

Article

Child emotional abuse in England and Wales: year ending March 2019

Child emotional abuse in England and Wales, bringing together a range of different data sources from across government and the voluntary sector.

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1 . Main points

- The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) estimated that 1 in 11 adults aged 18 to 74 years experienced emotional abuse before the age of 16 years (3.8 million people); this includes perpetrators aged 16 years or over only.
- The abuse was most commonly perpetrated by the child's parent(s); around 5 in 10 were abused by their mother, around 4 in 10 were abused by their father.
- Emotional abuse was the most common category of abuse for the child protection register (CPR) in Wales (1,295 children at 31 March 2019) and the second most common for child protection plans (CPPs) in England (18,460 children).
- Childline delivered 3,925 counselling sessions to children in the UK where emotional abuse was the primary concern in the year ending March 2019.
- Emotional abuse is the only type of abuse to see an increase in Childline counselling sessions from the previous year, in contrast to the decrease for all other types of abuse; increased public awareness of the damage caused by emotional abuse is thought to have contributed to this increase.

Finding help

If you or someone you know has experienced abuse, help is available:

- [Childline](#) can be called on 0800 1111
- [Help for Adult Victims of Child Abuse \(HAVOCA\)](#) offers online support
- [Mind](#) can be called on 0300 123 3393 or emailed at info@mind.org.uk
- [National Association for People Abused in Childhood \(NAPAC\)](#) can be called on 0808 801 0331
- [National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children \(NSPCC\)](#) can be called on 0808 800 5000 or emailed at help@nspcc.org.uk
- [Rape Crisis](#) can be called on 0808 802 9999
- [Samaritans](#) can be called on 116 123 or emailed at jo@samaritans.org
- [The Survivors Trust](#) can be called on 08088 010 818
- [Victim Support](#) can be called on 0808 16 89 111

2 . What is child emotional abuse?

There is no specific offence of “child emotional abuse”. Practitioners have come to define child abuse based on the laws designed to protect children from harm. For example, [the 2018 HM Government report, ‘Working together to safeguard children’](#), defines “child emotional abuse” as:

“The persistent emotional maltreatment of a child such as to cause severe and persistent adverse effects on the child’s emotional development. It may involve conveying to a child that they are worthless or unloved, inadequate, or valued only insofar as they meet the needs of another person. It may include not giving the child opportunities to express their views, deliberately silencing them or ‘making fun’ of what they say or how they communicate. It may feature age or developmentally inappropriate expectations being imposed on children. These may include interactions that are beyond a child’s developmental capability, as well as overprotection and limitation of exploration and learning, or preventing the child participating in normal social interaction. It may involve seeing or hearing the ill-treatment of another. It may involve serious bullying (including cyber bullying), causing children frequently to feel frightened or in danger, or the exploitation or corruption of children. Some level of emotional abuse is involved in all types of maltreatment of a child, though it may occur alone”.

A child may be emotionally abused by an adult or adults or by another child or children.

A child is defined as anyone who has not yet reached their 18th birthday. This is consistent with the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(UNCRC\)](#). Article 1 states that everyone under the age of 18 years has all the rights in the Convention.

3 . Things you need to know about this release

This report brings together different data sources on child emotional abuse with the aim of providing a better understanding of child emotional abuse than is possible from looking at individual data sources. It has been produced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), working in collaboration with the:

- Department for Education (DfE)
- Home Office
- National Association for People Abused in Childhood (NAPAC)
- National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC)
- Welsh Government

Further commentary on child abuse, and quality and methodology information, can be found in [Child abuse in England and Wales](#).

How is child emotional abuse measured?

Measuring the scale and nature of child emotional abuse is difficult because it is usually hidden from view. Victims often feel unable to report their experiences and adults are not always able to recognise that emotional abuse is taking place. As a result, administrative data sources do not represent the full scale of the issue. There are no current surveys that measure children’s experiences of emotional abuse because of the challenges in asking this age group about such a sensitive topic. We therefore do not know how many children are currently experiencing, or have experienced, emotional abuse.

However, there are a number of sources of information that, when looked at together, can help build up a picture of the scale and nature of child emotional abuse. Indicators of child emotional abuse reported in this article use data on:

- adults' self-reported experiences of child emotional abuse
- offences recorded by the police
- children who come to the attention of children's services
- contact with support services

The different data indicators are not directly comparable. They are collected on different bases (for example, victims or crimes), using different timescales and reference periods.

