CPP for emotional abuse	280	1,330	4,770	5,760	6,420	940
% of children on a CPP who were on a plan for emotional abuse by age group	21.1%	30.0%	39.5%	40.6%	39.8%	34.2%

(Source: DfE, 2023a)

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