

# Online Help for Children at Risk

*ANALYSIS OF PROBLEMS REPORTED BY CHILDREN*



**Nobody's Children Foundation**

**2015**

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## National Helpline for Children and Young People – 116 111<sup>1</sup>

As a result of lobbying efforts by Child Helpline International (CHI), a global network of child helplines, on **15 February 2007 the European Commission** issued the 2007/116/WE Decision on reserving the national numbering range beginning with 116 for harmonised services of social value. Three numbers were reserved:

- 116 000 — hotlines for missing children,
- **116 111 — child helplines,**
- 116 123 — emotional support helpline for adults.

The following scope of services provided by the 116 111 helpline was defined: *The service helps children in need of care and protection and links them to the appropriate services and resources; it provides children with an opportunity to express their concerns and talk about issues directly affecting them and contact someone in an emergency situation.*

In Poland the 116 111 line was launched on **6 November 2008** as the **National Helpline for Children and Young People**. Poland was the fifth European country that enabled children and young people to contact professionals through a free 116 111 helpline.

This was made possible by successful collaboration of the **Nobody's Children Foundation** (operating the Helpline for Children and Young People), the **Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration**, and the **Office of Electronic Communications**, and by the Polish telecommunications companies' joint decision to resign from charging fees for connections with 116 111.

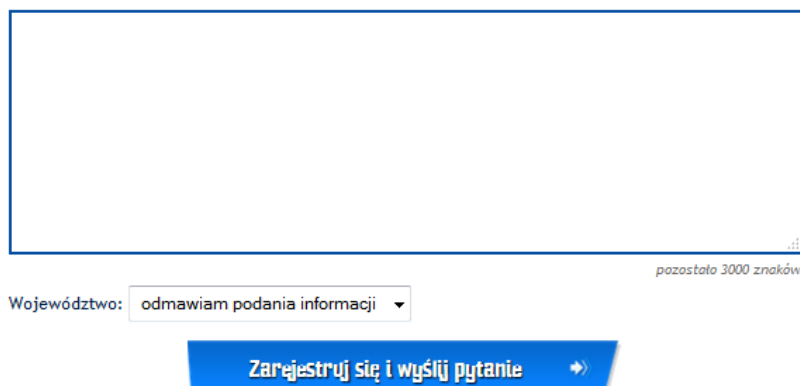
Together with the telephone line, a dedicated **website** was launched, enabling children to ask questions through an anonymous contact form available on [www.116111.pl](http://www.116111.pl).

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<sup>1</sup> Based on: Kicińska L. (2010). Historia telefonów zaufania w Polsce i na świecie. *Dziecko Krzywdzone*, No. 2(31).

**Figure 1. Online help: Contact form (current version)**

4. Na odpowiedź zazwyczaj trzeba poczekać kilka dni. Poczekać więc cierpliwie, a na pewno ją otrzymasz. Jeśli nie możesz czekać tak długo - **zadzwoń na 116 111**.



Source: print screen from: <http://www.116111.pl/napisz>.

## Introduction

Between January and December 2015 an international project called Helping Children at Risk is being implemented; the project is financed by the International Visegrad Fund<sup>2</sup>.

The goal of the project is to identify the threats and needs of children at risk and to create a joint strategy of providing help and support for children in the Visegrad Region, based on this assessment and on good practices identified within the partner organizations.

The project is being coordinated by the **Nobody's Children Foundation** and its partners are organizations from the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary:

- **The Safety Line Association** (*Sdružení Linka bezpečí*),
- **Child Safety Line, non-profit organization** (*Linka detskej istoty, n.o.*),
- **Kék Vonal Child Crisis Foundation** (*Kék Vonal Gyermekkrízis Alapítvány*).

Within the project, a study was conducted based on an **analysis of the content of messages sent through the websites** run within the 116 111 helplines in the four partner countries between 1 Jan 2014 and 31 Dec 2014. This report summarizes the results of the study conducted in Poland by the Nobody's Children Foundation.

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<sup>2</sup> The official website of the International Visegrad Fund: <http://visegradfund.org/>.

## Object of study

The goal of the study was to gain a better understanding of the perspective of children at risk who sought support through online contact with the 116 111 Helpline staff.

The main research questions concerned both the content of children's messages (the nature of the reported problems, their categorization and distribution) and the characteristics of the senders (children's expectations and motivations to seek online help). To answer these questions two types of analysis were used: qualitative analysis of the content of selected messages and quantitative analysis based on the statistics included in the data base completed by the 116 111 Helpline counsellors for every single contact (on the phone and online) as well as sample of the messages .

## Method

The sample contained messages sent by children and young people between 1 Jan 2014 and 31 Dec 2014 via the helpline's website: <http://www.116111.pl/napisz>.

352 messages (out of 6084) were selected for the qualitative analysis<sup>3</sup>. The sample covered 12 constructed (or analytical) weeks<sup>4</sup>, which made it possible to analyse messages from every month of the year and from all days of the week (see Figure 2). The idea behind this method of sample selection was to make sure that the sample contained messages from different days of the week (weekdays vs. weekends) and from different months of the year (school year vs. holidays).

The qualitative analysis was conducted using the **QSR NVivo 10** software, which was made available to the Nobody's Children Foundation free of charge for the purpose of this study (among others)<sup>5</sup>. The results are discussed later in the report.

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<sup>3</sup> The number of messages comes from the 116111 website's mechanism that allows users to send messages up to 3000 characters long. Sometimes senders need more space to describe their situation and they send their message in parts. The number includes messages from so-called unverified accounts (most often due to wrong verification data provided by the child).

<sup>4</sup> See: Riffe, D., Aust, C. F., & Lacy, S. R. (1993). The effectiveness of random, consecutive day and constructed week sampling in newspaper content analysis. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 70(1), 133-139.

