

Stop It Now!

# Helpline Report

*23,000 hopeful conversations about  
child sexual abuse and prevention*



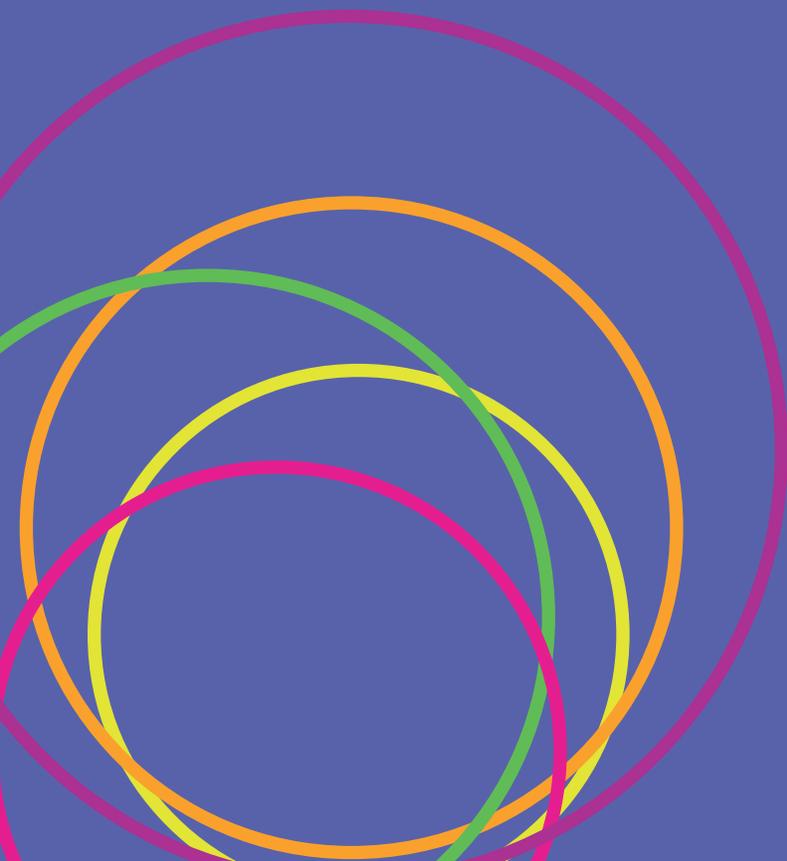
Stop It **Now!**<sup>®</sup>

TOGETHER WE CAN STOP THE SEXUAL ABUSE OF CHILDREN



**“Thank you so very much for your excellent advice and resources! With the swirl of emotions that often accompanies these challenging situations, it’s hard as a parent to think objectively about things. I am very grateful for the help Stop It Now! provides.”**

*– Mother concerned about warning signs of sexual abuse in her family*





## Why it matters to have a helpline about children's and teenagers' sexual safety.

Because when there is a safe place to call to ask difficult questions about preventing and responding to sexual abuse, then sexual abuse can move out of secrecy and isolation, and **children can be better protected**.

Because when parents are looking for help after seeing warning signs that their child could be at risk, that is the moment when there is **an opportunity to protect a young person** from being sexually abused.

Because we **need to learn and talk about** children's sexual development and behaviors to know what's age-appropriate and what is a warning sign.

Because child sexual abuse is complicated and confusing. People we love may hurt children we love, and **how we respond deeply matters**.

Because people **need a place to ask for help** if they feel like they are at risk to harm a child.

Because it's hard to know **what to say** to someone you care about if you are concerned about their behaviors.

Because when a grandmother has questions about her granddaughter's sexualized behaviors, she needs accurate information to **help her know how to respond**.

Because a worried dad, unsure of how to talk to his brother about boundaries with his teenagers, **needs a place to practice** what he'll say.

Because a concerned neighbor needs to know **what to do if they suspect** a child is being sexually abused.

Because a therapist is seeing her first client who talks about being attracted to children and isn't sure what her **next steps** should be.

Because a daycare provider is **worried about the behavior** of one of her children and wonders if it is normal.

Because an adult survivor of sexual abuse wants to know **how to break the cycle** and protect the children in her family from being sexually abused.

Because an adult concerned about their unwanted sexual thoughts of children can **get help BEFORE anyone is harmed** so they can live a safe, productive life.

**Because children deserve to live free from sexual harm.**

**"Talking to the Helpline changed my life. There was some place to go where I could tell my story to people who were experienced and knowledgeable about child sexual abuse. Helpline staff told me about steps I could take to interrupt a situation that worried me. I am very close to the people involved in the situation and Helpline helped me to proceed in a loving way."  
– *Mother preparing to respond to concerns about her child's safety***

The quotes and testimonials used here have been collected throughout our years of service through follow-up surveys, emails and social media. Because the Helpline is confidential and anonymous, all sample contacts, scenarios and other examples are only those shared with permission, with all identifying details altered to protect confidentiality.

Throughout this report, "caller" and "callers" are used to identify anyone who contacts the Helpline, regardless of whether they contacted Now! by phone, email, chat, letter or through social media.



# Acknowledgments

Thank you to all of Stop It Now!'s generous donors who support prevention. We particularly want to thank the **Oak Foundation** for its long standing support, including the funding that allowed us to develop this report. Thanks to **Thorn** for their partnership, backing and support of our Helpline. We also want to thank our affiliate partner, **Klingberg Family Centers**, and especially **Pat Wilcox**, for their steadfast support for our Helpline and other programs.

We are in appreciation for the data collection and analysis completed by **Dr. Billie-Jo Grant** of Grant Consulting, and with the support provided from the **Smith College School for Social Work's Independent Study** graduate interns (**Melissa Rocheleau, Anne Deering, Erin Wood and Emma Batting**) and their professor, **Maria Torres, PhD**.

Special thanks to **Peter Pollard**, both a previous Now! staff member and a current advisory council member. This report has borrowed some of his eloquent descriptions of the Helpline service and impacts. We are also grateful to **Yvonne Cournoyer** for her shared insights, encouragement and review, also a previous Now! staff and current advisory council member.

This report would not have been possible without **Julie O'Brien**, our communications and design consultant. With her encouragement and guidance, this report was able to come together – and this important story could be told and shared.

With a deeply grateful heart, we acknowledge the contributions and support of **Joan Tabachnick**. Joan has served Now! almost since the beginning – as a volunteer, the first staff member, author of many of Now!'s resources and now as a current advisory council member and consultant. She brought the vision of the Helpline to life, even answering its very first call. She continues to inspire the work of Now!, contributing not only to the accuracy but the heart of this report.

The Helpline service itself, much less this report, wouldn't exist without the skilled, professional and authentic presence of the **Helpline Consultants**. From the first consultants who bravely answered calls not knowing what to expect, to **Micah Waxman** and **Mackenzie Mathieu-Busher**, our Helpline consultants currently responding to inquiries daily from around the world; witnesses to every imaginable and unimaginable question and concern about sexual abuse. We are grateful for your hearts, your wisdom and your ability to hold every single person contacting the Helpline with compassion and respect. Thank you also to **Lily Lawrence**, who keeps our office running and leads so many of our communication activities, helping us to bring prevention awareness and information to many fronts.

Without the courage and the distinctive ability to turn insight and ideas into actions of our founder, **Fran Henry**, Now! nor the Helpline would exist. We are forever grateful to her for carving out a map for us all to take up the call to do everything we can to protect children from sexual harm.

# Director's Welcome

In the last decade, child sexual abuse has continually been headline news. We hear and read about it across every news outlet and on every continent, seemingly every day. These news stories are typically “the worst of the worst,” shedding light on systemic abuse of hundreds of children over decades, or revealing a public figure’s involvement with child sex trafficking and online child sex abuse material, or reporting on respected institutions that enabled and protected adults known to have abused. All of these are important stories to share. They build awareness about child sexual abuse, and they prompt needed conversations.

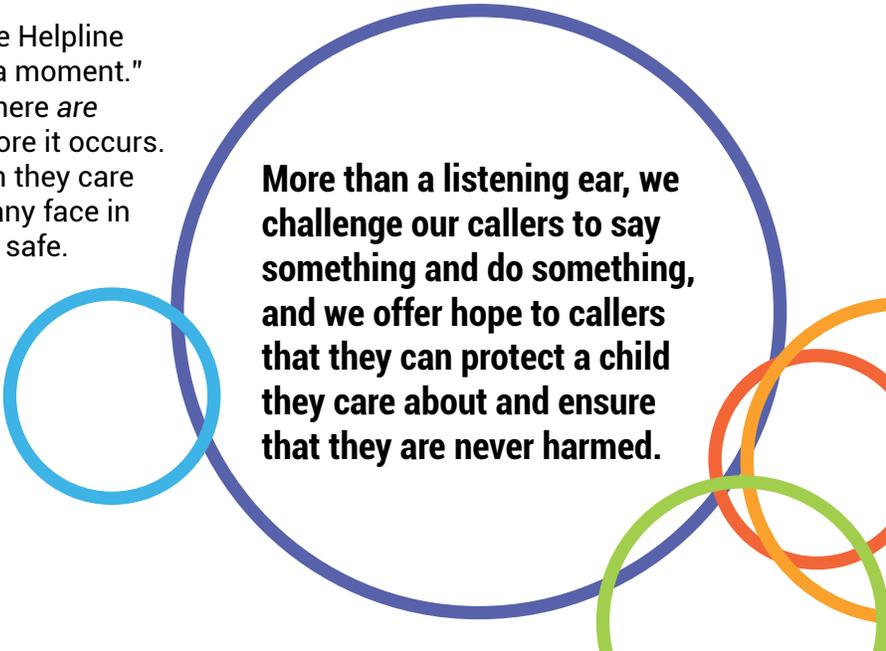
However, the conversation that is lost in the news is how to address child sexual abuse where it happens the most: in our homes. Children are most often sexually abused by someone who they and their families know and trust, adding complexities to the impact of coming forward and getting help for everyone involved.

Sexual abuse is fueled by this isolation and silence. We have learned that people need a place to ask difficult questions and feel both respected and safe. We need to talk about the critical role that adults have in creating safer environments and holding other adults accountable for their actions.

Stop It Now!’s Helpline exists to have these critical conversations about child sexual abuse. We are the first and only Helpline of our kind in the United States. Since 1995, we have replied to over 23,000 inquiries about responding to and intervening in sexual abuse concerns – most from people who have never spoken about abuse to anyone else. More than a listening ear, we challenge our callers to say something and do something, and we offer hope to callers that they can protect a child they care about and ensure that they are never harmed.

Before I came to work at Stop It Now!, I spent the majority of my career as a psychotherapist, often acting as a social worker. I specialized in working with youth in foster and residential care. Many of these young people were at risk because they had experienced trauma – including sexual abuse – and as a result, were trauma-reactive, had behavioral problems and/or experienced emotional difficulties. I have seen what happens to children who are sexually abused, and I have journeyed alongside them as they work incredibly hard to heal and recover. In these early days of my career and often in the midst of the aftermath of trauma, it had never occurred to me to ask, “How can I stop this from happening to other children?”

Learning about Now!’s work, especially the Helpline service, shifted this for me. It was my “Aha moment.” As part of my wakeup call, I learned that there *are* opportunities to prevent sexual abuse before it occurs. That people can act to protect the children they care about. And I learned about the barriers many face in seeking help and support to keep children safe.



**More than a listening ear, we challenge our callers to say something and do something, and we offer hope to callers that they can protect a child they care about and ensure that they are never harmed.**

I have seen how our Helpline enables and prepares caring adults to protect children to ensure they live healthy and safe lives. I have helped people who might be at risk to abuse take responsibility for their behaviors and seek help before ever harming a child. I have personally experienced the impact we make when we provide a worried caller with practical ideas of what they can do, helpful tools, important information and critical support to help them respond to concerns about a child's safety.

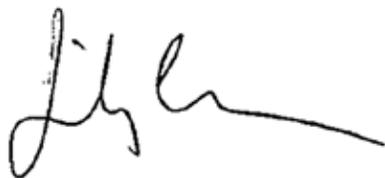
The Helpline is a window, offering a unique view into real-life experiences that are rarely told. These are not stories heard on the news, but the concerns within individual families, that all of us need to listen to and learn from. These 23,000 conversations teach us about child sexual abuse, the situations that put young people at risk and the tools that adults need to have difficult conversations and take action.

I know that our work is important – urgently and critically important – every single day as we read a new email or answer a call from someone who is scared and courageously reaching out for help. We are here for every person to ease their fears, to validate their concerns, to think through gray areas and to empower them with actions to protect children.

We are the ally our Helpline callers need to build their confidence to do what they can to protect children. Through each interaction, we have learned that people want and need a sense of hope – hope that children can heal if they have been abused, hope that people who have concerning thoughts can be held accountable for their behaviors and also learn to live safely in their communities, and ultimately, hope that child sexual abuse can be prevented.

I am proud of the work shared on the following pages. The voices and the stories shared will offer perspectives you may have never heard and new insights into this difficult issue. We hope they will inspire you to talk about this with your family, your friends and your communities. The simple act of speaking up, asking questions and seeking information will help create the safe places our children deserve.

We can prevent child sexual abuse – together.



Jenny Coleman, MA, LMHC  
Director, Stop It Now!



**"Thank you for empowering me to speak up."**

***– Concerned community member***

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# **Child Sexual Abuse in the United States**

## PREVALENCE

The prevalence and universality of child sexual abuse (CSA) are staggering. The sexual abuse of children and adolescents is shrouded in pain, shame, stigma and fear. Long-term research shows that in the U.S., more than **one out of 10 children** is sexually abused before the age of 18.<sup>1</sup> Global estimates are often much higher, especially in developing countries. In the U.S., 50% of children who are sexually abused are younger than 12 years old.<sup>2</sup>

Children in all racial, religious, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation and age groups, and at all socio-economic levels are sexually abused. While there are risk factors that may increase the possibility of sexual abuse, sex abuse is found in all types of families, communities and cultures. Youth and adults who sexually harm a child come from all levels and types of education, employment, relationship statuses and sexual orientations, and from all racial, religious, ethnic, gender and age groups.

**The majority of children who experience sexual abuse do not tell anyone – not while they are still children or even as adults.** When children do disclose, most often the first person they tell is not a parent or any other adult, but rather a friend. More than 60% of the time, children do not disclose.<sup>3,4</sup> Of the 30% of children who do disclose, almost half wait at least five years before telling anyone. Most never disclose.<sup>5</sup> Of those adults who did eventually disclose their abuse to a close family member or friend, 88% never reported their abuse to law enforcement or child protection authorities.<sup>3</sup>

This massive underreporting of sexual abuse is most often the result of fear of what might happen to them or to their family, a sense of guilt and feelings of shame. Contributing to the complexity of preventing and responding to sexual abuse is that in over 90% of known sexual abuse cases, the person who sexually harms a child is known to the child and/or family.<sup>6</sup> Often, these are people in important and meaningful relationships, such as a family member, family friend or babysitter. Additionally, the person causing sexual harm to a child may be another child; 30-50% of children are sexually abused by another child.<sup>7,8</sup>

**There is no one reason why a person – an adult or youth – would sexually abuse a child.** Researchers continue to explore the risk factors and the protective factors that may help or hinder someone from harming a child. What we do know is that there is no typical profile of an adult who sexually abuses a child. We also know that children who abuse other children require a different response than those directed toward adult-to-child sexual abuse, and that sexual development plays a role.

**1 IN 10 CHILDREN IS SEXUALLY ABUSED.  
50% ARE UNDER AGE 12.**



## IMPACT

There is a growing body of research that has detailed the short term and lifelong negative impacts of sexual abuse. The consequences of sexual abuse can include:

- Depression, suicidal thoughts and suicide
- Elevated rates of substance abuse
- Higher risk sexual behaviors
- Serious health problems, including diabetes and heart disease
- Generational cycles of abuse <sup>9,10</sup>
- Higher rates of teenage pregnancy <sup>11</sup>
- Negative impact on educational success <sup>12</sup>
- And many more.

In addition to the devastating impact on its victims, there are large societal costs. The lifetime economic burden of CSA in the United States alone is approximately \$9.3 billion and includes:

- Increased lifetime medical treatment for people who have been abused
- Lost productivity
- Increased crime, often tied to substance abuse
- Psychiatric treatment and hospitalizations, including for suicide attempts
- Incarceration and treatment of people who have abused
- And much more.<sup>13</sup>

**Healing and recovery are possible.** A significant factor in a child's healing is the response of the adult they talk with when they disclose. Children need to be believed, reassured that they are not at fault, and affirmed of adults' commitment to their safety. Thanks to both research and the stories courageously shared by people who have experienced abuse, we know that individuals and families can heal from abuse, break cycles of violence and lead happy, healthy, fulfilling lives. Research continues to demonstrate the resiliency of children and families, especially when evidenced-based, restorative and trauma-informed supports are available.<sup>14-19</sup>

"The Helpline really helped me when I was thinking about taking my own life."