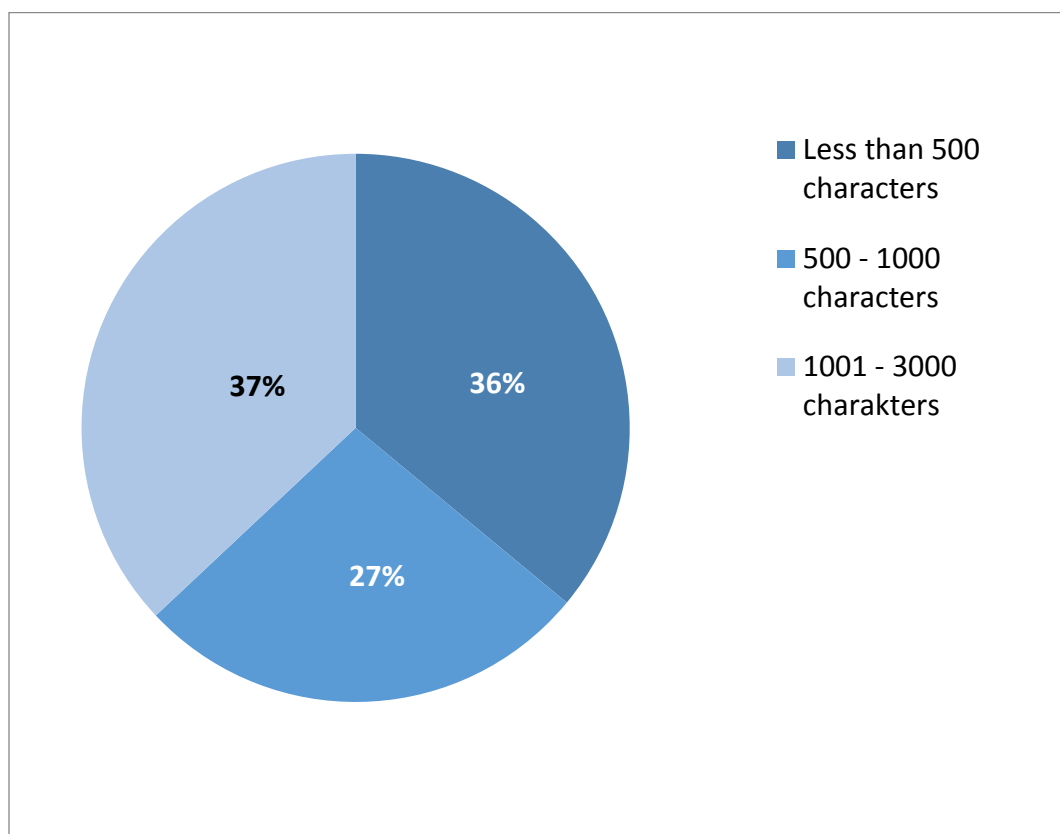
<sup>5</sup> For more details see [http://www.qsrinternational.com/products\\_nvivo.aspx](http://www.qsrinternational.com/products_nvivo.aspx).

Figure 2. Sample structure: 12 constructed (analytical) weeks – selected days of 2014.

Year 2014		January							February							March						
		Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa	Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa	Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa	Su
I				1	2	3	4	5	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
II		6	7	8	9	10	11	12	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
III		13	14	15	16	17	18	19	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	17	18	19	20	21	22	23
IV		20	21	22	23	24	25	26	24	25	26	27	28			24	25	26	27	28	29	30
V		27	28	29	30	31										31						
		April							May							June						
		Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa	Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa	Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa	Su
I			1	2	3	4	5	6	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
II		7	8	9	10	11	12	13	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
III		14	15	16	17	18	19	20	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
IV		21	22	23	24	25	26	27	26	27	28	29	30	31		23	24	25	26	27	28	29
V		28	29	30												30						
		July							August							September						
		Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa	Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa	Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa	Su
I			1	2	3	4	5	6	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
II		7	8	9	10	11	12	13	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
III		14	15	16	17	18	19	20	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
IV		21	22	23	24	25	26	27	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	22	23	24	25	26	27	28
V		28	29	30	31											29	30					
		October							November							December						
		Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa	Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa	Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa	Su
I				1	2	3	4	5	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
II		6	7	8	9	10	11	12	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
III		13	14	15	16	17	18	19	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
IV		20	21	22	23	24	25	26	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	22	23	24	25	26	27	28
V		27	28	29	30	31										29	30	31				

The average message length was 992 characters, while the median was 729 characters. Messages shorter than 500 characters constituted 36% of the sample; messages of medium length, i.e. 500 to 1000 characters, made 27% of the sample; and long messages – over 1000 characters – constituted 37% of the sample. The shortest message consisted of 4 characters, and the longest one had 3000 characters (which was the maximum length allowed in the textbox).

**Chart 1. Message length, N=352.**



Source: Own data.

## Characteristics of help-seekers and nature of reported problems

The data presented below are based on the **annual statistics** included in the data base of contacts kept by the 116 111 Helpline for Children and Young People. In **2014** helpline counsellors replied to **4990 messages**<sup>6</sup> sent through [www.116111.pl](http://www.116111.pl). Each message was assigned to the appropriate thematic category – according to its main theme and secondary topics. Additionally, whenever possible, the sender’s age and gender were recorded.

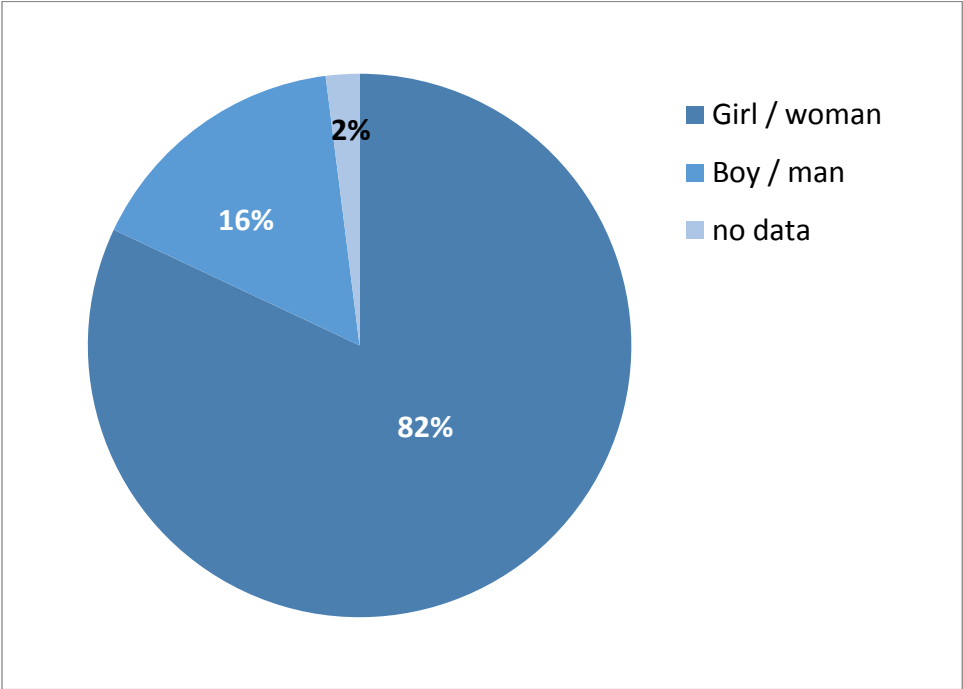
In 2014 the main recipients of online help were girls who constituted the vast majority of persons sending messages through [www.116111.pl](http://www.116111.pl) (Chart 2).

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<sup>6</sup> The difference between the number of messages provided by the website’s mechanism and the number of messages answered by helpline counsellors (recorded by them in the data base) results from the fact the contact form used by [www.116111.pl](http://www.116111.pl) allows users to send messages up to 3000 characters long. Some users of the 116 111 Helpline send longer messages – these are sent in parts with each part counted as a separate message. In the data base of contacts kept by the 116 111 Helpline counsellors, each message received in parts is entered as a single record. Moreover, the data base is limited to information about messages from verified accounts (while the website’s mechanism includes information about messages from both verified and unverified accounts).



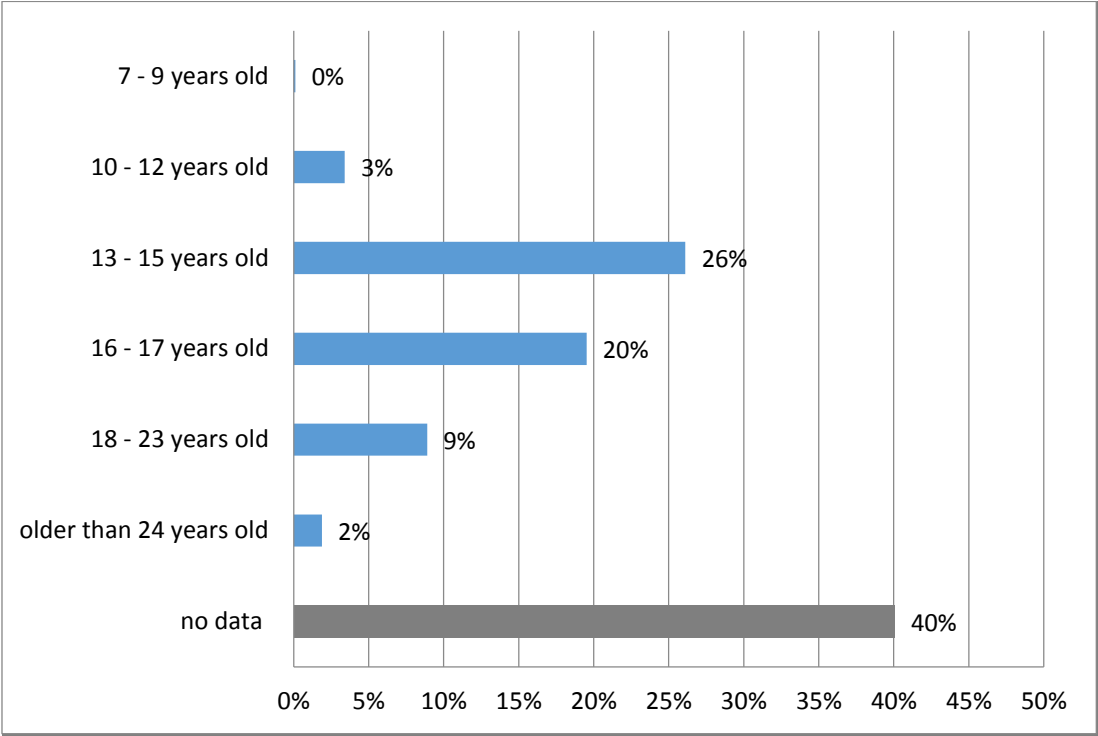
**Chart 2. Message senders by gender, N=4990 messages.**



Source: Own data based on the annual statistics of the 116 111 Helpline for Children and Young People.

Determining the age of online help users was difficult due to a large proportion of missing data: for 40% of all messages the sender’s age was unknown (Chart 3). The teenagers are the largest group of on-line help users. According to estimates, one in four (26%) of the senders is a person aged 13-15, and one in five is aged 16-17 years old.

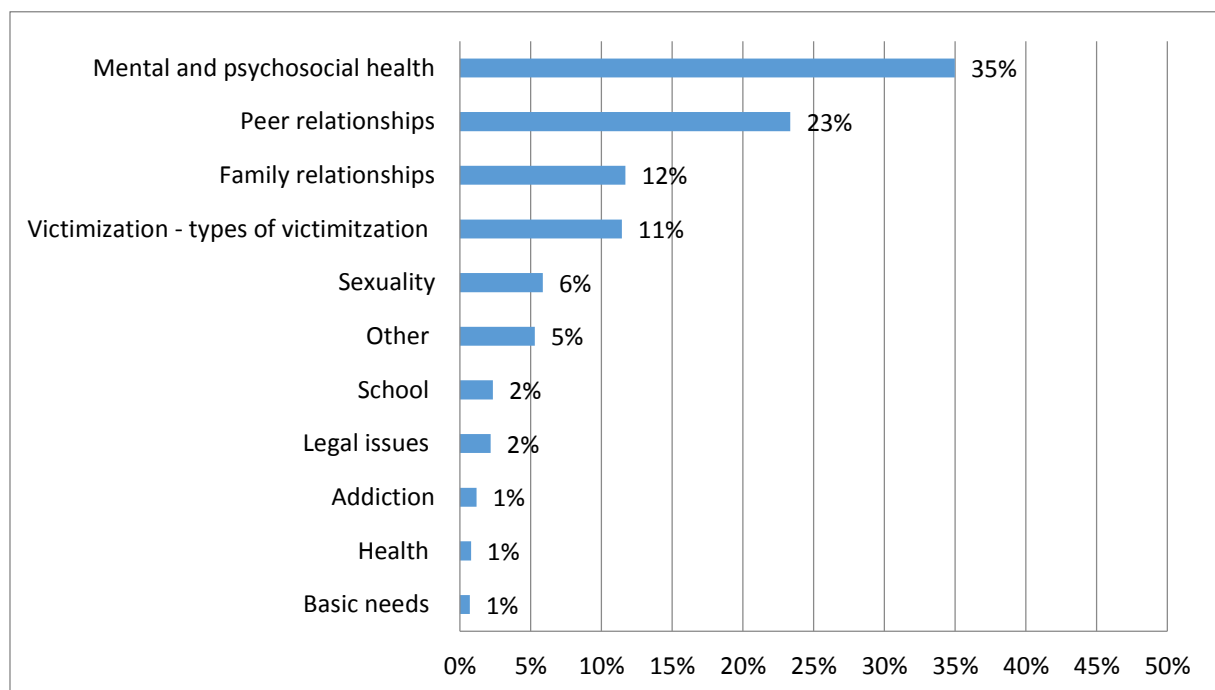
Chart 3. Message senders by age, N=4990 messages.