– A young man worried that he had behaved harmfully as a youth

## BARRIERS TO ACTION

There have been many advances in understanding both the complexity of sexual abuse and what is needed to protect children, though many barriers to action persist.

Initial prevention efforts focused largely on children speaking up to protect themselves from sexual abuse and if they have been abused, to tell a trusted adult. These programs have been incredibly important to families and to systems in so many cases. However, many children are not able to say no or are too afraid to report their abuse.

Stop It Now! introduced the idea that while we can and should talk to children about their bodies, healthy sexuality development, and what they can do that will help them stay safe, we need to be clear that preventing sexual abuse is an **adult responsibility**. Adults are solely responsible for protecting children – meaning preventing sexual abuse before anyone is harmed and intervening when it is suspected or known.

Even so, Now! recognizes that many adults don't know what to do when they are unsure of what they are seeing, especially if the person they are concerned about is a family member or close relation. Common reasons adults do not take action include:

- Not wanting to believe that a child they love has been harmed, or that someone they love could sexually harm a child.
- Financial dependence on the person who has sexually harmed a child, resulting in potential homelessness or loss of custody and other basic needs.
- Fear of wrongfully accusing an adult or youth and “ruining their life” through imprisonment, offender registries or other lifelong punitive actions.
- Avoiding making a report to minimize the potential of further trauma to the child.

It is equally critical that we reduce barriers for people who may be at risk to abuse or who have abused and want help to stop. Adults and youth who have sexual thoughts or behaviors about children also have little information about the kinds of help available – if there is even help at all. Resources that help people with unwanted sexual attractions to children are limited, and individuals encounter barriers of deep shame, stigma, and fear of arrest. They fear reprisal even when a crime has not been committed but just for thinking about children sexually. Many adults are also worried that seeking help will cost them their jobs, their families, their homes and their community.<sup>20-23</sup>

Through the Helpline and our extensive resources, Now! works to break down each of these barriers and equip adults to keep children safe. When adults are informed about child sexual abuse, then they are better prepared when children reach out to them for help. The following pages outline how.



## Stop It Now!

Empowering adults to prevent child sexual abuse.  
Supporting adults to take action to protect children.  
Equipping adults with resources to help children and families.

## ABOUT STOP IT NOW!

Stop It Now! was founded in 1992 by Fran Henry, a survivor of child sexual abuse who recognized that standard approaches to keeping children safe at that time did not account for the complex relationships surrounding most abuse – and would not have prevented her own sexual abuse.

She founded Now! on the belief that adults can and must take responsibility to stop child sexual abuse. This belief, coupled with research and public policy, led to the recognition of child sexual abuse as a preventable public health problem.

Through a hopeful and compassionate lens, Now!'s programs equip and motivate adults to intervene before a child is ever harmed. Now! is known as one of the first organizations to outline warning signs of sexually abusive behavior in adults, including those we know. This research guided development of our early resources to equip family members, friends and other adults to raise questions and concerns with the people they care about, without causing irreparable harm to relationships.

Across our programs, Now! offers support and guidance to adults in the position to address concerns with anyone's behaviors, including their own. Our 27 years of innovative programming has shown that:

1. Adults will act to prevent abuse if they have access to accurate information, practical tools, guidance and support.
2. Families will intervene and seek help when they see problematic behaviors in their children.
3. Communities will mobilize around prevention initiatives, including efforts that address the complexities of abuse closer to home.

Today, we are a leading expert on building awareness of the scope of sexual abuse, developing and widely distributing prevention tools for adults and families, and advocating for both compassion and accountability. In the past two years alone, we have answered thousands of Helpline calls, trained thousands of adults, and reached more than 1.5 million people with our website.

### **Our Mission**

Prevent the sexual abuse of children by mobilizing adults, families and communities to take actions that protect children before they are harmed.

### **Our Vision**

Children grow up free of trauma from any form of violence including sexual abuse and exploitation.

## OUR PHILOSOPHY

Stop It Now! was founded on the belief that adults are in the best position to keep children safe from sexual abuse. We value and support the work of others to talk with and teach children about their bodies, and what to do if someone tries to hurt them. But unless adults take this on in a meaningful way, nothing will change.

By adults, we mean parents, family members, neighbors, community members and professionals of all types. We further believe that people who might sexually abuse a child have an important role to play in prevention. This is bigger than individual responsibility; our communities, organizations, and institutions must make the same commitment to children's safety. No other program has ever directly challenged ALL adults, in all environments, to take full responsibility for ending sexual abuse.

Challenging individuals to hold themselves accountable is an important and bold first step towards stopping the sexual abuse of children. But it is not enough. We must broaden the notion of adult responsibility to inspire families and communities to push for a corresponding change in societal attitudes and government policies. As a society, we can't identify effective solutions until we have the courage to face the fact that children can be and are hurt by people we care about.

If we want to create a safe climate for children, we are obligated to care about and help every person seeking help to be responsible.

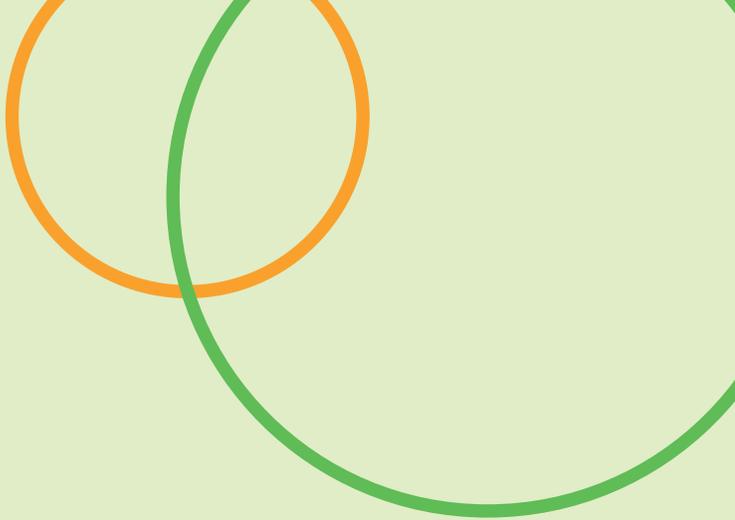
## OUR PROGRAMS

**Help Services** – In addition to our Helpline (1.888.PREVENT), our Help Services provide email and chat services, an interactive Online Help Center, and our "Ask Now!" advice column.

**Prevention Education** – Our prevention education services creates and provides, often for free, tools and materials that are available through our website and shared in trainings, media campaigns and other events. These resources help laypeople and professionals alike recognize opportunities to take protective actions.

**Technical Assistance and Training (Circles of Safety)** – Our Circles of Safety training and consulting services are available to professionals, youth-serving organizations, coalitions, and community-based programs on strategies, policies and practices for preventing child sexual abuse.

**Prevention Advocacy** - We partner with other sexual violence experts to advocate that child sexual abuse be addressed as a public health priority, encouraging increased investment in a full range of prevention strategies, including perpetration prevention. We also provide content expertise to media, policymakers and advocacy groups.



## OUR FOUNDING STORY

“When the people who have harmed are the same ones we depend upon and model ourselves after, then [we] must take time to craft a solution which stops the behavior and holds people accountable, but also holds the whole situation in a caring, community-centered embrace.”

– Fran Henry, 1992

Fran Henry founded Stop It Now! in 1992. A survivor of child sexual abuse, Fran had a unique vision of empowering adults and communities to prevent abuse before a child was ever harmed, rather than waiting for a crime to be committed, or a child to have the ability to report, or the system to have enough information and evidence to respond.

In 1992, public conversations about child sexual abuse were limited. When stories were covered in national media, they were generally cases of extreme violence of kidnapping, rape and murder by a stranger. Prevention programs were focused on teaching children to say “No!” and get help. This programming was important, but Fran recognized that it was only a partial solution. She believed that the enormous scale of the problem required adults to take responsibility for their own actions and the actions of others.

Fran’s visionary understanding of the complexities of prevention was due in part to her personal history: the person who abused her was her father, who she also loved and admired. She recognized that contemporary prevention programs did not account for familial sexual abuse – the majority of sexual

abuse – and would not have protected her. Although she courageously spoke up as an adult, she understood that the vast majority of child victims would not report their abuse while it was happening, not wanting their family to break up and fall apart.

To develop Now!’s programs, Fran reached out to experts in the field and hired staff to ask the difficult questions. They approached each of their target audiences: adults who had abused, these adults’ friends and families, and parents of children and teens who had problematic sexual behaviors.

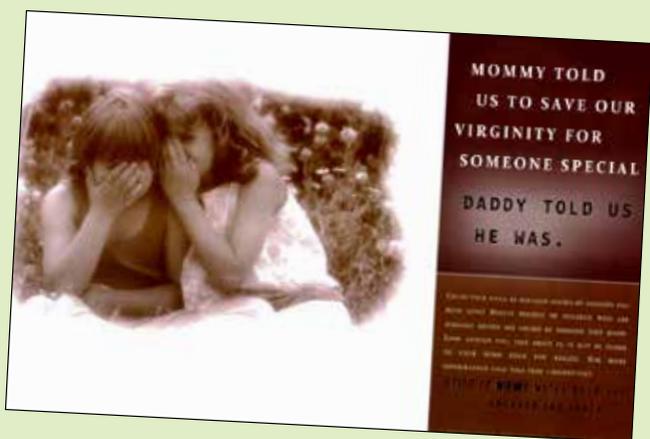
They asked:

- What would have made a difference?
- Who would you have listened to? What could they have said?
- Was there a time you would have heard these messages before anyone was harmed?

Now!’s staff gathered these findings and concluded that giving people information would not be enough; they would need someone to talk with, without shame. As a result, Now! developed resources that could help adults interrupt sexual abuse before a child was harmed.

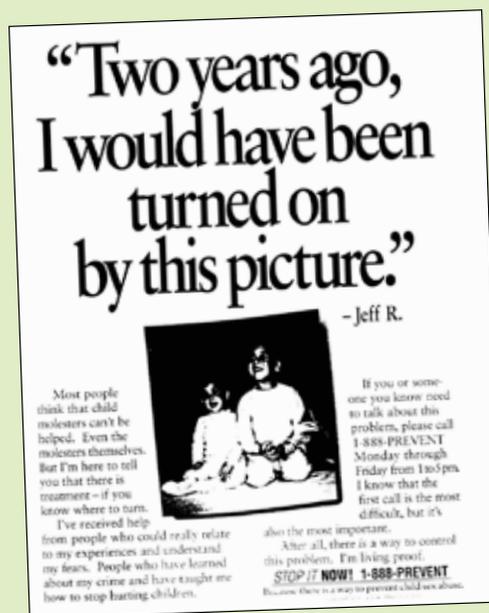
The groundbreaking materials created from these initial conversations include:

- A checklist of warning signs in adults that they may be at risk to abuse.
- *Let's Talk*, a guidebook about how to have difficult conversations about problematic sexual behaviors with people we know and love.
- The first helpline in the world committed to helping adults concerned about their own thoughts, feelings or behaviors and the adults who care about them and want to take action to prevent sexual abuse.
- A series of public service announcements to encourage conversations about child sexual abuse. (See examples from the 1990s below and to the right.)



This early work became a hallmark of Stop It Now!'s practice of asking tough questions, gathering previously undiscussed ideas and sharing the findings with important communities.

Our early work had significant impact on national policy and research. Founding members initiated and guided important conversations with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that led to child sexual abuse being recognized as a public health issue.



"Imagine a disease that affects one in four girls and one in six boys before they reach 18 ... Imagine what we, as a society, would do if such a disease existed. We would spare no expense. We would invest heavily in basic and applied research. We would devise systems to identify those affected and provide services to treat them. We would develop and broadly implement prevention campaigns to protect our children. Would we? Such a disease does exist – it's called child sexual abuse."

– James A. Mercy, PhD, 1999 <sup>24</sup>

Dr. Mercy is a CDC researcher and was an early board member for Stop It Now!



## The Stop It Now! Helpline

The Helpline is the heart of our prevention programs, and it is a working symbol of the philosophy and practice that makes Stop It Now! unique in the field of sexual abuse prevention.

1.888.PREVENT

## OVERVIEW

From our first caller in 1995, a man identifying himself only as John and asking for help before he hurt a child, the Helpline has given everyone intent on preventing sexual abuse the permission to speak up and ask sometimes very personal and vulnerable questions about a topic that is often viewed as unspeakable. Many people who contact the Helpline tell us that they have never voiced their concerns out loud before.

The Helpline offers accessible and confidential information, guidance and support to anyone who is concerned about their own feelings or someone else's sexualized feelings or behaviors toward children, worried that a child has been sexually harmed, or simply seeking information about preventing abuse. With every caller, our priority is the safety of every child. We focus on accountability; supporting every caller to do what they can do to make sure that a child is not harmed. We ask every caller to take responsibility for their own actions and behaviors, emphasizing that our focus is on keeping children safe from sexual harm.

Accountability strongly contributes to healing and recovery after sexual abuse. It also supports prevention. When adults – all adults – can hold themselves accountable to learn more, take protective actions and reach out for help when arranged, we can make the shift to safer, harm-free environments for children. Our Helpline approaches every person with help to be accountable and responsible, whether this means participating in safety planning, seeking help when there are warning signs, speaking up when children are vulnerable, or even as the discovery of sexual abuse is made.

The core of the Helpline's success is in the personalized care, attention and resources we provide. We take a journey with our callers as they tell their story, and we offer expert insights, coach them on next steps and guide them through the information, resources and tools we and others have provided them. We work with each individual to identify the best action based on their situation, skills, relationships and safety. We motivate callers to make a difference and to be accountable.

As a result of our success, we served as the model for international efforts, such as Stop it Now! UK and Ireland, Stop it Now! The Netherlands and Stop it Now! Belgium, and have trained Helplines in Grenada, Columbia, Kenya and Nigeria.

**"If I had known that the Helpline existed, I might not be in prison today. I didn't know where to turn for help before I hurt a kid."**      *– Man convicted of sexually abusing children*

## OUR STAFF

The Helpline is staffed by skilled and experienced social service professionals, who are also educators and advocates with backgrounds in child development, healthy sexual development in children, interpersonal violence intervention and prevention, and/or trauma responses.

Every staff member undergoes comprehensive training, with at least 80 hours of instruction and a 90-day observation phase. Staff remain current and informed through ongoing training, regular research and literature review and, by consulting with other experts in intervention, treatment and violence prevention as needed.

## OUR BELIEFS

We are defined by our mission to do everything we can to keep every child safe from sexual abuse. We see hope as fundamental to preventing sexual abuse. Hope allows someone to consider that they can be the one to take necessary actions to keep a child safe. While each situation is unique, we seek to provide hope to every caller through:

**RESPECT** – Every caller is treated with respect and compassion. We do not use labels or make personal judgments, regardless of whether a person has experienced abuse or has sexually harmed a child.

**ELIMINATION OF SHAME** – Every caller is given a safe place to speak freely about uncomfortable and difficult feelings, especially shame. We support callers and help them move past challenging emotions, so they are confident in taking next steps to help children and themselves live safe and healthy lives.

**EMPOWERMENT** – Every caller receives customized guidance and support that equips them to prevent child sexual abuse and protect children. Every adult is encouraged to act compassionately and to always hold themselves and each other accountable for their actions.

**EMPHASIS ON ACTION** – Every caller is asked to identify the action steps they are willing to take to keep children safe.

## THE ROLE OF CONFIDENTIALITY

Confidentiality is the foundation of the Helpline's ability to provide a forum for open, honest discussion. Our conversations serve as a drawing board where people can learn, explore and work out possible strategies to address concerns.

Callers repeatedly note that being able to speak freely, anonymously and without fear of judgment allows them to fully sort through their feelings, fears and concerns. By minimizing their discomfort, we equip adults to listen to their own gut response, and to identify the steps they can take to prevent abuse.

Our counselors clearly explain to callers that our confidentiality has limits. If we are given identifying information about a crime happening or when we know that a child is in danger, we act as mandated reporters and reach out to authorities. Although callers are always urged to file reports directly on their own, the Helpline may offer assistance and support to conference in the appropriate reporting authority. We also help adults who want to turn themselves in, to keep a child safe and to get help.

### LANGUAGE MATTERS

How we talk about people directly impacts how people feel about themselves. As part of the Now! philosophy and beliefs, we have chosen to be very specific about the language we use when we talk about child sexual abuse prevention. **Whenever possible, we use person-first language that describes behavior – which can and does change – rather than use words that label people, which suggests permanence.**

For example, we reference the “adult who has sexually abused children” instead of labeling someone is a pedophile, perpetrator, rapist, sex offender or abuser. Similarly, we focus on the “adult who was sexually abused as a child” rather than labeling someone a victim or survivor. However, for many people, the word “survivor” does feel right for them to describe their own relationship to the abuse they experienced, and so we have chosen to use “survivor” often in this report to honor this.

Even in small ways, this language encourages callers to see themselves and others as whole, complex people. We reinforce their agency and ability to feel hopeful, confident and capable of living a safe, healthy life.