Source: Own data based on the annual statistics of the 116 111 Helpline for Children and Young People.

According to the categorization based on the helpline’s annual statistics, the largest proportion of messages sent by children and young people concerned the following areas: **mental and psychosocial health, peer relationships, and family relationships** (Chart 4). By comparison, the 2014 statistics of phone calls answered by helpline counsellors point to peer relationships as the most frequently addressed topic, followed by sexuality and victimization/maltreatment.

**Chart 4. Main topics by category, N=4990 messages.**



Source: Own data based on the annual statistics of the 116 111 Helpline for Children and Young People.

## Results of message analysis

### I. MOTIVATIONS TO USE ONLINE HELP

#### Online contact vs. telephone conversation

Online contact is an alternative to seeking help by phone. Messages sent to the helpline show that many children decide to send a message after several unsuccessful attempts to call the helpline.

*I've tried to call you several times, but **I couldn't get through...***

*I've called the helpline a few times, but **it's really hard to reach.***

*PS. **One just can't get through on the phone, I tried calling you many times.***

In some cases, however, online contact is the child's deliberate choice. Children's messages suggest that a phone conversation may be embarrassing or stressful for the caller. The perceived advantages of online contact include: feeling more comfortable when describing

personal problems rather than talking about them to a stranger; a stronger sense of anonymity; and being able to send a message anytime and from anywhere.

*I'm writing to you because I'm too shy to call.*

*It's not always easy to get through on the phone and it's a bit embarrassing to talk about it.*

*I'm afraid to call, because I would feel strange if I were to tell the whole story to someone I don't really know.*

*I could call, but I'm a little bit afraid that telling my story would be too stressful and upsetting.*

*I'm at least sort of anonymous here, and I'm writing instead of telling.*

Need for contact: Attention and unconditional acceptance

It seems that children and young people's primary motivation to seek help online is a belief that this form of contact will allow them to express their thoughts and feelings and share their problems without exposing themselves to judgment or criticism. Message senders often report they have no such opportunities in their environment.

*I'm writing here because I have no one else I could tell the story. They would surely laugh at me.*

*I guess no one wanted or was able to help me in any practical way... Thanks for your response, it feels as if someone understood me at last. I wish there was someone like this in my environment.*

*Sometimes I'd like to talk about my problems to someone non-virtual. But I have no one to talk to. Just like this.*

*There was no one who would like to talk about me, even for a short while.*

Lack of support from parents/adults in children's environment

Our analyses show that in many cases adults (parents and teachers) do not know how to talk to children about things that are important to them. As a result, children do not have opportunities to learn to share their experiences with adults in their close environment or to seek help and support. In their messages children admit they are reluctant to share problems

with their parents. Family relationships are a topic that is not only spontaneously raised by children, but also followed-up and elaborated by helpline counsellors.

*She or my father **don't know anything about my problems**. I always **pretend when I'm with them**. I **can't talk to them**.*

*But how to do it without my parents finding out? I **don't want to tell them about anything important, anything that matters to me**.*

*I feel unwanted and rejected. My relationship with my parents is **not that bad, like in other families, I guess**, but I'm still very much afraid of people.*

Some children feel their parents deliberately avoid “difficult” topics such as puberty of sexuality. Therefore even when they seek answers to such questions, they are afraid to ask their mother or father. Some children are also afraid that if they share their problems with their parents, they can be ridiculed or ignored.

*The situation with my parents is not really good, I **cannot talk to them about any difficult subject**. They never started a conversation about growing up, boys, sexuality or **my problems in general!** They prefer to think **these things just don't exist**. ...**They hardly ever talk to me** and if I tell them about something, they just nod their heads or mumble “uh-huh”.*

*I'm afraid to talk about it to my parents because they **don't take me seriously**. They think a **kid like me cannot have any problems**.*

Sometimes children are afraid that by sharing their problems with their parents they will cause them additional worries.

*I **can't tell anyone** what I've told you, except for my boyfriend, but my boyfriend is not the same as my mum or dad. I have a feeling that **my mum is tired with my problems**, I mean, she **has enough problems of her own** and I'm just an **extra nuisance** for her.*

*When I want to talk about problems, I talk to my best friend. I have a good relationship with my parents, but I **don't want to worry them**.*

## II. BENEFITS OF ONLINE HELP

Emotional benefits: Psychological support

For children who send messages to the 116 111 Helpline getting **attention and understanding** is often as important as obtaining practical solutions or advice. They would like someone to devote **time and attention** to try to understand their perspective, i.e., they expect to achieve something that is missing in their everyday life.

*I guess I wrote to you **to get a little bit of attention**.*

*What kind of help do I need at the moment? I can talk to you. **I have someone to confide in. That's enough.***

*I don't really know what I expect from you. **It helps me a lot that I can write to you and that you understand me and are able to answer my questions and doubts.***

*I don't need a lot of help, just some kind words and good advice, but today I'm in a terribly bad mood and **I have to get it off my chest.***

***It means a lot to me. You took a load off my chest, because now I know there are people out there who want to help me.***

*It's so important to me that **at least there's someone who's trying to give me advice, even if I can't talk to you face to face.***

Getting solutions vs. seeking solutions

The very fact that the child has to describe the situation and answer some questions about it may often help them to organize their thoughts and feelings, to find words for what is going on in their life and for the problem they have to face. For many children who write messages to seek help, it is a challenging and frustrating process, which however might be an important step towards finding a solution to their problems. Questions asked by helpline counsellors and their paraphrasing, mirroring, and encouragement skills play an important role in the process of defining problems by children.

*I wonder where to start and what to write... I don't even know if I really need help, maybe I'm just bothering people for no reason. **I don't even know how to name it or describe it. On***

*the one hand I feel there's a lot to say, but on the other hand perhaps **nothing is really going on** and I'm just dramatizing.*

*I don't really know what to think about it, that's why I'm writing.*

*Well, I feel much better now when I put my thoughts into words.*

*I'm glad I can write here because I'm describing my feelings, I can get it off my chest, and I get some advice :)*

*I don't really know why I'm writing all this, I don't even know if someone will ever read my message or write me back, if it's not too late. It's more like writing a diary, I sort of open up to myself. What else can I do?*

Functional benefits: Factual knowledge

At the same time the helpline is an **important source of knowledge** for children. By writing to 116 111 counsellors they can elicit important information or advice concerning things they are embarrassed or reluctant to talk about to adults in their environment, such as **health** or **sexuality**.

*I'd like to ask about what will happen if I, for example, run away from home. Is there any legal punishment?*

*I'd like to know, specifically, if it is a criminal offence.*

*Is there any other way, I mean... without my parents getting involved?*

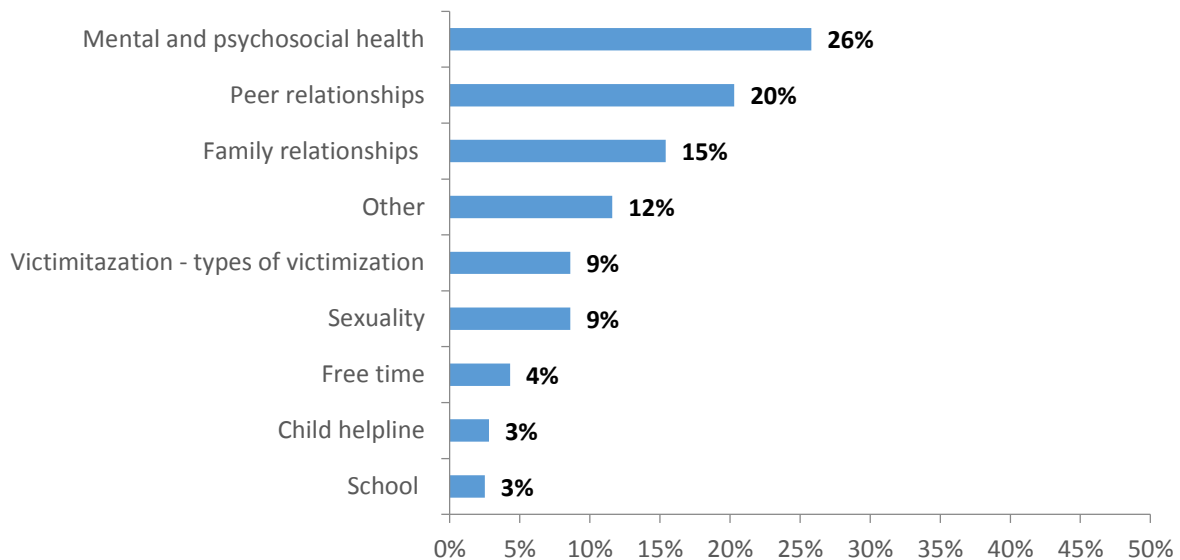
By contacting the 116 111 Helpline, children can also discover and adopt a different perspective on their problems. They learn to look for solutions and appreciate the benefits of talking to someone or finding someone trustworthy in their environment.

### III. PROBLEMS REPORTED BY CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ONLINE

The qualitative analysis of randomly selected messages was consistent with the annual statistics and pointed to mental and psychosocial health as the most frequently addressed topic. It was the main theme of one in four messages (26%). One fifth of the messages (20%) focused on peer relationships, and nearly one seventh (15%) concerned family issues. Nine

percent of the messages concerned sexuality and the same proportion addressed abuse and maltreatment.

**Chart 5. Main topics by category, N=352 messages.**



Source: Own data.

Charts 6, 7, and 8 show the distribution of subcategories (specific topics) within the three most popular subject areas<sup>7</sup>.