## HOW THE HELPLINE IS UNIQUE

### **We are singularly focused on child sexual abuse.**

We are the only U.S. Helpline to respond exclusively, comprehensively and professionally to questions and concerns specific to child sexual abuse and preventing sexual harm from people who are in many diverse roles and relationships with youth, of all perspectives about all stages of prevention and intervention.

The Helpline is a window offering a unique view into real-life stories and experiences. These are stories that are rarely if ever told to anyone. These are not stories heard on the news about famous people or big institutions, but the stories and concerns within families. These 23,000 conversations inform all of Now!'s prevention and training efforts, as well as our research and discussions among professionals. These first-hand stories keep us current, knowledgeable and inspired about what individuals, families and communities are doing to keep children safe – and what they need in order to overcome the barriers to prevention.

With our 360-degree view of the issue, we offer a perspective that no one else offers – for each and every person. We teach skills, practice conversations and outline clear actions adults can take to protect children and prevent children, youth and adults from sexually harming.



**The Helpline is a window offering a unique view into real-life stories and experiences.**

## HOW THE HELPLINE IS UNIQUE

### We are a helpline, not a hotline.

The Helpline is not considered an emergency response service, as 911 or state-run child abuse reporting hotlines are, and we offer more than information and referrals, as in a 211 service. Although we are here for many people during one of the most devastating times in their lives, there are many ways that we set ourselves apart from crisis hotlines:

- **We meet people where they are in preventing, suspecting or responding to child sexual abuse.** Talking about child sexual abuse is difficult, and for some it is nearly impossible. We understand the barriers people experience and respect that there is not necessarily a best practice that works for everyone. We work with our callers to identify their needs, their strengths and resources and then work with them to develop their next steps.
- **Our callers don't always need emergency responders.** We recognize that not everyone needs to or is ready to involve authorities or professionals in their concerns. We describe their options and resources, encouraging action to protect children and preparing them for acknowledging the barriers in these complicated, sensitive issues. When a person contacting the Helpline does talk about an immediate crisis or a child in any danger, they are encouraged to immediately notify the authorities.
- **We prevent perpetration.** Preventing sexual abuse has to include resources for both youth and adults who are at risk of sexually harming a child or who have engaged in sexually harmful behaviors. Prevention must also include support and resources for those adults calling about another adult or a youth, with concerns that the adult or youth could harm a child. We provide a lifeline for people who want to address their own feelings and behaviors before a child is ever harmed and, whether they're calling about themselves or someone they know, we help them find resources and support.

"You are my first link to anything positive happening for my family. I have talked to so many people, and this is the first time I really feel that somebody understands and is really trying to help."  
– Grandparent seeking support and resources

## HOW THE HELPLINE IS UNIQUE

### We use a compassionate, myth-busting approach.

Many Helpline callers – including those with concerns about their own thoughts – contact us with preconceived notions of sexual abuse and myths about those who abuse. It is vital to dispel these myths, which are often barriers to people taking action and reaching out for further help.

**FACT: The majority of people who sexually abuse children are people the child and most often the family knows, trusts and loves.** While we hear predominantly in the media about famous, powerful adults who have sexually abused children, most often those who have abused are parents, relatives, friends, siblings – people who may also have loving relationships with the child and family.

**FACT: Labeling people who are at risk to or who have sexually abused children as “monsters” makes it nearly impossible to help.** If we think of these individuals who struggle with their attractions as monsters, we create our own walls that make it difficult to see what may be happening in our own home, families or communities.

Further, when media coverage characterizes adults or older youth who harm children as monsters, other adults have an even harder time recognizing warning signs in behaviors of close family members, friends and other trusted community members.

Labeling anyone as a monster can become a barrier that can prevent us from reaching out with help and resources. We cannot successfully prevent perpetration if we cannot recognize someone we love as being at risk to harm a child, because we think only “monsters” or “bad people” abuse children. And if we believe that no one we care about could be this type of monster, warning signs and prevention opportunities are missed.

**FACT: Children are sexual beings.** When we avoid or deny children's sexual behaviors, we miss opportunities to support healthy sexual development and to address concerns. At the same time, we must take youth's harmful behaviors seriously and within the context of sexual development. We can have conversations with concerned parents and caregivers so they understand normative sexual development in their child and can promote healthy boundaries with their child. And we can prepare them to respond to early warning signs in their child.

## HOW THE HELPLINE IS UNIQUE

### We talk with people concerned about their own behaviors and with the people who know and often love them.

From its founding, Now!'s Helpline has sought to compassionately provide resources and information to people who are concerned about their own behaviors, including those who have abused a child. We know that when adults are held accountable and provided with help and compassionate understanding, they make choices to act safely. We believe in addressing obstacles and inspiring hope, so those who might otherwise sexually harm a child will seek out help and will act responsibly to keep children safe.

Recent research shows that providing services to individuals with an attraction to children (or more broadly, those at risk to abuse a child) in order to help manage their behaviors is an important part of sexual abuse prevention.<sup>20,25,26</sup> By focusing on the needs of this population, Now! can offer an opportunity to access services or resources in a compassionate, safe, and anonymous environment – while continuing to hold people accountable.

The Helpline is a rare resource for family members, colleagues and others to talk about their concerns. The importance of being listened to and feeling supported enables these people to do and say something, and that may be to make a report of sexual abuse.

While we don't know why every incident of sexual abuse happens, thanks to the Helpline, we do know that adults will look for help to become a safe person, a person who isn't at risk to cause any child sexual harm.

## A HELPLINE COUNSELOR'S EXPERIENCE

Taking calls from adults who could pose a risk to children is possible because I know that speaking directly to them can hopefully prevent that adult from harming again or at all. There are so many positive benefits from encouraging all adults to take responsibility.

When I'm asked how it is that I can speak to someone who may have harmed a child or potentially could, I share this Cherokee story: *A wise grandfather talks with his grandson about every person's internal "bad wolf" and "good wolf." The grandson wanted to know which of the wolves showed itself and was the face of the person. The grandfather replied, "Whichever one you feed."*



### **I believe that my help is food for the good wolf.**

Every adult who calls the Helpline about their own risk in sexually abusing children was in agony. Every single one. I hear their pain and desperation. I have heard numerous times from adults who said that they would rather kill themselves than hurt a child. I have never heard an adult "brag" or talk about their thoughts, feelings or behaviors regarding sexually abusing a child with bravado, disconnection or even pride. Every caller wants help so that a child is protected.

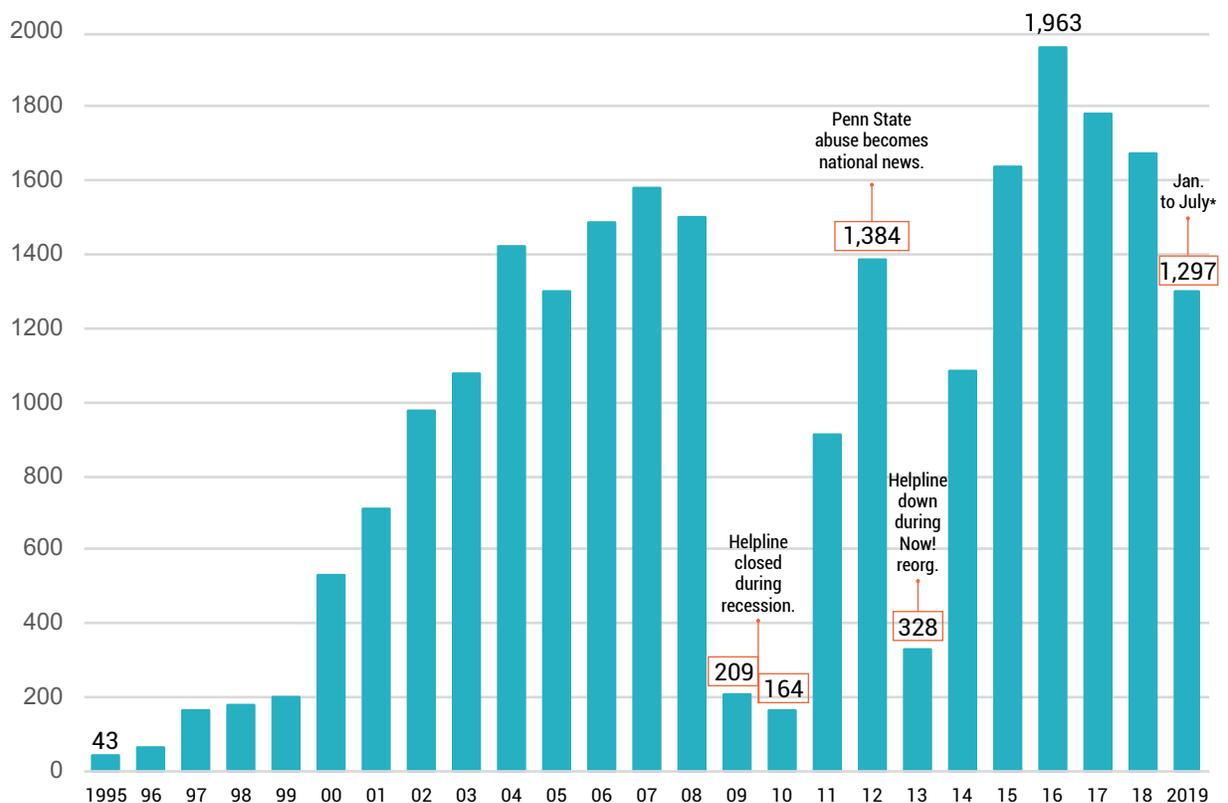
# 23,000 CONVERSATIONS ABOUT CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE AND PREVENTION

The saying “If you build it, they will come” proves accurate in the case of the Helpline. We have watched the numbers of people contacting the Helpline grow, and in 2018, we responded to 1,672 requests for personal help – more inquiries than in our first five years combined. Since that first phone call, we have responded to 23,682 requests for help, and we have grown from a single toll-free phone line to multiple access points through email, chat, social media and letters.

At the end of 2008, the U.S. economic downturn resulted in the loss of many of our individual donors, and the Helpline closed temporarily. However, even during that period, people continued to contact Now! via email seeking help. And again, during a brief closure for reorganization in 2013, worried adults still reached out to us, and volunteers responded to as many inquiries as they could.

As high-profile cases of sexual abuse become public knowledge through media coverage, our Helpline sees an increase in the number of individuals seeking help.

## Total Helpline Contacts by Year



Total helpline contacts, 1995 to July 2019 (n=23,682). The 2019 total reflects January to July 2019. We are on a trajectory for this to be our highest number of contacts yet!

## WAYS TO CONTACT THE HELPLINE



**PHONE**  
1.888.PREVENT



**EMAIL**  
helpline@stopitnow.org



**CHAT**  
stopitnow.org/chat



**SOCIAL**  
facebook.com/stopitnow

## HOW PEOPLE REACH OUT

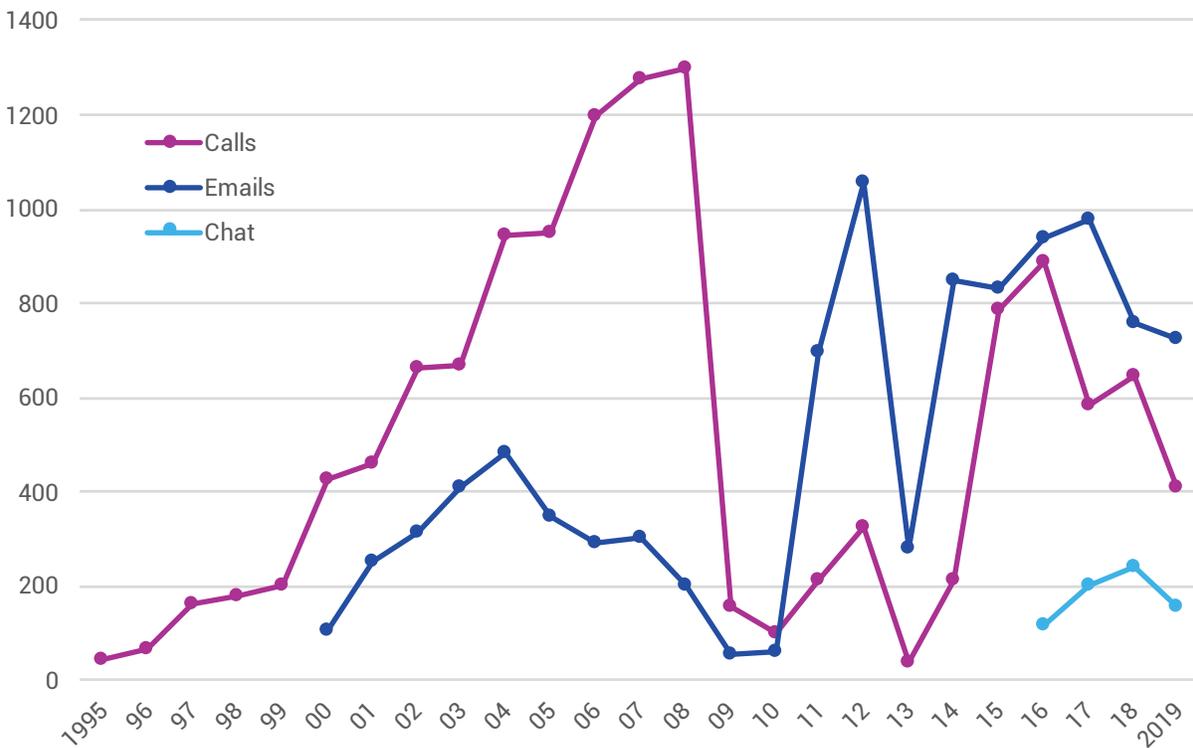
Communication has changed drastically in the last 24 years, and Now!'s Helpline has improved and expanded so adults get the information they need. When the phone lines became temporarily unavailable in 2011, concerned adults sought assistance through increased email inquiries – even without any marketing, and this portal continued to grow and now is the most used access point for Helpline inquiries. In 2012, we received our first request via social media, and in 2014 we added chat services.

With each new contact method, we have learned how to continue having conversations that build connections, show compassion and drive action, while demonstrating the unique features of the comprehensive Helpline Services. Phone calls allow for a conversation, and often the Helpline can better assess barriers that a caller is facing. Emails allow us to create detailed responses, including links to resources that can be shared and re-read. Chat is a different pace, both allowing our Helpline to be in live dialog and share links and resources that can later be referenced. All of these, plus our growing social media and our existing letters, continue to instruct us on best practices to encourage adults seeking help to take next steps.

Total Contacts by Access Point	
Calls	12,895
Emails	9,942
Chats	718
Letters	78
Social Media	49
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>23,682</b>

## HOW PEOPLE REACH OUT

### Helpline Growth through Changing Technology



Contacts by calls, emails and chats, 1995 to July 2019 (n=22,425).

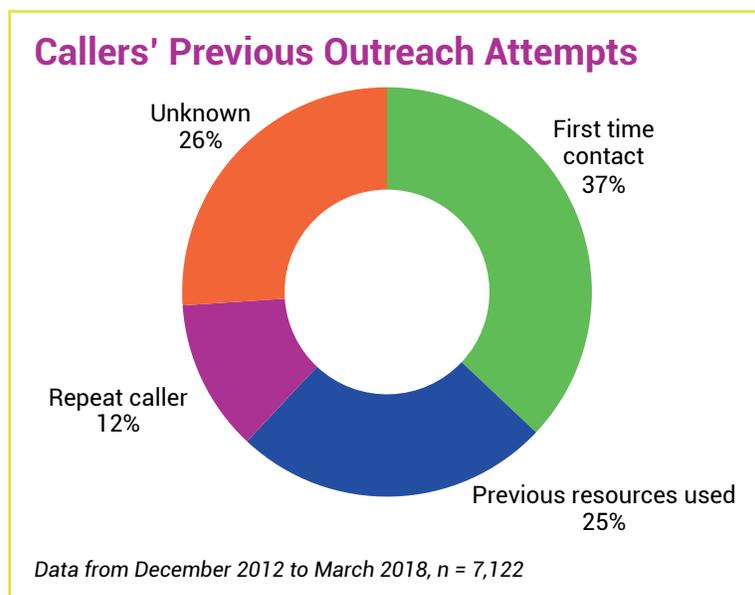
The increase in calls that culminates in 2008 represented our peak staffing and operating hours, allowing us to field the most calls and steady stream of emails. In 2009, the economic recession hit, leading to closure of the Helpline and staff layoffs. Without a working phone service, concerned adults began reaching out via email in record numbers, and former Helpline staff volunteered their time to reply to emails as they could. By 2011, emails surpassed phone calls in popularity (698 emails to 214 phone calls). Still, each new contact method expands our reach to new audiences.

"I have emailed before ... Your response was very uplifting. I printed it out and read it daily. Thank you."  
– Father of a child who had been abused

## HOW PEOPLE REACH OUT

It is vital that prevention resources are easily located and accessed. **The majority of our callers (77%) find the Helpline through searching the internet for help for questions about child sexual abuse.\*** Helpline callers report reaching out after first visiting the website and viewing content such as “Warning Signs in Children of Sexual Abuse” and “Frequently Asked Questions.” They recognized that they needed more in-depth guidance to sort out their situation.