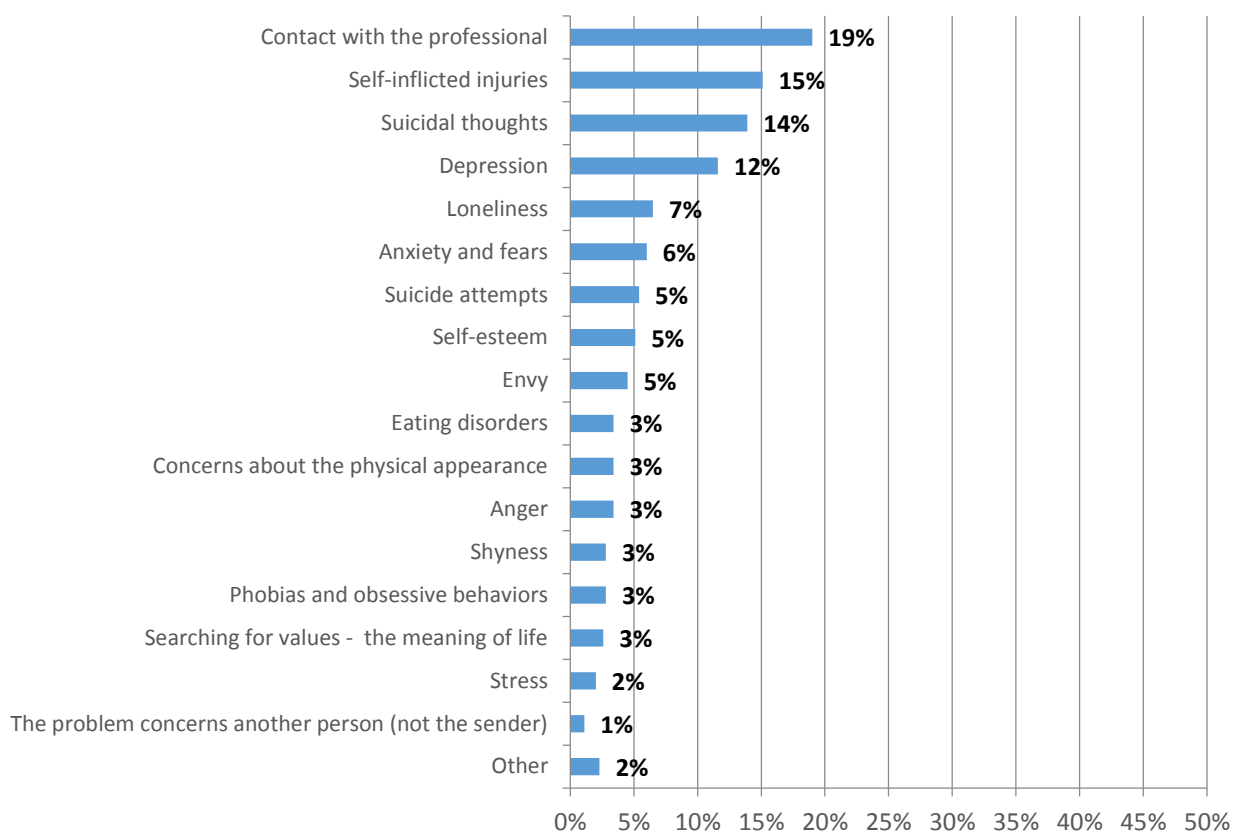
### Mental and psychosocial health

The largest proportion of messages included in the analysis was devoted to the senders' **mental and psychosocial health**. That broad category included problems such as: the need for professional help or contact with professionals, depressed mood, loneliness, feeling unable to cope with difficult emotions, or self-destructive behaviours.

<sup>7</sup> In the message analysis each message was coded for the main topic and one or more specific topics.



**Chart 6. Problems within the “Mental and psychosocial health” category, N=352 messages.**



Source: Own data.

Lack of support from adults in the child’s environment and the strategies children use to hide their problems are the reasons why **children often report feeling lonely** – they feel all alone with their worries, without care or attention from adults.

*I’m 16 and I’m **used to having to cope with problems on my own**, but this one, I guess, is too much for me.*

*I promised myself that when I have **my own child** I will never let anyone treat him the way they treat me now. I’ll want the best for him. **And I will never let him feel UNLOVED and UNWANTED.***

*The feeling of being **unloved** by **YOUR OWN MOTHER** is the worst feeling in the world.*

In search for significance

Many of the analysed messages included a reservation that the child's problem might be seen as "insignificant" (comparing to other people's problems) by the counsellor, but is very important to the child. It can be interpreted as a form of "hedging" against being ignored (a fear resulting from the child's previous experience) or as a manifestation of the child's belief that only "pathological cases" deserve attention from adults.

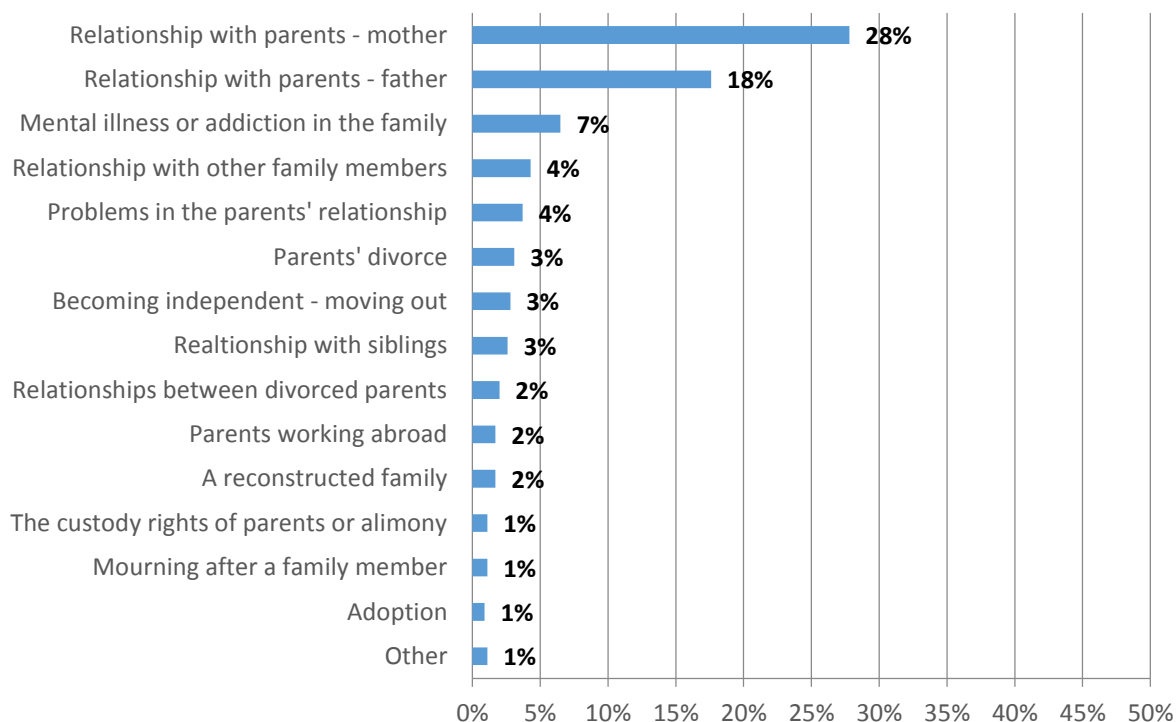
*I guess it is not such a tough problem comparing to others.*

*Many people have much more serious problems or worries than mine, but I'm writing to ask for advice.*

*I tried to call but no one answered the phone... Maybe that's better because **other people have bigger problems, I guess.***

At the same time, problems related to children's mental and psychosocial health are strongly interwoven with **family** issues. In their messages children devoted much attention to their relationships with their parents (especially mothers), to strategies they used to hide their problems from adults, and to problems in their parents' relationships.

**Chart 7. Problems within the “Family” category, N=352 messages.**



Source: Own data.

Maintaining pretence of normality: Pretending in front of adults

Children often write not only about their fear of being ignored, but also about the **strategies the use to hide their problems from people in their environment**. They often do not realize that keeping up appearances or pretending „everything is OK” not only makes it difficult for them to seek help, but also costs them a lot of effort and is emotionally exhausting.

*When I'm at school I try not to show my mood swings in public... Normally I pretend to be a girl without problems and I try to help others... I talk to people and worry about them, but no one worries about me.*

*When I'm with my parents I act tough, I just prefer it that way.*

*But my mum never offered me any help, I guess she doesn't know how hard it is for me. I don't want to ask her for help because she might think I feel sorry for myself. I can't stand it. I always keep things to myself.*

No space for the child's problem in the family

Children often describe how they turned to their parents with their problems but did not receive support they expected. Instead of getting help responding to their individual needs, they felt **“forced” to adapt to some generally accepted norms and standards of behaviour** (for example parents downplayed the child's difficulties or told the child straightforwardly that his or her problem would put the family in a difficult situation, because it would be negatively judged by others – e.g., teenage pregnancy or homosexuality). Sometimes the child is treated as the family's “showpiece”, an element of its public image. In such cases children often come to believe that their wellbeing is unimportant and that their individuality has been sacrificed to maintain the impression of a “normal” family.

*I talked to my parents about seeing a therapist, but they try to avoid it... Sometimes I have a feeling **no one really wants to know**. They all see me **the way they want to...***

*My uncles, grandparents and others don't know anything, because **my family is cracked and wouldn't say a word to anyone**.*

*I won't talk to my dad about going to hospital because my dad **already has a plan for my treatment in his head...** When I mention that I just don't have the strength, that I'm thinking about going to hospital, and that I'm so terribly tired, my dad always says: **“You can handle it” and presses me to admit he's right**. I know he wants the best for me, but **I'd like him, for once, to ask me what I need and to agree to that**.*

When parents deny or downplay the child's problems, the child starts to perceive them as members of the hostile public rather than as caring adults whom the child may turn to for help even with the most personal or embarrassing problems.

Self-destructive behaviours

**Accumulated negative emotions** and lack of knowledge or skills to cope with them may drive children to **self-destructive behaviours** such as self-inflicted injuries or, in extreme cases, suicide attempts.

*I really had no reason to cut myself again and now there is more and more of it and I'm **left on my own**. The first and only thought that helps me to **unload negative emotions is self-injuring**.*

*I harm myself whenever I **get upset or when something happens**.*

*I went to the kitchen and **cut my veins**. I was in terrible emotional pain, I felt so bad, so weak, I hated myself so much... **When I saw blood running from my body** I started to feel better, **the whole pain was going away with it.***

Again, children often put a lot of effort into concealing the effects of their self-destructive behaviours. They do this because they fear rejection, lack of understanding, or punishment.

*I hurt myself. I've been doing this **for a few years**. I haven't got many scars because I do it carefully **so that no one finds out.***

***No one knew I was doing it**, I mean **no adults**, but at school almost everybody knew.*

*I started to cut myself regularly in October, I guess. First I cut my arms and then my legs and stomach joined the party. I bled till I lost sensation. **My parents noticed that quite late.***

Support, understanding for their problems, and psychoeducation help children who engage in self-injuring to realize that the behaviour that was supposed to be a solution to their problem has actually become a problem in itself.

*I've been cutting myself for some time because **I read on the Internet that it helps you relieve stress** and feel much better. Unfortunately it didn't really work that way, but now cutting myself gives me great pleasure so as soon as I get back home I take a knife and...*

*My parents noticed that quite late when **I was already doing it for pleasure.***

*Using external categories to describe personal experience*

Senders devoted much space and attention to describing their psychological and emotional states. Interestingly, they often used **external categories present in the public discourse** (such as the media, popular culture, or self-help books) to describe their personal experiences, e.g., *mood swings*, *emotional breakdown*, *hysteria*, and *depression*, as if trying to fit their problems into “generally accepted adult norms”.

*I am 100% sure **I have depression.***

*I am a middle school student and **I'm going through a serious mental breakdown.***

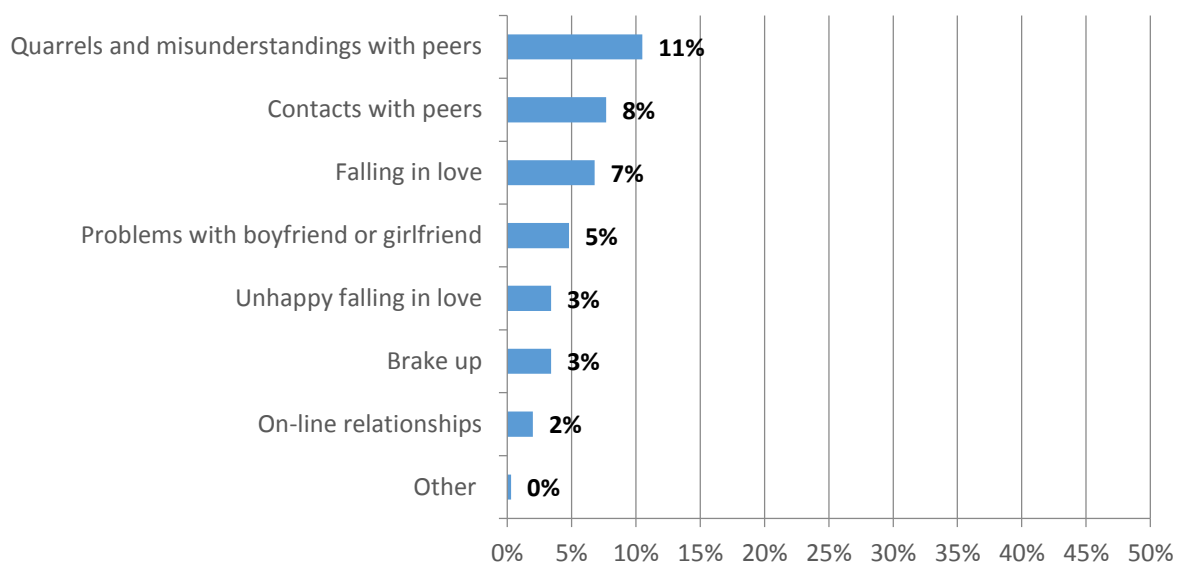
*I suffer from **hysteria and depression.***

*I have several mood swings throughout the day, almost every day. Sometimes I'm sad all the time; other days I'm hyperactive in the morning, then I burst into tears, later I have those rapid, manic movements and I talk too much, and finally I clam up and don't say a word to anybody – and all this during just one day.*

Peer relationships: A world of new experiences

Peer relationships are another topic frequently addressed in the messages. They are often **the centre of the child's world and the content of his or her everyday experience**. Senders describe situations that stir up a broad range of emotions, both positive and negative, such as: arguments with their peers, making and keeping friends, or their first relationships and breakups.