For over one third of our callers (37%), Now! is the first step to get help. Another 25% tried other resources – such as law enforcement, social services or even personal friends and family members – before contacting us. 12% of our users are repeat callers, contacting us again to follow up on their initial situation.



\*Unless otherwise stated, the remaining data cited in this report is from the reporting period of December 2012 to March 2018. This time period reflects comprehensive tracking and reporting capabilities through Now!, and it gives timely insights into how callers use the Helpline. See more in the Appendix, page 66.

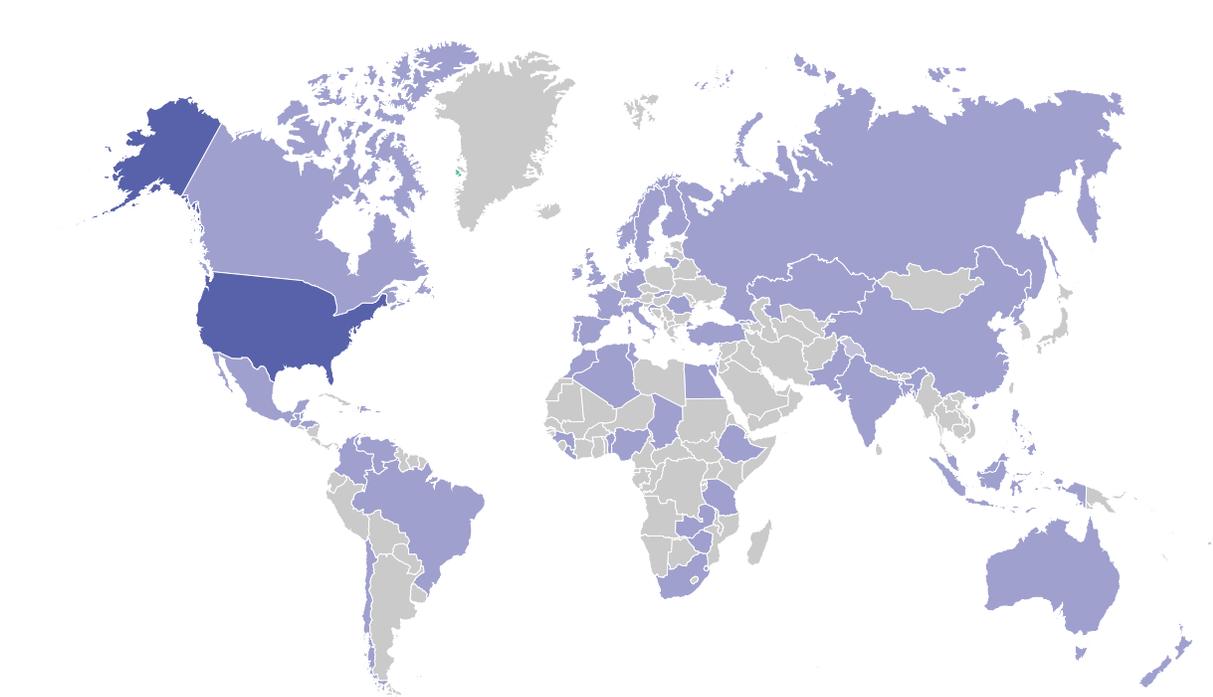
## HOW PEOPLE REACH OUT

### Our Global Reach

The Helpline was initially created as part of a Vermont pilot program. However, it fit an important need and rapidly became a national resource. As a result of a growing internet presence and a need for a resource such as ours, Now! also became an international service with minimal marketing.

Stop It Now! has heard from every state in the country, as well as Puerto Rico, and our international audience is growing. Between December 2012 and March 2018, 10% of the Helpline audience was international. Canada and the U.K. comprised over 50% of our international inquiries. The remaining contacts came from every continent and included Israel, South Africa, Pakistan, the Philippines and Thailand.

Many of these international contacts reach out because they do not have local, confidential resources; some fear being arrested or having children taken away by as a result of their asking questions. The unique, confidential services that we provide are essential across cultures. At every opportunity, Now! bridges the gaps in culture, language and resources to provide guidance and support





# Our Callers

## OUR CALLERS

At the start, the Helpline was a resource primarily for adults seeking help for their own behaviors and for the adults who had concerns about other adults' and children's sexual behaviors. As awareness of Stop It Now! grew over the last 24 years, the identities, the roles and the needs of our callers began to expand.

With so few resources available, more and more people found us when they were looking for help about what was often considered "unspeakable" – addressing worries about children's sexual safety. Today, the people who contact us fall into four primary identity groupings:

### 1. ADULTS IN BYSTANDER ROLES

People who: have questions about preventing sexual abuse; are aware of a situation that requires safety prevention steps to protect a child from sexual abuse; know an adult or child who was sexually abused; or know someone who demonstrates warning signs and/or problematic sexual behavior.

### 2. PEOPLE AT RISK TO ABUSE OR WHO HAVE ABUSED

People who disclose their own behaviors or thoughts that put children and youth at risk for sexual abuse. While adults are the target audience, we also hear from youth who seek help with their own thoughts and behaviors involving younger children.

### 3. SURVIVORS

People who were sexually abused as children.

### 4. OTHER

A subset of contacts with inquiries about children's sexual safety who either do not identify their relationship to a concerning situation or are seeking general information and resources, such as professionals or students.

"You have been so helpful. Now I can hang up the phone and cry."

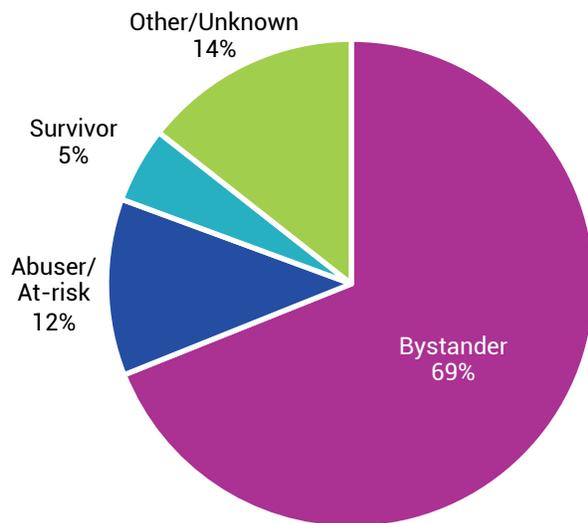
– *Woman concerned over her brother's actions*

## OUR CALLERS

In all of our activities, our primary focus is to offer tools and guidance to prevent sexual abuse before anyone is harmed. We often hear from adults who have a feeling that something is not quite right but are uncertain whether abuse is happening and what to do. We navigate each situation by talking about their concerns and translating what they've observed into warning signs and possible actions. If they know or strongly suspect that a child has been sexually abused, we talk with them about reporting, what is involved, what they can expect, their fears and ultimately, how this difficult action in the present can help a child and family heal over time.

More than half of callers reach out with a suspicion or concern about abuse, asking for more information on whether there is a child being abused, how to prevent possible abuse and/or how to respond to the warning signs. Forty-four percent of callers reach out with certainty of abuse. Three percent of our callers reach out expressly with questions about preventing abuse before there are any concerns or warning signs, wanting to be sure that they are doing everything they can to protect a child.

### Callers' Identities



December 2012 to March 2018, n=7,122

### Callers' Presenting Concerns

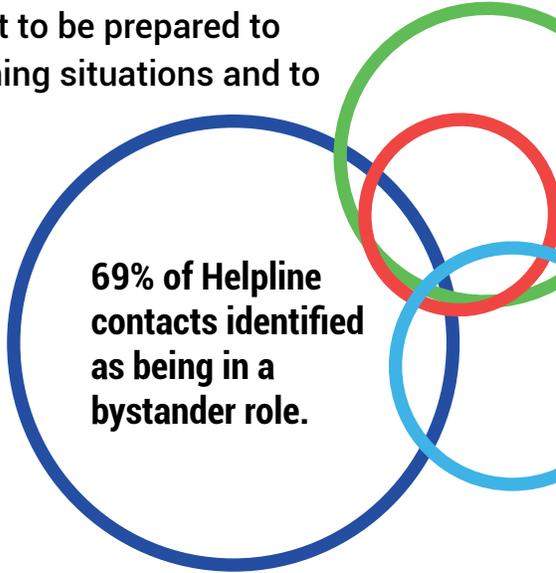


Contacts with known presenting concerns, December 2012 to March 2018, n=6,267.

## ADULTS IN BYSTANDER ROLES

All adults can be in a bystander role when it comes to children's sexual safety. They contact the Helpline to find information and support to be prepared to act before anyone is harmed, to intervene during concerning situations and to respond to sexual abuse.

These individuals share one thing; they have questions or are concerned about a child, adolescent or adult they know and care about – and they want to know what they can do. In nearly every case, **adults in bystander roles are in a position to act to protect children**. We encourage them to learn more about sexual development in children and teens, create the safest environment possible through safety planning, or respond to warning signs.



**69% of Helpline contacts identified as being in a bystander role.**

### Why They Call

Adults in bystander roles contact the Helpline because they have questions about children's sexual development, concerns about a child's safety, concerns about how an adult or older child is acting around a child they know, or concerns about a sexual abuse situation they are aware of. Their questions sound like:

- Is my preschooler's behavior normal or a sign that he has been sexually abused?
- I'm uncomfortable with how my boyfriend acts around my daughter. Are these signs of abuse?
- How do I respond to my child and her best friend playing games that include sexual content?
- What should I do if a child I know told me about being sexual abused?
- My niece abused her cousin, where can I get help for her?
- How do I talk to a close friend about their overly mature and suggestive comments directed to my daughter?
- How do I keep the children in my after school program safe from sexual harm?
- How do I report suspected sexual abuse?
- I just heard that a registered sex offender moved into my neighborhood. Should I be concerned?
- My teen son watched his younger sister shower. What should I do?

**"Talking anonymously to the Helpline gave me the practice and courage to speak to the people who could help me to make my house safe again."**

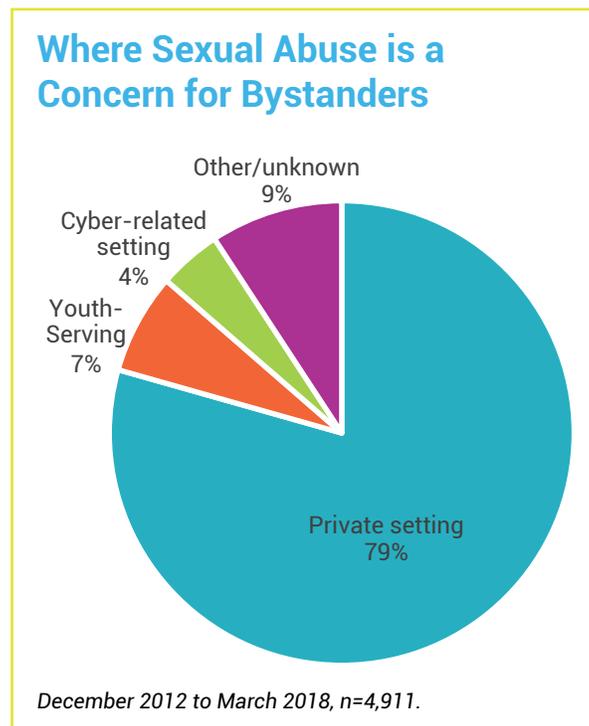
*– Aunt following up on a disclosure in her family*

## ADULTS IN BYSTANDER ROLES

**The deeply personal and private nature of these callers' situations is exactly what makes our Helpline vital and unique. We create a learning environment like no other, providing us with the real stories about abuse in families, homes and local communities – not just the headlines.**

The people reaching out to the Helpline are asking for help in private, unpublicized situations that range from asking for help in understanding worrisome behaviors to responding to evidence of sexual abuse.

The majority of individuals we speak to are worried about a child's and/or adult's behaviors in the most intimate of environments: their homes and the homes of others (79%). Additionally, our callers reach out with questions about safety in public settings that include educational, faith-based and other youth-serving organizations (7%), as well as concerns about cyber-related settings (4%). While incidents of abuse in these settings can often be on a larger scale and involve more victims and families, the majority of sexual abuse happens in homes.



**"Thank you so much for taking on this task. Sometimes families think they can do this on their own, but they do need help." – Grandmother seeking help for her grandchildren**

## ADULTS IN BYSTANDER ROLES

● ● ● SUBJECT: HELP FOR MY DAUGHTER

TO: HELPLINE@STOPITNOW.ORG

I'm not sure if my daughter's coach sexually abused her, and I am so terrified of what to do next.

My daughter is almost 10, and she told me last week that her tennis coach pushed the end of her tennis racket to make it touch her private parts. She said she was shocked and just started at him, and he said "That was an accident, but this one is on purpose," and "booped" her again on her private parts!!!

I am trying so hard not to freak out. But now I remember that her coach once told me that her pink socks were "sexy" (SHE IS 9!!!!!!!!!!), and I'm just running through my mind some other stuff that, in retrospect, isn't right.

I know I have to do something. But what do I even do? Should I talk to the coach alone? Or call the manager of the program? Should I ask other parents? Please help!!

Our Helpline acknowledged first how wonderful it was that this daughter told her mom what happened and that she was taking this so seriously. We confirmed that these behaviors were warning signs that absolutely required a strong response, and that it was reasonable that his actions be reported and investigated. Very likely, his actions were in violation of the tennis program's policies and code of conduct.

We recommended that mom speak to the manager, informing them of this coach's behaviors and asking about the program's policies and their response.

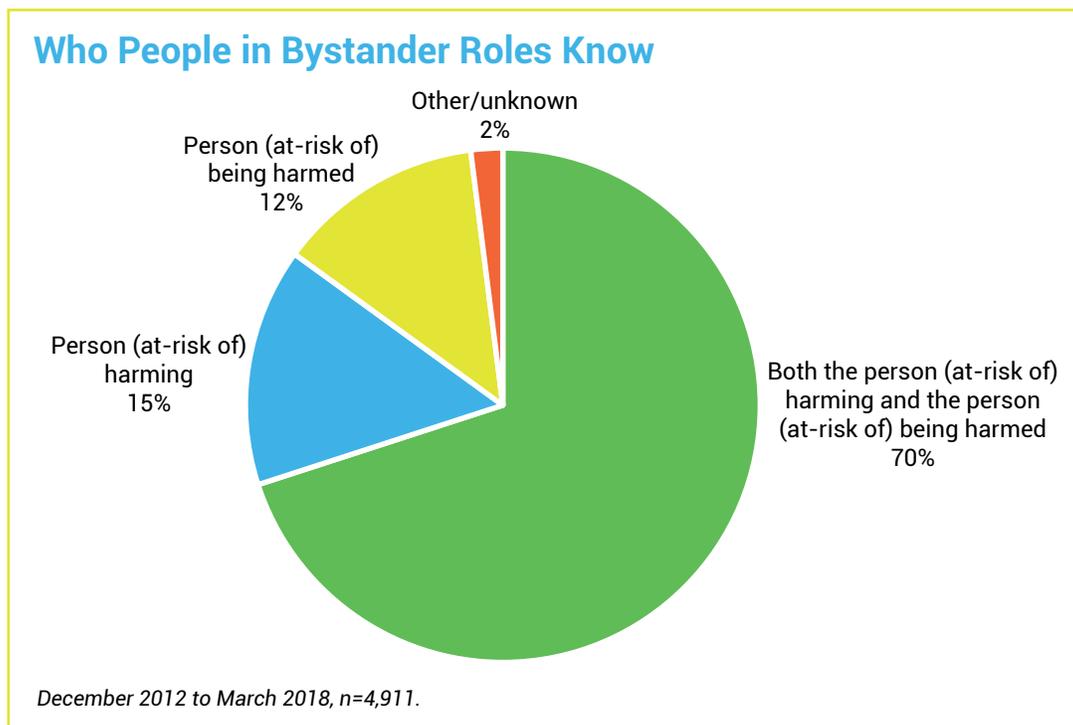
We provided her resource guides to help her feel prepared, and we talked about her own support system, encouraging her to bring an ally to the meeting. Finally, we checked in on how her daughter was doing, identifying possible supports if needed.

## ADULTS IN BYSTANDER ROLES

### What are the personal situations that people contact the Helpline about?

Most people in bystander roles – 70% – know **both** the child at risk of being abused **and** the person whose behavior concerns them. They share with us that their personal relationships create fear and uncertainty about what impact their actions will mean for everyone involved. This contributes to the complexity of sexual abuse and creates barriers for bystanders to take protective steps. They share concerns protecting the child and are worried about the possible damage if they are wrong. They talk about caring for both, and their concern that if they are right, how can they take next steps without creating more pain.

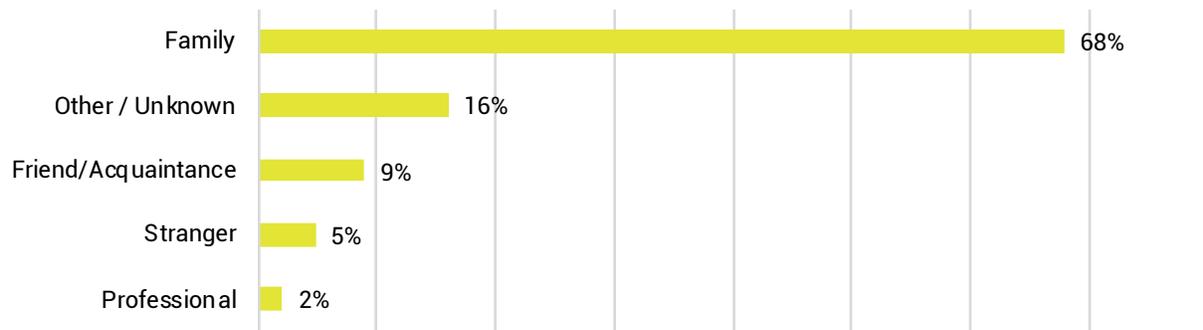
Calling the Helpline gives them a chance to talk about these decisions with someone and begins to break them out of their own feelings of isolation. We recognize the fears and confusion that come along with wanting to help both people, and we guide every interaction with a clear focus and priority on protecting children.



## ADULTS IN BYSTANDER ROLES

We speak most often to family members – immediate and extended. As bystanders, they are often the first to recognize possible signs of sexual abuse in a child or be told by a child that they have been harmed. **Sixty-eight percent of adults in bystander roles contacting the Helpline are family members**, many of whom see warning signs early and are unsure about what to do. Most of them never thought that they would have to address sexual abuse.

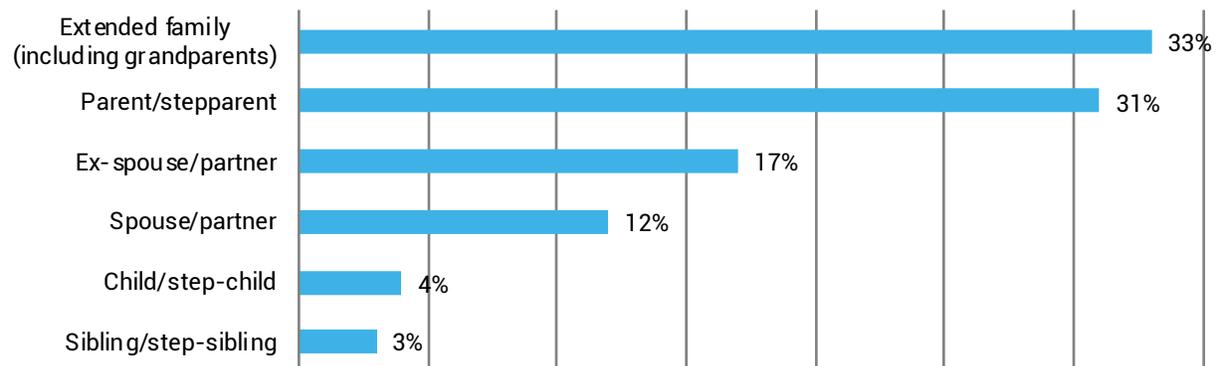
### Relationship of Bystander to the Child at Risk or Being Sexually Abused



December 2012 to March 2018, n=4,911.

Just as family members are most likely to notice a child at risk or being abused, family members are the first to raise concerns about an adult or child's behavior. **Eighty-five percent of bystanders who contact the Helpline know the person abusing or with worrisome behaviors. Of these, over 50% are related to the person.** For the majority of these relationships, the bystanders are parents/stepparents or other extended family members.

### Familial Relationships of Bystanders to Person Abusing/at Risk



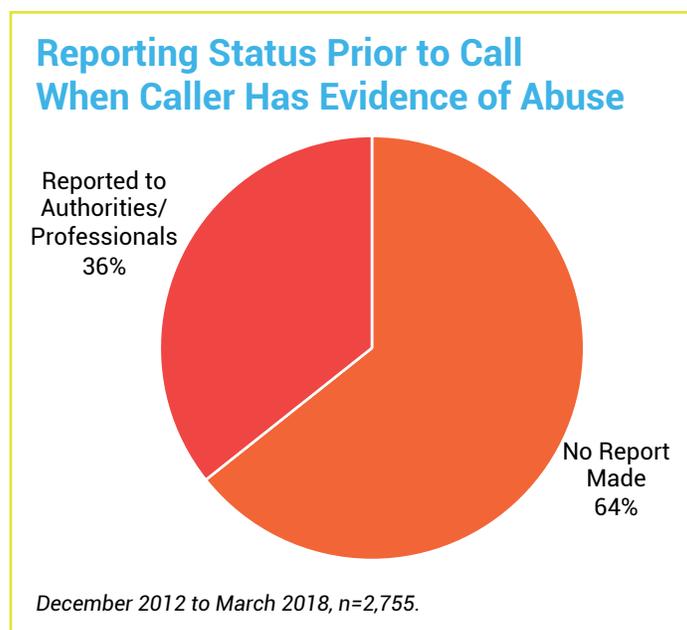
Family members of those at-risk to abuse or who have abused. December 2012 to March 2018, n=2,579.

## ADULTS IN BYSTANDER ROLES

### Reporting

Responding to either suspicions of sexual abuse or the discovery that a child was sexually abused can seem “simple” to an outsider, but for most families, it is often a difficult and weighted decision. Callers are hesitant to report for various reasons, from fears of breaking up a family, to concerns that nothing can or will be done, to worries that there has been a mistake and some disbelief that sexual abuse just couldn't have happened. In many cases, our callers have not yet spoken to anyone else about their concerns or observations, fearing that if they talk about what they've seen or learned, they will become part of the stigma of sexual abuse.

Of the 2,755 inquiries we have received about cases with some evidence of sexual abuse, more than two-thirds have been from people who reached out to us before a report to the appropriate authorities had been made. We are a **first lifeline** and guide for these concerned people, many of whom are scared and need help to make a report and to more fully understand the next steps they should take. While not everyone who contacts the Helpline expresses their intent to report suspected sexual abuse, we help them overcome barriers to taking preventive steps, emphasizing reporting as a process to protect a child and get all involved professional help. We walk them through the reporting process and what to expect, and we provide the hope and encouragement they need to take the most protective steps for their individual situation.



When a child or adolescent has disclosed to a caller, or when the caller suspects sexual abuse, the Helpline will do whatever is needed to help them make that report. This includes giving them the correct authority to call, effective talking points and preparation for what will likely happen next. We also help the caller identify their key support people, ways to help the child's healing process and safety planning moving forward.

## ADULTS IN BYSTANDER ROLES

● ● ● SUBJECT: NEIGHBOR CREEPS ME OUT

TO: HELPLINE@STOPITNOW.ORG

My neighbor watches my girls (6 and 9 years old) in a way that makes me uncomfortable. He always seems to come outside when my girls are playing or waiting for the bus and starts talking to them. He doesn't even pay the same attention to his 7<sup>th</sup> grader when he is outside.

When he's offered my girls toys before, I've intervened to politely decline, which wasn't easy. But they're getting more independent and playing outside alone, and they don't want me hovering! And I can't just keep them inside.

I looked him up in the offender registry and didn't see anything, and maybe it's nothing sinister? But it creeps me out.

What can I do to protect my girls without scaring them? Any advice is greatly appreciated.

Our Helpline staff gave this mom resources to address the key issues she described: safety planning, warning signs in adults, and having difficult conversations. We identified specific safety planning steps for her family, and we suggested she identify any other neighbors with concerns, so she can build her support network. We explored a few strategies for communicating her concerns to the neighbor, emphasizing her safety plan and her involvement as an observant parent.

## ADULTS IN BYSTANDER ROLES

### Addressing children's behaviors

Talking about sexual behaviors between children is uncomfortable for many adults, and it brings up different concerns than those about an adult's sexual behaviors with children. Our callers on this issue voice their confusion about what is "normal" for a child at any given age and what behaviors are cause for concern.

The Helpline supports parents and other caregiving adults with accurate information about healthy sexuality development, consent, boundaries and relationships. Children are sexual beings, but their sexual behaviors are different from adults' sexual behaviors.

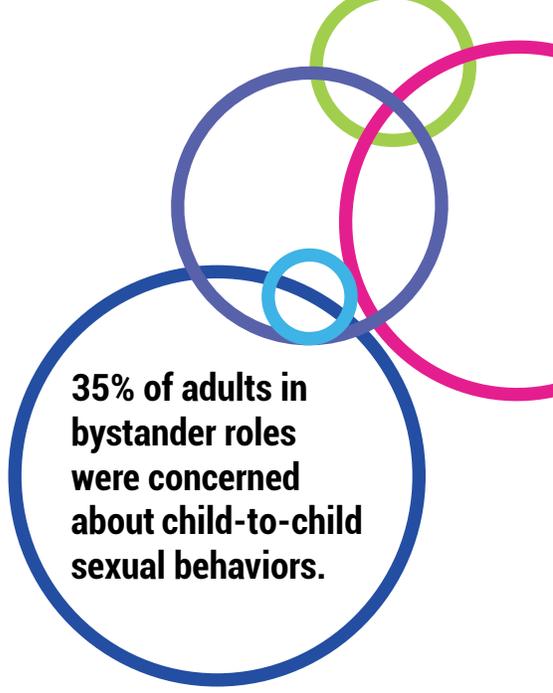
Thirty-five percent of bystander calls were primarily concerned about a child-to-child sexual behavior. Their concerns covered a broad range from children engaging in age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate primarily curiosity driven behaviors to those children instigating sexually harmful behaviors with another child. (December 2012 to March 2018, n=1,699.)

Four percent of calls about children's behaviors involved concerns generated by age-appropriate play and curiosity, that was both mutual and with limited power differences between the children. For example, a mom contacted the helpline after discovering her 4-year-old son playing "doctor" with his 3½-year-old cousin. She walked in on the children just as her son was putting his toy stethoscope up to his cousin's naked bottom, and she wondered if she could be concerned and how to respond. She described the kids as laughing and both seeing the game as fun, and she had never seen any similar behaviors between them or had previous concerns about their play.

With this caller as with every caller, the Helpline provided her information on safety planning and healthy sexual development to ensure that boundaries are reinforced, children's questions about sexual behaviors are answered and that caregiving adults feel prepared to respond to behaviors before significant warning signs that could lead to sexual harmful activities between children.

However, a significant number of Helpline callers (42%) sharing concerns about children's behaviors described a more than 3-year age gap between children or other power differential such as differences in size or cognitive abilities. Other features of child-to-child interactions described warning signs that included:

- Children's overly mature sexual activity (18%) with other children, raising questions of where the child(ren) learned the behavior.
- Children's threatening and coercive behaviors designed to persuade or even force another child to engage in harmful sexual behaviors (13%).



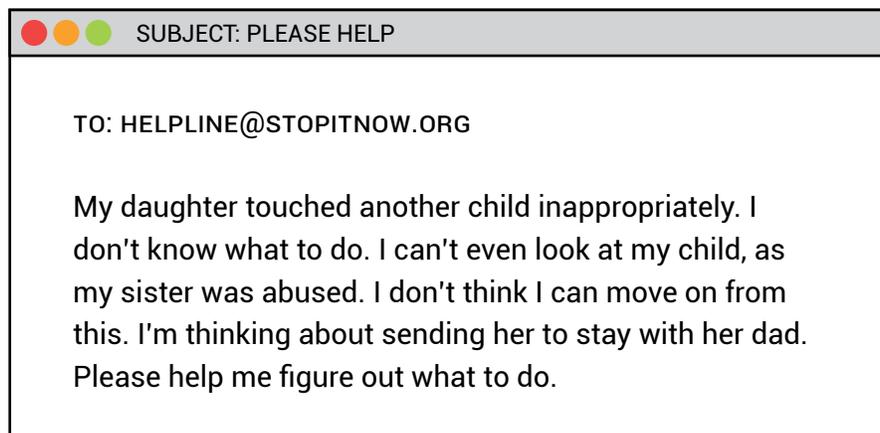
**35% of adults in bystander roles were concerned about child-to-child sexual behaviors.**

## ADULTS IN BYSTANDER ROLES – ADDRESSING CHILDREN'S BEHAVIORS

Children's sexual behaviors that raise warning signs and youth who have harmed another child require immediate attention and responses. Even if these behaviors are not "reportable" early intervention when there is reason for concern can change the lives of these children in a positive way. The Helpline provides bystanders with information and supportive legal, medical and educational resources. Most importantly, while emphasizing vigilant safety planning, bystanders are given hope that children can learn healthy and safe behaviors when professional help and support are available for all involved.

In 3% of Helpline cases involving child-to-child concerning behavior, legal outcomes were pending as charges were pressed against a child who sexually harmed another child.

A small number (4%) of bystanders calling about children's sexual behaviors are asking about age-appropriate healthy children's sexual behaviors such as playing "doctor" with a same-aged peer, that is mutual and infrequent.



The Helpline responded to this email with support and guidance for this mother and her daughter. We expressed understanding the difficult feelings she was having toward her daughter, and we emphasized the importance of having support for herself.

We recommended she talk to her daughter's primary physician and a therapist specializing in children's behavior. We described children's healthy sexual behaviors and concerning behaviors to provide the mom with a baseline, so she could better identify the concerns in her daughter's behaviors with others. Finally, we gave her overall safety planning strategies to help her daughter remain safe when around other children.

## ADULTS IN BYSTANDER ROLES

### What They Tell Us They Need

For anyone concerned about another's safety, we first acknowledge and appreciate their care and willingness to take steps to keep a child safe. The Helpline views these callers – often in unwanted and difficult roles – as heroes. They are bravely willing to act to keep a child safe.

When someone reaches out to the Helpline, they are taking a hopeful step. They share their experience and their needs. They have taught us that they need us to:

- Listen. Many callers have no one else to talk with, and having someone who cares about their concern – especially outside of the immediate nuclear family – is a huge factor in their and a child's resilience and protection.
- Direct them to relevant materials and resources both on our website and through other expert sources.
- Explore available protective actions they can take, identifying potential barriers and challenges.
- Emphasize the importance of their own support and allies to reduce the isolation often inherent in sexual safety planning and responses.
- Provide information and support about the reporting process, when needed.

For the parents, relatives and neighbors asking questions about age-appropriate sexual behaviors in children and preventing sexual abuse, we listen, validate and recommend preventive steps that will guide them to taking action, such as:

- Creating a family safety plan.
- Having conversations with children of all ages about healthy sexuality, boundaries and consent.
- Having conversations with other adults about what they can do to keep children and teens safe.
- Educating themselves about healthy sexual development and child sexual abuse.
- Modeling safe and healthy boundaries and behaviors as an adult.
- Addressing their own safety and well-being. Safe adults can better protect children.

For adults in bystander roles who know both the child and the person whose behaviors concern them, there may be many challenges in figuring how to respond. The Helpline recognizes that many people want to help both, and that they are most often scared and confused. In every interaction, our priority is to protect children.

**"I don't want him to destroy his life or anyone else's. I just want him to get help."  
– Father concerned about his teen son**

## PEOPLE WHO ARE AT RISK TO OR WHO HAVE ABUSED

The Helpline is available for both adults and youth who are worried about their own thoughts, feelings and behaviors toward a child. Our goal is always to keep children safe, and we hold every caller accountable and responsible to do so.

The Helpline recognizes what both research and experience tell us: there is no single reason why an adult, an adolescent or even another child would sexually abuse a child.<sup>27</sup> The reasons vary and include lack of healthy sexuality knowledge, trauma reactive responses, addiction issues, developmental delays, psychiatric disabilities and many others.

What is clear from these callers is that not one of them wants to harm a child. These callers also have very few supportive people or systems to help them. The Helpline is a vital tool so that these individuals can get help.

Our goal is to hold each person accountable for their behaviors and responsible for doing all they can to keep children safe. This can include reaching out for professional treatment, designing a personal safety plan, finding a support person who can ensure that they stay safe, identifying community support resources and potentially making a report if they have harmed a child in any way.

In 1995, the first year of the Helpline, 72% (31) of the inquiries received were from adults concerned about themselves. In the years since, the media, public policy, technology and social landscapes have changed considerably, and we have expanded to serve a more diverse audience: any adult with questions or concerns about child sexual abuse. Still, in the past five years, we have heard from 834 adults and youth concerned about themselves, representing 12% of our overall callers.