**Chart 8. Problems within the "Peer relationships" category, N=352 messages.**



Source: Own data.

#### *New roles and relationships*

Children and young people often share their difficulties related to entering new roles and relationships. They describe their emotions and worries related to building and ending close friendships and first romantic relationships and to their impact on children's relationships with their friends and parents.

Entering new, intense relationships is often related to being dependent on another person and to seeking boundaries of one's freedom and autonomy. Children often find it difficult to tell

the difference between a healthy friendship and a relationship in which one person is dominant and imposes his or her will on the other person or even abuses the partner emotionally. Lack of assertiveness and inability to set boundaries, combined with the natural need to have friends, may often keep children in abusive relationships despite their negative experiences.

*I know I can't forbid him anything or tell him what to do, but I don't want him to hang out with others, **because I think I love him** and I didn't think about anyone else during the holidays.*

*Thinking about it now, I guess **I just want to forget him**. I'm trying hard, but I can't, unfortunately.*

*I'm so lonely, **I had a friend for life and death**, but our friendship did not survive.*

*We spent the last year of middle school in the same class after we both moved. Ironically, **that year, which was supposed to bring us even closer, did a lot of damage to our friendship**.*

*The problem is that she is **terribly jealous**. She won't leave me alone for a minute, so I can't even talk to XXX1 or XXX2. She **keeps an eye on me all the time**.*

*My last important **friend** was XXX3, but **she took my boyfriend away and left me in the lurch**. Everyone sided with her and **stopped liking me, because I was not the cool one**.*

*Lack of peer acceptance*

**School** is a **natural environment** for the child's **everyday interactions**. When the child is not accepted by peers, especially in the class, the resulting tension and negative emotions are compounded by the **feeling of being trapped (unable to escape)** and, very often, by lack of understanding and support from adults.

*In the class **they treat me as if I didn't exist**, there are groups, 3 large groups of rich party kids...*

*Hi, my class **doesn't accept me**, I can't get along with them...*

*Anyway, **I was really surprised that the atmosphere in the class could be so nice**...*

The main barriers that prevent children from seeking help from their teachers or school counsellors include children's **mistrust**, not necessarily resulting from their past experience, and their lack of faith that an adult can actually solve the problem. Another important obstacle is the child's concern that more people will learn about the problem, e.g., other teachers or parents.

*Sure, **the psychologist should keep silent**. But I just can't resist the impression that **all students' matters are openly discussed in the staff room**.*

*I can't talk about it to the **school counsellor** even though I trust him as a person. I'm afraid **he's going to tell my parents, my form tutor, or the headmaster**. If he kept it to himself, it would be easier for me, but I'm afraid he won't.*

*The **school counsellor** called my mum in the evening and told her I was cutting myself again, but she must have said that **in a different way than my form tutor in primary school**, because this time my mum did not yell at me and I was not punished.*

*My form tutor once started a conversation about why everybody in the class was so **terribly afraid to sit next to me**, but it didn't change anything. **Even when a teacher shows some interest in my relationships with my classmates, it can only relieve the pain a little bit, but will not kill it**.*

Adolescence: Self-exploration and searching for the „normal“

The sample messages included topics related to the nature of adolescence: changes in the body and exploration of new areas such as sexuality, substance use, or the passage to “adulthood”.

*What am I like? Me in my own eyes and in the eyes of others*

Because of the various changes typical for adolescence, it becomes very important for young people to **be able to compare themselves to some “objective” external norms**. Very often it is **the idealized picture of the world created by the media that is used as such a frame of reference**. Senders write about their **low self-esteem** or about **feeling dissatisfied with their appearance**. At the same time, they care a lot about other people's opinions: They are concerned about how their peers evaluate them, what they think or say about them.



*I feel so worthless, empty-headed, stupid, dull, ugly, and **abnormal**. I feel like everybody is laughing at me. I can't believe in myself.*

## Summary

### MOTIVATIONS TO USE ONLINE HELP

- The 116 111 Helpline provides **space for children to share their problems** and express their worries and concerns **without exposing themselves to judgment** or criticism. It is a place where they can get **attention and unconditional acceptance**, which are missing in their environment.
- For many children being heard and understood is as important as getting practical guidelines or ready-made solutions. Online contact helps children to develop new important skills: to describe and analyse their situation, to search for solutions, and to take a different perspective.
- Online contact is chosen by children either **as a “substitute”** (when helpline counsellors are difficult to reach by phone) or **as the preferred form of communication** (helping children to overcome their shyness and reluctance to talk, even to an anonymous helpline).
- **Difficulties in communicating with parents** are a key problem reported by children and young people. Very often they **don't know how to talk to adults** about their problems, but they also make efforts to **hide their problems** from people in their environment, which makes it even more difficult to find a solution.

## **BENEFITS OF ONLINE HELP**

The analysis of selected messages identified two types of benefits children get from online contact with helpline counsellors: emotional benefits (**psychological support**) and functional benefits (**factual knowledge**).

## **PROBLEMS REPORTED BY CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ONLINE**

- Children often report **feeling lonely**, they feel they are left alone with their worries, without care or attention from adults.
- **Accumulated negative emotions** and lack of knowledge or skills to cope with them may drive children to **self-destructive behaviours** such as **self-inflicted injuries** or, in extreme cases, **suicide attempts**.
- **Peer relationships** are **the centre of the child's world** and the content of his or her everyday experience. Children and young people often share their **difficulties** related to **entering new roles and relationships** (close friendships, first relationships).
- **School** is a **natural environment** for the child's **everyday interactions**. When the child is not accepted by peers, the resulting **tension and negative emotions** are compounded by the **feeling of being trapped (unable to escape)** and, very often, by lack of understanding and support from adults.
- Due to the nature of adolescence – changes in the body and exploration of new areas such as sexuality, substance use, or the passage to “adulthood” – the problems of **self-esteem and how the child is seen by others** become a **source of concern and strong emotions**.

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