**12% of our callers are at risk to or have abused.**



**These callers tell us they do not want to harm a child.**

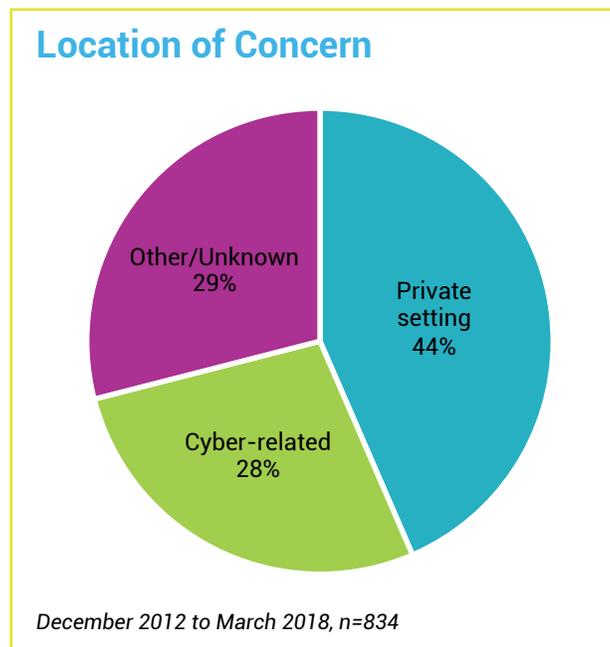
## PEOPLE WHO ARE AT RISK TO OR WHO HAVE ABUSED

### Who Calls

In addition to seeking help and support for unwanted feelings and thoughts, 10% of this Helpline audience concerned about their own behaviors also disclosed that they were survivors of child sexual abuse themselves. These callers are predominantly male (82%), with female callers making up 5% of calls and 13% of callers identities unknown.

Most of these callers are adults, though 47 youth contacted the Helpline with concerns about their thoughts and behaviors. We hope to expand our outreach to this group in the future. (See more in *The Future of the Helpline* on page 62.)

Like the majority of bystander inquiries, who are asking about concerns in the home, these callers also identify private homes as the most common location where they are concerned. The second most common reason to contact Now! is about their online behaviors, often viewing child sexual abuse imagery online.



"I don't know who you are, but whoever you are, thank you for listening and for not thinking I am a monster. You've done more for me than you can ever imagine."

– *Man worried about his thoughts*

## PEOPLE WHO ARE AT RISK TO OR WHO HAVE ABUSED

A man in his early 30s contacted Helpline, initially asking for general resources to help someone else. As our Helpline counselor used her intuition to dig deeper, the caller felt safe enough to share his real reason for calling:

"I'm worried how I'm feeling about my friend's young son. I am supposed to babysit him today, and I don't know if I can be around him without hurting him."

We emphasized the need for this child to stay safe and asked him to strategize to avoid being in a vulnerable situation with this child. Staff told him to cancel with his friend so that he is not alone with the child, then call us back.

"I told her I had the flu, but she has nowhere else to bring him, and she has to go to work. What can I do to be sure I don't hurt him? I am so scared."

The caller shared his confusion regarding his feelings for children, wanting to understand how relationships with children were harmful. Helpline staff explained children's development, and their inability to enter consensually into a sexual relationship. He indicated his own mental health issues might be contributing to his confusion, and he agreed that working with a specialist on his thoughts and feelings would be helpful.

We talked him through safety measures: having a friend come over, remaining in public places with the child, or asking a friend who knows his situation to call him throughout the afternoon to ensure he and the child were safe. We asked him to go to the ER if the urge to offend became unmanageable. We stressed the importance of getting professional help and referred him to treatment resources.

"Thank you so much. The last thing I want is to hurt him, and I wish more than anything that I didn't have these thoughts. All I want is for him to be safe. Thank you for everything. I'm not going to hurt him. And tomorrow I'm going to call someone about treatment."

With the Helpline's support, this man eventually talked to his mother, who helped him find a treatment provider. He contacted the Helpline several more times, providing updates about his progress in therapy and for ongoing encouragement and support to continue to focus on both his safety and on the need for children to be safe.

## PEOPLE WHO ARE AT RISK TO OR WHO HAVE ABUSED

### When They Call

More than half of all people calling with concerns about themselves (51%) describe being at a crossroad of knowing that their thoughts are putting them at risk to harm a child. They have not hurt a child, are committed to living harm-free, and are reaching out for help. Others are reaching out because they wonder if something they did, perhaps even decades in the past, was the source of sexual harm to a child, and they want to know how to be accountable now.

Over half (52%) of all those contacting the Helpline about their own sexual thoughts and/or behaviors towards children have tried other resources or services before reaching out to us. They may have been involved in the legal system or spoken with a therapist, but they say that resources are limited, and they want next steps to better ensure their own safety towards others.

For 29% of these callers, their call to our Helpline was the first time they reached out for help. Most had never told anyone their fears about their own thoughts and feelings. They shared that they feared just asking whether help was available would destroy their life.

### Why They Call

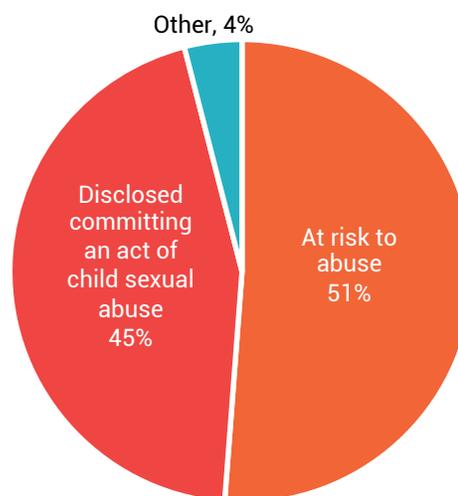
People are reaching out to us when they are noticing their own thoughts and feelings about children before they have harmed anyone. They are calling for help in living a harm-free, fulfilling life. They are reaching out to reduce their isolation, to find strategies to be accountable and to locate resources. Their questions are most often:

- Am I a monster?
- What can I do?
- Is there help for me?
- Why am I like this?
- Will this go away?
- What will my life be like?

They are afraid of being arrested for their thoughts. They are afraid of losing their family, friends and jobs. They are afraid they will be forever ostracized and isolated. They want to know if they can live a "normal" life.

Now! offers support and resources for those adults who have thoughts and feelings but have not acted on them. Adults who contact the Helpline for help with their own sexual feelings towards children are taking a huge step in taking responsibility for their actions to keep children safe. We want to create conditions that support – and welcome – people who reach out for help before a child is harmed.

### People Calling about Themselves



*Committing an act of child sexual abuse includes viewing of online child sexual abuse material. December 2012 to March 2018, n=834.*

## What They Tell Us They Need

The sheer presence of a place where you can ask for help is a beacon of hope for those seeking a safe place to voice the feelings and behaviors that they perhaps have never talked about before – and that most likely terrify them. Isolation and secrecy fuel sexual abuse. Without having anyone to talk with about their concerns, people can experience increased depression, anxiety, and hopelessness – all increasing the risk for sexually abusive behaviors. When someone feels like a monster and feels that others perceive them as a monster, those feelings of hopelessness and aloneness can lead to making decisions that cause harm. These callers tell us about feeling isolated, hopeless and even powerless, and they share that these feelings are barriers, impeding their ability to seek in-person help. They need to feel that there is accessible help available, and that there are things they can do to be safe.

They need to know where to find resources, specialized for their unique needs. Some callers have shared that when they do attempt to reach out for help, they are often turned away by the providers that they have. Others have been unable to find services at all.

As is the case for many people seeking mental health or addictions treatment, cost can be a factor limiting the ability to obtain services as well. This is sometimes compounded by lack of specialized treatment resources, when people cannot afford to travel to find help.

Beyond accessing affordable and specialized help, many callers reported that they had been wanting to reach out for help, but were hesitant due to fear that they would be reported and/or arrested. Some had been struggling with their thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviors for many years. Many had never committed any sexual abuse offenses, and were afraid of retribution just for their thoughts.



**These callers need to know where to find resources specialized for their unique needs.**

## PEOPLE WHO ARE AT RISK TO OR WHO HAVE ABUSED – WHAT THEY NEED

For some, the fear of being reported or arrested is compounded by the possibility of being disowned by their families. Some are minors themselves, and they are concerned that they will be kicked out of their homes if they confide in their parents and ask for help.

Additionally, some callers reported being concerned about the psychological effects that their feelings and/or behaviors might have on those around them. Others were the main providers for immediate family members who would be left without an income if they were arrested and/or lost their jobs.

The Helpline seeks to enhance protective factors for children by helping these adults find the resources they need. This includes sharing resources for professional counseling and answering questions about potential legal repercussions. Additionally, small but increasing numbers of youth are reaching out, with their own concerns about their thoughts and feelings of attraction for younger children.

Primarily the Helpline guides both adults and youth to prepare to:

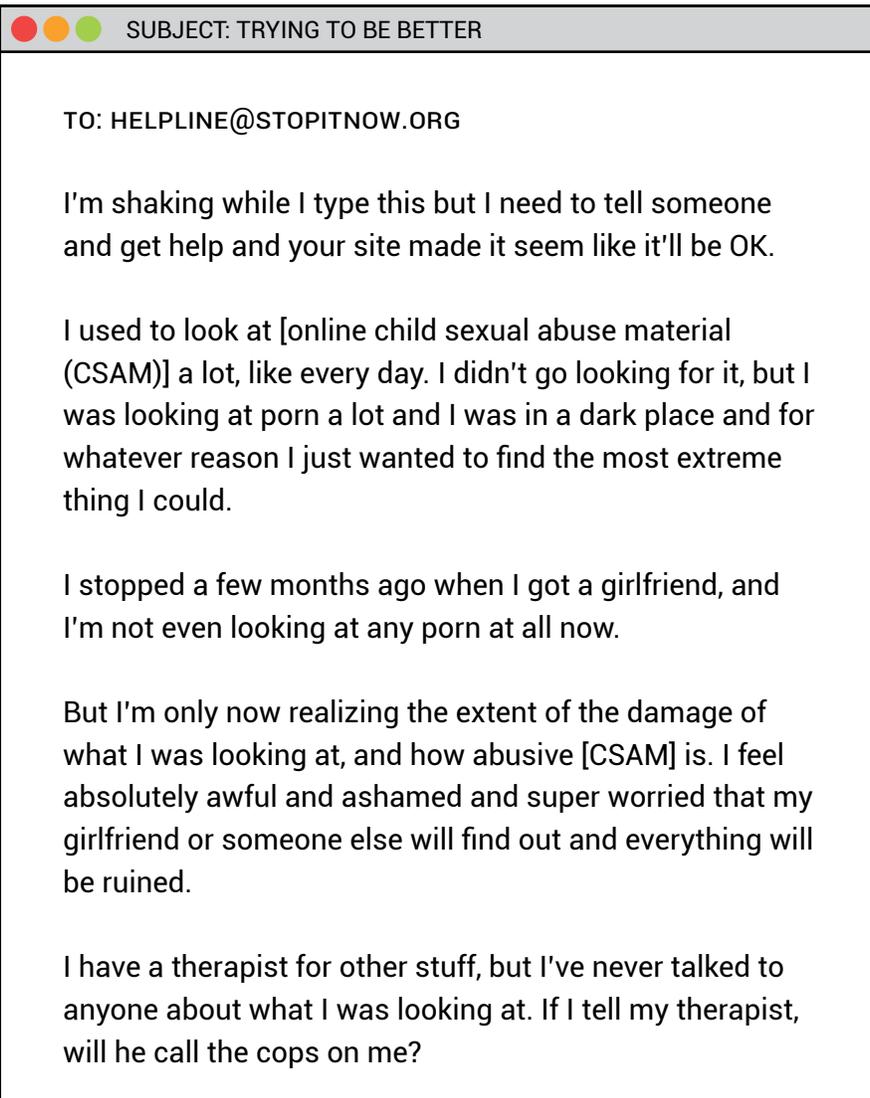
- Seek professional help
- Create a clear safety plan
- Identify people in their lives who can support them and hold them accountable for their actions

Unfortunately, resources to support both children and adults who may pose a risk to children remain limited. While there is a growing recognition of the critical need to address youth's early sexual behaviors and prevent any sexual harm, there continue to be gaps in resources for these youth and their families. Adults acknowledging their own sexual attraction to children remain predominantly hidden and isolated, often unable to find the specialized support and resources to help them.

"I wish other people could see that all it takes is just one phone call to get help. I was nervous about calling, but I decided that I needed to get help. I've just got to get these thoughts out of my head. I feel a lot better now that I've said these things out loud. I feel I can call the therapists you gave me and make an appointment."

– *Man worried about his thoughts*

## PEOPLE WHO ARE AT RISK TO OR WHO HAVE ABUSED



The Helpline, after first appreciating his commitment to children's safety, encouraged him to raise his concerns about his past behaviors with his current therapist. We offered language to bring up his worry about how his therapist might need to respond, both preparing him to face this option, while addressing barriers that would prevent him from seeking help. We provided additional support, information and resources to help him responsibly remain harm-free moving forward, emphasizing the importance of ongoing professional help for safety planning, whether with his current therapist or a specialist.

## PEOPLE WHO ARE AT RISK TO OR WHO HAVE ABUSED

### Vital and Actionable Insights

Callers who are at risk or have abused a child provide vital, unique insights into the thoughts, behaviors and actions of a largely hidden population. As Now! provides resources and support to help these callers keep children safe, the stories they share inform Now!'s primary prevention activities and our resources.

**These callers confirm that sexual attraction for children is unwanted, and that those who experience this want help – and are willing to ask for help if they know where they can safely ask.** They care about children's safety. They want resources and strategies to help them understand their feelings and thoughts, and to help them continue to behave responsibly and safely.

From these calls and from Now!'s early activities asking incarcerated offenders what could have prevented them from sexually abusing a child, Now! has:

- Created *Let's Talk*, a guidebook for adults to address concerns with adults at risk or who have abused, while still communicating that they love them.
- Built extensive web content addressing these individuals' questions on seeking help, staying safe and being accountable – with a hopeful and compassionate tone.
- Shared *Stories of Hope* from adults who wanted to inspire others that help and healing are possible.
- Partnered with other prevention organizations to reach out to younger people who are questioning their sexual thoughts and behaviors towards children.
- Developed and recently updated a tip sheet, *Fifteen Questions About Your Own Thoughts and Behaviors*, to help adults assess their own feelings and actions that pose a risk to children, emphasizing the need and benefits of specialized counseling.

These individuals reach out to our Helpline to share their most shameful and scary secret. When Helpline staff talk to them with respect and help, their relief and gratitude are obvious. Phone calls that start with a quiet and wavering voice, hesitatingly and nervously stating, "I need help," often end with a voice that is stronger and has a sense of purpose and commitment, now with the hope that they can change how they respond to these feelings and get the help they need to do just that.

"I am relieved and grateful that Stop It Now is around. I have searched all over the internet about my problem and there just isn't anything positive on this matter out there."

– *Anonymous survey respondent*

## SURVIVORS

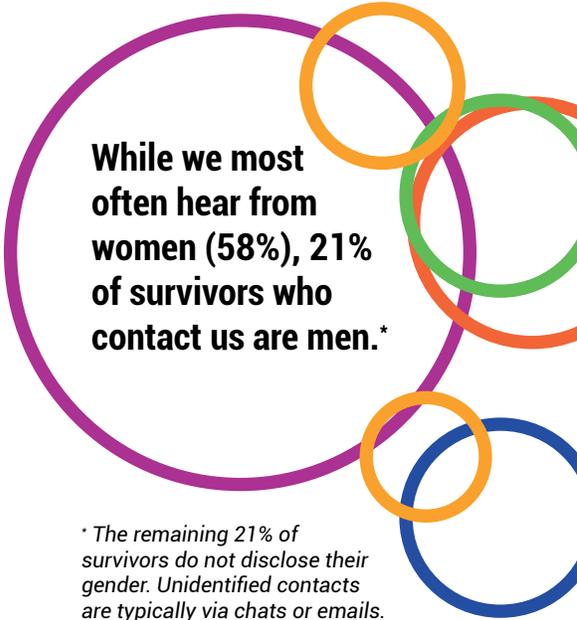
Survivors at all stages of healing contact the Helpline to disclose, find resources and seek action to protect their own children or other potential victims. Since our inception, survivors have been essential to informing our prevention efforts; the experiences they share help us protect children from future harm.

From our very founding by a vocal survivor of child sexual abuse, Stop It Now! has been committed to believing and supporting survivors. By courageously overcoming barriers to speak up, survivors inform our prevention work, our resources and our supports for fellow survivors.

Survivors who are specifically looking for help for their own experiences of sexual abuse represent 5% of the inquiries to the Helpline. Additionally, we hear from survivors who are now in a bystander role; parents seeking help in preventing their own child from ever experiencing what they experienced or are seeking to address concerns that the person who abused them may still pose a risk to others.

Just as most bystanders contact us about situations in homes, at least 40% of the survivors contacting us identified the person who abused them as a family member, and primarily spoke of situations that occurred in their family homes.

Nationwide, reporting rates for child sexual abuse are low, with estimates that only 38% of victims/survivors ever disclose at all, many not until they are adults.<sup>4,5,28</sup> Few make reports to authorities, but of the reports made, most are by adult survivors years after the abuse has happened. In over 66% of Helpline contacts from survivors, they shared that there had not been a report made to authorities about their own abuse.



**While we most often hear from women (58%), 21% of survivors who contact us are men.\***

*\* The remaining 21% of survivors do not disclose their gender. Unidentified contacts are typically via chats or emails.*

## SURVIVORS

### Why They Call

Many of the survivors share with us that this is the first time they have ever told anyone what they experienced. Sometimes a high-profile media story or a television episode with sexual abuse content prompts a survivor to break their silence, reach out for help and disclose what they experienced.

Survivors who did disclose as children often share that they were not believed or they were instructed to keep quiet for fear of disrupting the family. This experience is clearly described in existing research.<sup>29</sup> Some share that they have sought help before, but they continue to seek support and guidance. Some wonder how to tell their parents and family now, years later, and how their family will respond and react. They also ask if something they experienced as a child is in fact sexual abuse.

Adults who were sexually abused as children often share that they've struggled with relationships and speculate that this is because of the abuse they experienced. There are questions and concerns about the impact of sexual abuse on their parenting ability and whether they will be able to keep their own children safe. With needs and concerns about their own emotional and mental well-being, they also ask for help in finding a counselor or a support group.

"I'm a 41-year-old male survivor of incest. I'm looking for help finding someone to talk to."

– Survivor

## SURVIVORS

### What They Tell Us They Need

Survivors need safe places to tell their story and to discuss options for next steps. These callers, often wanting confirmation that their experience was indeed abusive, need to be believed and validated. They are seeking resources to help them address not only their past experience of sexual abuse, but the impact of the abuse on their current day relationships and functioning.

For these courageous callers, the Helpline provides a safe, confidential place to talk and find the support and resources they deserve. We validate their experiences. We focus on their own needs, identifying resources for further support and healing. And when appropriate, we offer information on creating family safety plans to decrease the possibility of abuse in future generations. **We believe survivors.**

The guidance and actions steps we most often provide to survivors include:

- Resources for trauma-informed mental health services and supports.
- Information on making a report.
- Support and guidance on having conversations with others about their own experience of abuse.
- Recommendations for legal consults often in response to questions about statutes of limitations and future legal actions.
- Safety planning for their own family.

**"You have lifted the burden. I have the answer now of what I need to do."**

*– Survivor who wanted to make a report*



## What We've Learned

## The Helpline protects children.

Helpline callers tell us that our service gives them the tools to build safer environments for children and teens and leads them to the resources they needed to help them with their situations. **The Helpline has a lasting impact on children.** Children are safer because adults have the Helpline to contact support and guidance.

While measuring efficacy is difficult in a program that offers a confidential service and addresses such a sensitive and personal issue, callers tell us that they **and** a child benefited because they contacted the Helpline. They take the time to write us back or they share their experience in our confidential follow-up survey:

- 84% feel better prepared to take action; found the resources and links they received helpful; and feel that they had their questions answered.
- 89% would recommend Stop It Now! to a friend who had a question or needed help regarding child sexual abuse.

*Surveys collected January 2017 to February 2019, n = 202. When a contact reaches out via email or chat, the Helpline provides a link to our follow-up survey. Surveys are confidential and are not matched to email addresses or chat IPs.*

Helpline callers feel that their questions are answered and that the resources shared with them are helpful for their individual situations. They report that they are often surprised at the depth of our responses, as well as the personal care they feel that they received.

Every parent, spouse, relative, friend, neighbor and colleague who speaks with the Helpline informs all of Now!'s work. These conversations show us, along with research, what skills, tools and resources people need to have in order to intervene early, before a child is harmed.

The voices and stories heard on the Helpline inform not only our Online Help Center, tip sheets and guidebooks but also our training, advocacy and other public education activities. For example, with the knowledge we've gained from hearing about the intimate situations where child sexual abuse is a concern, we have created webinars, sharing the questions concerned adults have about keeping children safe from sexual harm to both further reduce the isolation inherent in sexual abuse, while also sharing these real-life situation to communicate action steps everyone can take to protect children. Participants often say that the most illuminating aspects of our trainings are when they can draw from their own real-life experiences to prepare them to respond to future situations.

These calls and what they teach us reflect the importance of moving these issues out of the shadows and by doing so, helps create a world where children can grow up free from sexual harm.

## Adults need information about child sexual abuse.

Adults **will** take courageous steps in asking for help with what is considered a taboo and shameful subject. When they have access to a resource that will confidentially speak to them about their concerns, they **will** use that resource to share their stories and concerns. When it is someone they love, when they are not sure of abuse, or when they are worried seeking help will be more harmful than staying quiet, adults need to talk confidentially before they take the next step of contacting authorities to make a report. People need information on what to look for so that they can intervene BEFORE any child is harmed.

The majority of bystanders (53%) reach out because they are unsure of whether a child has been harmed. The secrecy and shame around child sexual abuse allows it to continue. Stop It Now! offers a safe refuge to call where anyone can easily access information and materials to demystify the behaviors that they are seeing – the gray areas of child sexual abuse – and clearly define what behaviors are OK and what behaviors are not.

The resources and guidance provided by the Helpline are not only used for callers' personal situations, but callers tell us that they share our resources and information with others in their family or their community. Survey information tells us that Helpline callers would recommend this important service to friends and family members who have concerns about child sexual abuse.

Our website traffic shows an even greater demand for information. More than 100,000 unique users access our website monthly, most of whom navigate to our free resources. The most common resources visited are:

- **Warning Signs of Possible Sexual Abuse in A Child's Behaviors**  
[stopitnow.org/warning-signs-children](http://stopitnow.org/warning-signs-children)
- **Age-appropriate Sexual Behaviors**  
[stopitnow.org/ohc-content/what-is-age-appropriate](http://stopitnow.org/ohc-content/what-is-age-appropriate)
- **Behavior in Children and Adolescents**  
[stopitnow.org/advice-column-topic/behavior-in-children-and-adolescents](http://stopitnow.org/advice-column-topic/behavior-in-children-and-adolescents)
- **Defining Child Pornography**  
[stopitnow.org/ohc-content/defining-child-pornography](http://stopitnow.org/ohc-content/defining-child-pornography)

"I had been struggling with what to do, and you really empowered me to protect my daughter. When I got off the phone, I went and got her away from a risky situation. It made me feel strong."  
– *Mother worried about her daughter's friend's father*

"The Helpline made me feel that I wasn't alone with my problems, and it assured me that there is help and people are out there who are willing to help me change my life."  
– *Person at-risk to harm a child*

"Your staff member that I spoke with was very kind and helpful. She made me feel very at ease, which is so important for me as I feel like I am in a vulnerable situation. Thank you."  
– *Survivor worried that her child may have been abused*

"I received such insightful and sensitive help. It was just what I needed at this critical time. I had no idea these resources existed."  
– *Spouse worried about their husband's behavior*

"Your response really helped me a lot. I appreciate the information about getting help and will check out all the links for this and try to get information from my younger grandson about any inappropriate touching. And I agree that supervision between the two of them is necessary. Thank you so much!  
– *Grandfather concerned about his grandson's behaviors*

"You've been extremely helpful. I've learned a lot and I feel so much better. How wonderful to know that there's a place to go when you don't know what to do, where someone will speak to you one-on-one like this, and who lets you know that your gut feelings are important."  
– *Teacher who noticed concerning signs in a student*

"You guys changed my life! I don't know what I would've done without you... I thank you guys again because you gave me so many paths to go down."  
– *Mother who received resources for her family*

## Adults are willing to take action to protect children.

When adults call us, they often do not have enough information to act, and they talk about their confusion about next steps. They want to learn about child sexual abuse. They need to express the wide range of emotions that they're feeling – from fear to grief to hope. They need to feel that they are not alone in their worries or in making decisions about next steps. They may want to talk through the impact of their actions. They need to prepare for conversations that may be difficult.

We have learned that with support and education, adults will do what is needed to keep children safe. They will become better educated about healthy sexual development and safety planning for their children, and they will share information with their families and the programs their children attend. They will talk about the behaviors that concern them with close friends, family members and colleagues and address the behaviors they feel put children at risk. When they face the potential impact of sexual abuse on a child, they will make a report of suspected or known sexual abuse.

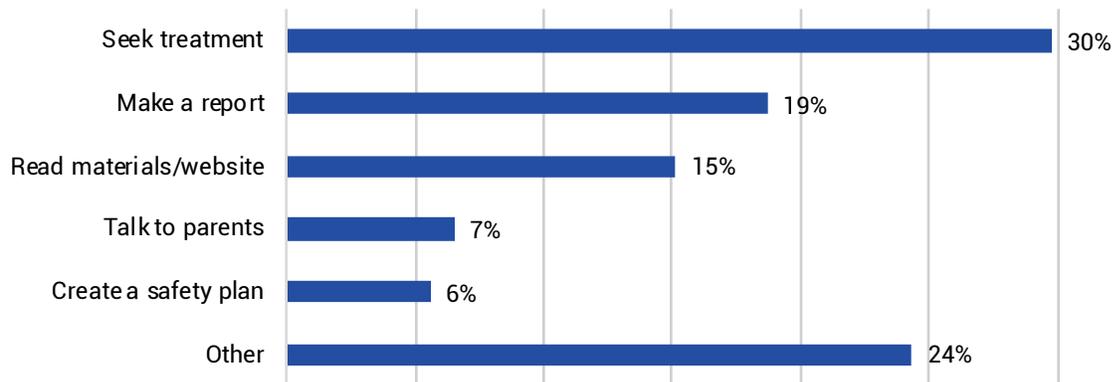
Many callers tell us that they find it challenging to make the decision to call authorities when they're concerned about child sexual abuse but not sure of what is happening. When adults are reassured that they are not alone, that what they are seeing is problematic, empowered with resources, and presented with manageable steps, they report their intention to act protectively.

We understand that preventing child sexual abuse is a process of steps. Sometimes these steps are to read materials and become more informed, sometimes it is about how to talk with a child about boundaries, and sometimes these steps are monumental life changes that an adult makes to protect a child. Our callers tell us that after receiving our response to their request for help, they are able to move forward with an action step to protect a child.

While we are not always informed about the next steps a person plans to take after contacting the Helpline, the next action step most often identified is seeking help from a professional, such as a therapist. Our hope for every caller is that they find a way to not be so isolated. Whether they are seeking help for themselves or for someone else, we consider it a success when someone agrees to reach out further for help.

Nearly 20% of our callers who do indicate their next steps tell us they intend to make a report of suspected abuse or of a disclosure. Other steps include talking directly to someone they know – whether it is the adult whose behaviors are concerning, a child who appears to be struggling with safe behaviors, the parents of a child with warning signs or an ally. Additionally, people share intentions to learn more and to plan for safety.

## Helpline Callers' Intended Action Steps



December 2012 to March 2018, n=3,547. In many cases, especially via email, next steps are not identified.

### Other Action Steps Identified

Talk to adult at risk/abusing	Seek an ally	Seek legal consultation	Talk to child at risk/abusing	Talk to child at risk/survivor
31%	26%	20%	14%	9%

December 2012 to March 2018, n=574.

Further, 51% of people emailing about a personal situation opt-in to receive ongoing emails, continuing the reach and impact. As of 2019, our complete email list is 12,000 people.

Often, we hear from callers that their gut instinct was confirmed, and that gave them the encouragement and courage to take action. They also felt better about the steps they had already taken. Many callers describe **feeling enormous relief** at having finally found someone who can understand the complexities of their struggle and can listen and offer new insights as they move through their confusion. Again and again, they've told us that the Now! Helpline was the only place they could find where they could think through their options out loud.

**Nearly 50% of callers share the intention to reach out for professional help – via a report or support and treatment.**

## The person abusing a child is most often known to the child and family.

The situations raised by our callers align with the research: children are at risk for abuse by people they know. Most frequently, adults in bystander roles know both the youth and the person who poses a risk to that child – or is already harming them. This complicates the feelings, the responses, the options and the impact of sexual abuse. What may seem like simple decisions to make a report to authorities or speak with a therapist are weighed down by multi-dimensional relationships and situations.

This reality offers us ways to better understand the barriers people face in knowing how to respond protectively to a situation involving concerning and problematic sexual behaviors. Acknowledging the complexity of feelings and reactions to these situations can better prepare us to discover responses that are focused on the health and well-being for all involved. We can better listen to what both survivors and the people who love them want and need for their own healing. And we can respond with more compassion and support to those who need help to stay safe.

"The Helpline gave me light at the end of the tunnel when before there was none. You offered resources that have already moved things forward for us."

– *Father worried about his adult son's behaviors with his niece*

"The info I got was very helpful. I calmly informed him that I was aware of his conviction and wanted to help him abide by all the regulations of his parole, which includes refraining from any interaction with children."

– *Church member with concerns of registered sex offender joining congregation*

"I didn't think I could talk to [the person-at-risk to offend], but now that I have talked to you about it in this new way, I think I'll try this discussion again."

– *Cousin of a man with behavioral warning signs*

"Thank you for saying that. Nobody ever understood that I could still love the person who abused me."

– *Adult survivor*

"I had a gut feeling, and I knew what I was seeing was wrong. I had nobody to talk to about it, but the Helpline and the website offered validation and affirmed my concerns."

– *Aunt concerned about her nephews' father's behaviors*

"After I received the reply, it gave me confirmation of what I thought I should do. I spoke up... things are getting better... thanks."

– *Neighbor concerned about community safety*

"Thank you for all you do to help break the cycle of abuse."

– *Survivor*

"I thought that maybe I was being silly to worry, but what you said on the web made me feel it was okay to call anyway. The information you gave me on the phone was exactly what I needed to understand why I was having gut feelings that things aren't right. Now I know what to do."

– *Grandmother worried about her grandchildren's step-father*

## Public awareness matters.

When a case of sexual abuse is brought to the public's attention, often involving famous and familiar people or respected and powerful organizations, there is a new opportunity for dialog about children's safety and what we can do to prevent sexual abuse. This is exactly what happened in November 2011, when news broke of the decades of child sexual abuse perpetrated by Jerry Sandusky at Penn State. The coverage of abuse at Penn State clearly illustrated the missed opportunities for adults to have prevented child sexual abuse, and it brought this discussion to the forefront.

During the first few weeks of the continued media exposure, Stop It Now! provided expert statements and guidance to reporters and others concerned with telling the story. This increased exposure led to a **130% increase in calls to the Helpline**. A 68-year-old woman called, through tears, to say that she had been watching the news coverage and just needed to talk; she had never before disclosed the sexual abuse she experienced as a young girl.

Penn State represents just one of the many highly-publicized cases of institutional child sexual abuse. Others include USA Gymnastics, the Catholic Church, Boy Scouts of America and Horace Mann School, to name a few.

Public awareness of instances of child sexual abuse lead to more adults reaching out to protect children through prevention or recognition of warning signs. As we continue moving the conversation around child sexual abuse out of the darkness and into the forefront of public concern, the calls for help will keep coming. And we know that over time, we have seen an increase in the receptiveness of callers to have conversations about prevention.

"We are going to for sure do the safety plan for our family... it is a great idea!"  
– *Dad wanting to keep child safe in sports leagues*

## Policy and prevention have lasting effects.

The conversations from our Helpline inform Stop It Now!'s advocacy actions. Now! fully supports policies that aim to protect children and prepare adults to do so. We support legislative actions that help survivors heal and recover, and we seek policies that are rooted in equality and evidenced-based research that respond to criminal behaviors with both judicious consequences and a call for accountability.

Primarily, however, our focus is on policies and societal changes that will bring primary prevention concepts and strategies to the forefront, while addressing the need to shift attitudes about those who are at-risk to abuse children and the conditions necessary to create permanent, lasting changes that deter and interrupt sexual abuse. While affirming that how we respond to all levels of sexual misconduct is crucial to prevent further harmful behaviors, we advocate for policies, practices and legislation that include specific actions to create safe environments before children are harmed.<sup>30</sup>

Our callers have taught us how much public opinion about sex offenders impedes their willingness or even access to professional help. As even those callers who are both expressing unwanted feelings and thoughts of attraction for children AND who clearly are committed to children's safety and have no intention or interest in harming a child, tell us – they are afraid of the response from a professional if they disclose their feelings. They fear even more the response of their family and friends. In our advocacy work, we recognize these fears as a result of lack of information, resources and understanding and support policies that create more pathways to both change the attitudes that are deterrent to help-seeking behaviors and provide necessary education about sexual abuse prevention, as well as healthy sexuality education.

Lasting change can happen when we alter the perceptions traditionally associated with child sexual abuse. Now! believes that primary prevention must include shifting cultural and personal views that act as barriers to getting help and support, such as believing that only "monsters" hurt children and cannot be helped, or that punitive responses are the only response that is effective.

To support this belief, Now! partners with other organizations and experts to advocate that child sexual abuse be addressed as a public health priority. As a member of the National Coalition to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse, the Prevention Committee of Association for Treatment of Sexual Abusers and other coalitions, we contribute to policy recommendations, public health awareness campaigns and communication projects to further advance sexual abuse prevention and to make resources available early and broadly to anyone recognizing a child or adult at-risk, including their own risk.



**Lasting change can happen when we alter the perceptions traditionally associated with child sexual abuse.**



## The Future of the Helpline

## Prevention should be the first conversation – not the afterthought.

The conversation of primary prevention – before anyone is harmed – is rarely the focus of public policy, media stories, or essential funding. We are making progress in recognizing the importance of prevention-based education; programs focused on sexual abuse prevention are more prevalent than ever before, a growing number of states in the U.S. do now require healthy sexuality education and sexual abuse prevention programs for both youth and adults, and around the world, there is more recognition of the importance of providing prevention information. But we need to do more.

Prevention cannot be only discussed after a child has been sexually abused. Without a focus on primary prevention, we as a society are simply waiting for a child to be harmed before we do anything. That is morally unconscionable and financially unsound. The costs related to responding after a child is harmed far outweigh the costs for primary prevention, support and guidance before a child is harmed.

With every caller, Stop It Now! provides a sense of hope that something can be done. And we remain most hopeful that our vision is possible: children can live healthy, safe lives, free from trauma from any form of violence, including sexual abuse and exploitation. With our experience and knowledge of what it takes to prevent the often tragic and devastating experience of child sexual abuse for all involved, we serve the basic need and right of youth to experience a life without sexual abuse.

Education about healthy sexual development is not yet required for all professional educators and caregivers, and sexual abuse prevention training and support is not yet widely available and accessible for all. In both home and public domain environments, many remain unsure of where to go, and even what questions they have or information they're seeking. Until we do make lasting changes in how we address children's sexual safety and we shift the culture to one that is prevention focused, the Helpline is for many the only lifeline to answers and hope that they have.

**"We're trained in physical, emotional, social and cognitive development, but not in sexual development. We have fire drills, universal precautions and now we have shooter drills, but we don't address children's sexual safety."**

*– Early childcare provider following a Stop It Now! training*

## OUR GOALS FOR THE FUTURE

We want to grow! Until every adult knows what to do keep children safe, knows that there is a place to reach out for help and feels confident to taking necessary actions to prevent sexual abuse, Stop It Now!'s vision cannot be realized. We plan to continue providing Help Services, reaching more people with even more tools. These are our goals for the future.

### 1. Reach the adults who can make a difference.

So many adults are committed to the care and welfare of children. Imagine if every one of them knew where to go if they had a concern about sexual abuse, or were looking to create the safest environment possible so that the children in their lives could grow up free from sexual harm. Through additional support and partnerships, we can reach more people who need us with messages of hope, empowerment and accountability.

We know that more people need our help than are getting in touch with us now. Our current funding allows us to operate just 30 hours per week, answering phone calls, chats, emails and social media messages as quickly and thoroughly as we can. Here are ways we can continue to grow our reach to every family who needs us:

- **Expanded Hours.** People need our help at all hours. With additional funding, we could expand our staffing to operate the Helpline 24/7, ensuring no one has to wait for the vital information they need to keep children safe. With just 40 additional open phone and chat hours a month, we can be available for at least 400 more people yearly.
- **Texting Services.** We've been proud to expand our contact methods to social media (2012) and chat services (2016), but we know texting is becoming more important in delivering help services. With dedicated funding or in-kind services, we could develop and launch a texting service.
- **Website Upgrade.** With nearly a million people visiting the website annually, it is critical to stay current with the latest technology that allows visitors to easily locate information and resources. This includes increasing our mobile accessibility.

## OUR GOALS FOR THE FUTURE

With additional support, the Helpline could reach an even greater audience. Targeted awareness campaigns and increased points of access could provide specialized and confidential help for more people who have questions about keeping children safe:

- Extended family members
- New parents, teen parents and fathers
- Parent and home health care aides
- Daycare providers and early childhood education professionals
- Children's hospitals and medical professionals
- Professional and substitute caregivers
- Child protection workers
- Educators at all levels – preschool through college

Internet searches are the top referral source for our Helpline, and we make maximum use of free Google Ads campaigns via Google Grants. Still, we hear time and again that Helpline callers wished they had known about us sooner. An increase in marketing and awareness efforts about our free, confidential services would ensure more adults know that we offer tools and a safe place for these conversations.

Also, we want to reach more youth and adults who are seeking help for their own thoughts and behaviors. With texting and additional outreach efforts, we can better reach this audience and meet their unique needs. Prevention can happen when we help those with unwanted thoughts and behaviors know that help and support is available.

"I received such insightful and sensitive help. It was just what I needed at this critical time. I had no idea these resources existed."  
– *Nurse worried about a child patient*

## OUR GOALS FOR THE FUTURE

### 2. Reach at-risk youth and adults online, before they harm a child.

Adults and young people who have thoughts of sexually harming children may begin by first seeking out child sexual abuse material (CSAM, previously referred to as child pornography) online. With enhanced online tools, we can reach these people early to get them the help they need, and deter them from further seeking out this illegal and harmful imagery, becoming more engaged with any type of online exploitation of children and potentially from harming children in person.

To date, we have partnered with Thorn (thorn.org) on two successful projects toward this goal. In 2012, we began supporting their online deterrent program using search engine keyword ads. When users search for child sexual abuse material, Thorn's ad informs them that they are at risk for engaging in harmful and illegal activity, and that help and support are available. They are then provided with Helpline contact information. This program continues to operate and since its launch, thousands have clicked from the online deterrence pages onto the Now! website and contacted the Helpline to get customized support and guidance.

More recently, we supported Thorn on a pilot to reach youth. This included young people who were distressed over something they had viewed online, those who used online child sexual abuse imagery, and those who were concerned about their own thoughts, feelings and behaviors regarding younger children. During this brief pilot, hundreds of youth took a step to learn more, whether it was visiting our website or reaching out to the Helpline. We continue to seek avenues to broaden our support to youth with concerns about their own sexual thoughts, feelings and behaviors towards younger children. With increased marketing of the Helpline to reach youth who are struggling with their feelings toward children, we can promote earlier intervention and prevent harm to both the youth seeking help and other children.

Over one million people viewed Thorn's youth piloted deterrence program campaign, resulting in over 21,000 visits to the Thorn website. Of those, over 600 viewers clicked off Thorn's ads and onto Now!'s site, with over 30% of those exploring beyond the landing page. An example of the type of engagement Now! had as a result of this campaign is an email received from a 16-year-old male. He stated that while looking at pornography, he had inadvertently viewed child pornography and wanted to report it. He found it "terrifying", and felt guilty over viewing this. In his email, he stated that he wasn't concerned about his pornography viewing as he felt that it is something everyone his age does. After the Helpline responded with support, reporting resources and information regarding studied impacts of pornography viewing on youth and on relationships, this youth wrote back, "I don't think I can thank you enough for your support and resources. The information I found plus the experience I had a few days ago is enough for me to stop watching porn completely. Initially, I felt like the world was ending because of what I saw, and while it still haunts me a little, I think I've started healing and forgiving myself at least somewhat."

## OUR GOALS FOR THE FUTURE

### 3. Keep pushing the conversation forward.

We have to continue to help all adults have difficult conversations about sexual behaviors and boundaries. Conversations about a topic that has been off limits and fraught with shame and secrecy do not happen overnight. Our Helpline tells us time and time again, that when worried adults can talk over their concerns in a safe and supportive environment, they can better prepare how to approach concerning situations.

Many effective strategies are at work to prevent sexual abuse in youth-serving organizations, as well as prevent youth sex trafficking and online risks to children. Now! knows that conversations that happen early and in the home are the foundation to successful prevention safety plans. As we've noted, sexual abuse most frequently occurs in more intimate relationships – in homes, with family members and friends. We need to continue to provide tools to these first response bystanders, who want to respond to concerns in close family member's behaviors, talk to their children's caregivers about children's sexual safety and respond to warning signs in their child or other children close to them.

We will continue to develop the tools needed to make difficult conversations easier and more effective. We plan to share videotaped roleplays of sample difficult conversations, highlighting best practices for communication that shifts perceptive and creates cooperation instead of conflict. These roleplay videos are taken directly from Helpline calls and will let our callers know that others have gone through similar situations and found a way to keep a child safe. These tools also help to break a callers sense of isolation and offer some hope that their families can heal. No one has to be alone or think that they are the only person with worries about sexual abuse.

Our expert staff, advisory board members and other stakeholders have unique perspectives on child sexual abuse and the approaches that enact change. We can leverage our thought-leadership and move the national conversation forward with blogs, press releases, public statements and other media.

## OUR GOALS FOR THE FUTURE

### 4. Expand our commitment to prevention through partnerships and advocacy.

For professionals in the field, the Helpline continues to be a well of information on the **real life experiences** of families and communities facing the trauma of sexual abuse. There are committed organizations and programs everywhere working to prevent violence, to keep children safe and to promote healthy environments. Our knowledge and our message of hope and empowerment combined with practice prevention tools can be shared across all of these groups.

We can inform other social service and youth-serving organizations about what we know from our Helpline; how to effectively provide a highly sensitive and specialized service that offers language, tools and support to act preventatively. We want to continue the conversation in broad, public venues. With the capacity to develop our commentaries on our experiences and expertise, we are able to use the media to change conversations about sexual abuse prevention to ones of hope and empowerment, as opposed to despair and fear.

We will grow our collaborations and build our partnerships with other programs and services that are dedicated to the well-being of all. We know that when adults speak up, they can change the lives of the children around them, they can change their environment and their community. When adults speak up together, they can change the world. When we combine our energies with similar minded organizations working on issues such as bullying, sexual harassment and domestic violence, we create the safer environment that we want to promise every child.

*"The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any."*

*– Alice Walker*

## TURNING HOPE INTO ACTION

Child sexual abuse thrives in isolation. One clear message we have learned from each and every one of our callers is that you cannot confront these situations or behaviors alone. Our callers are stronger, smarter and more clear after talking through all of their options and identifying the people who can support them.

We also know that we can't continue the work of Stop It Now! alone. Financial support for the Helpline is a constant challenge and remains a limiting factor in our ability to respond to demand that may be generated by more widespread marketing of the service. However, with increased funding, we would be able to operate the Helpline's multiple forms of contact 24/7, so that we never miss a call or chat, and so we can respond promptly to each email, letter and social media message. We can – and should – make sure that every person with a concern about sexual abuse has a safe and informed source of help and support.

We need your help to protect children. To learn more about supporting the Helpline, please contact us at [info@stopitnow.org](mailto:info@stopitnow.org).

## IN CLOSING

Thank you for learning more about the Stop It Now! Helpline. We hope that sharing the voices and experiences of those who reach out for our confidential, trusted guidance will begin a new chapter for you – one where the value of offering help to those most in need at the time they most need it is felt in every child who is able to grow up free from sexual harm.

Stop It Now! maintains the only helpline in the U.S. focused exclusively on sexual abuse, and we are only one of a few global resources dedicated to preventing sexual victimization of children and youth by empowering the adults in their lives to speak up and take action. The ripple effect of the actions taken by those who have contacted our Helpline is immense, and every action and every person speaking up to protect a child activates our hope that one day, all children will experience safe childhoods.



# APPENDIX

## DATA & ANALYSIS

The data used in this report was collected for a study, "I Didn't Know Where To Go: An Examination of Stop It Now!'s Sexual Abuse Prevention Helpline" published in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, Sept, 2019.

The data for this project included two data sets. The first data set was maintained using excel and access databases and was manually entered by Helpline staff from 1995 to 2012 (N = 13,908). The second data set was maintained in iCarol helpline software, a content management system designed specifically to capture helpline service contacts and populated by Stop It Now! staff from 2012 to 2018 to monitor and track nonidentifying information about Helpline users and contacts (N = 7,122). The databases include anonymous individual Helpline data, such as user demographics of the persons who contacted the Helpline, including families and friends of those involved in a situation, demographics of the individuals who are causing the harm/persons at risk to abuse, demographics of the adults identifying as survivors, and details about the identified situation. More specifically, the variables maintained in the database include user type, type of contact, prevention level, user age, user relationship to person at risk of abusing, user relationship to the victim/person at risk of being abused, situation, situation location, victim age, person at risk or abusing age, recommended next steps, and other essential information shared by the user.

Learn more: Grant, B.J., Shield, R., Tabachnick, J., & Coleman, J. (2019) "I Didn't Know Where to Go": An Examination of Stop It Now!'s Sexual Abuse Helpline. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 24 (20), 4225-4253. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260519869237>

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The results should be reviewed in light of several important limitations, which may affect the reliability of the findings. First, although Stop It Now! collects rich information about Helpline users and their situations, the design of the Helpline was to facilitate service delivery, not research. As such, some variables that may be germane to child sexual abuse prevention efforts were not systematically captured in the current study. For example, Now! was unable to consistently collect the age of individuals calling about their own abusive behavior or calling about adults, adolescents, or children who may be engaging in problematic or sexually abusive behaviors. Second, because of changes to variables and data collection efforts over Now!'s history, data from the earlier years of Now! could not be used in this analysis. Therefore, how variable definitions or time might affect study results was not assessed. Finally, because of limitations surrounding maintaining the confidentiality of Helpline users, it was not possible to evaluate systematically the actions taken as a result of users contacting the Helpline. Subsequently, the impact of the Helpline contact on preventing child sexual abuse directly is not thoroughly examined.

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## TIMELINE OF THE HELPLINE

- 1992** ● Fran Henry founds Stop It Now! in Vermont with the vision that child sexual abuse be recognized as a preventable public health problem and to help adults take responsibility to prevent and stop child sexual abuse.
- Joan Tabachnick joins Now! as the first staff. She develops outreach materials and Helpline protocols.
- 1993** ● Now! partners with Fay Honey Knopp and the Safer Society Foundation and together create the first advisory committee.
- Staff and volunteers conduct focus groups with people incarcerated for sexual offenses, adults who had been sexually abused as children, and parents of children and adolescents with problematic sexual behaviors.
- 1994** ● Now! produces the first set of "warning signs," developed in collaboration with clinicians across the U.S.
- 1995** ● Helpline launches in September as part of Now!'s first state-wide media and outreach campaign in Vermont. Adults who had abused or are at risk to abuse as well as their friends and families were encouraged to call a toll-free number for information and referrals. This is the first helpline of its kind in the world.
- American Medical Association identifies child sexual abuse as a silent violent epidemic. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) declares violence prevention as a public health priority.
- 1996** ● Toll-free number (1.888.PREVENT) is obtained to provide services nationwide.
- 1997** ● Now! publishes its baseline random digit dial survey in Vermont in the *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*.
- 1999** ● Now! publishes its first evaluation report in *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*.
- A CDC expert panel convenes to offer recommendations to raise child sexual abuse as a public health issue.
- 2000** ● Email requests increase and are tracked.
- 2001** ● Helpline operates 40 hours per week.
- 2004** ● Stop it Now! UK and Ireland launch as independent organizations based on our model of success.
- 2005** ● Every state in the U.S. has contacted the Helpline.

## TIMELINE OF THE HELPLINE

- 2007** ● Now! becomes a member of Child Helpline International (CHI), the only global helpline member to serve the adults responsible for the safety of youth.
- 2008** ● Economic recession causes significant decreases in funding, requiring staff layoffs and temporary suspension of Helpline. Phone lines close, but people continue emailing in need of help. Staff volunteer to respond as they can.
- 2009** ● Online Help Center launches to guarantee free access to prevention resources if Now! were to close. The self-paced, guided resource directs users to the information they need based on self-selected criteria.
- 2010** ● With funding from the Office of Victims of Crime, Helpline reopens to emails and for 10 hours per week via phone. This is the first and only direct government funding Now! ever receives.
- 2011** ● Emails become 80% of contacts, surpassing phone calls for the first time.  
  
News breaks of the decades of abuse by Jerry Sandusky at Penn State. As a direct result, Helpline contacts increase 130%.
- 2012** ● Helpline training manual is completed and delivered to helplines in Columbia and Nigeria.  
  
Now! enters partnership with Thorn to support online deterrence program for adults abusing or at-risk to abuse. Ads interrupt searches for online child sexual abuse material, informing the searcher that help is available.  
  
Ask Now! launches, an online advice column sharing real Helpline inquiries and responses.  
  
First Helpline request is made through social media, a Facebook message.
- 2014** ● Now! becomes an affiliate of Klingberg Family Centers, Inc.
- 2015** ● Helpline phone hours increase to 30 per week, a result of more stable funding.  
  
Now! brings Helpline training to Grenada, preparing them to open a prevention helpline.
- 2016** ● Live Helpline web chat function launches.
- 2017** ● Stop it Now! Flanders (Belgium) launches.
- 2018** ● Launch of interactive webinars based on Helpline inquiries, including larger themes around children's sexual health and sexual behaviors, adults' sexual behaviors around children, vulnerable environments and safety planning.





**PHONE**  
1.888.PREVENT



**EMAIL**  
[helpline@stopitnow.org](mailto:helpline@stopitnow.org)



**CHAT**  
[stopitnow.org/chat](https://stopitnow.org/chat)



**SOCIAL**  
[facebook.com/stopitnow](https://facebook.com/stopitnow)



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