Findings from the data sources reported on in this article, as well as additional data sources, can be found in the [appendix tables](#). We have also released a [data landscape](#), which includes a comprehensive list of data sources relating to child abuse.

4 . What do we know about the prevalence of emotional abuse during childhood?

Current prevalence of child emotional abuse is challenging to measure

There is no source providing the current prevalence of child emotional abuse. The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) provides the best available indicator by measuring the prevalence of adults who experienced emotional abuse before the age of 16 years perpetrated by someone aged 16 years or over.¹ The CSEW provides an underestimate of child emotional abuse as abuse against 16- and 17-year-olds and abuse perpetrated by children aged under 16 years are not included. This measure includes emotional neglect. See [Child neglect in England and Wales: year ending March 2019](#) for more information.

In the year ending March 2019, the CSEW estimated that approximately 3.8 million adults aged 18 to 74 years experienced emotional abuse before the age of 16 years perpetrated by someone aged 16 years or over ([Table 1](#)). This is equivalent to 9.3% of the population aged 18 to 74 years ([Table 2](#)). Victimization varied by certain personal and household characteristics. See [Characteristics of victims of emotional abuse](#) and [Tables 6 to 7](#) for more information.

The majority of victims experienced more than one type of abuse

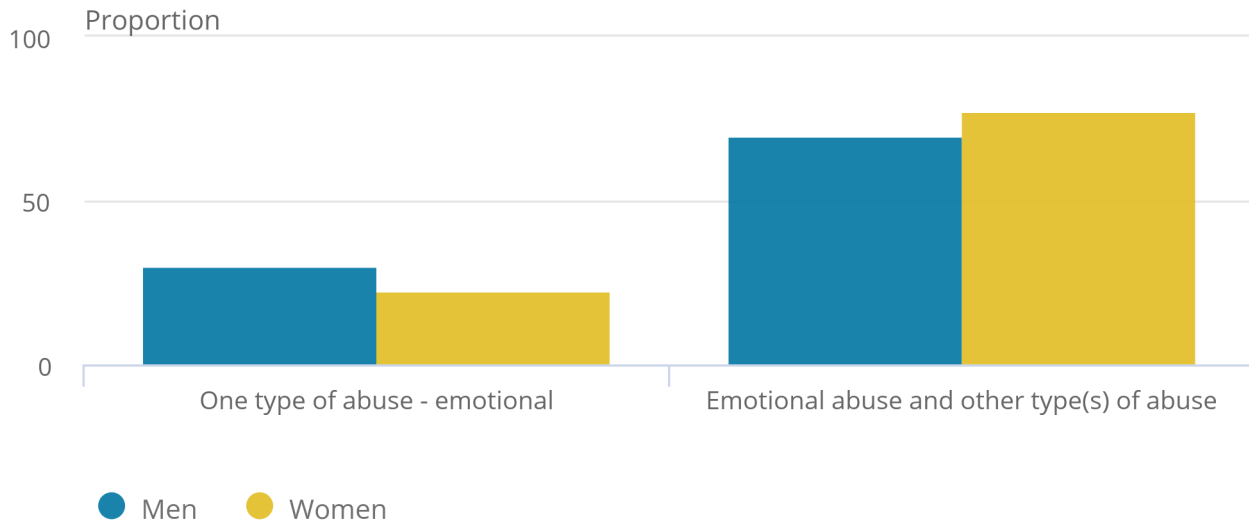
Three-quarters of adults who experienced emotional abuse before the age of 16 years, from someone aged 16 years or over, also experienced another type of abuse. This could be physical abuse, sexual abuse, and/or witnessing domestic violence or abuse (Figure 1; [Table 4](#)).

Figure 1: Women who experienced emotional abuse before the age of 16 years were more likely than men to experience multiple types of abuse

England and Wales, year ending March 2019

Figure 1: Women who experienced emotional abuse before the age of 16 years were more likely than men to experience multiple types of abuse

England and Wales, year ending March 2019



Source: Office for National Statistics – Crime Survey for England and Wales

Notes:

1. See Section 5.1 of the [User Guide](#) for definitions of abuse during childhood.
2. For cases where the respondent has answered “Don't know or can't remember” or “Don't wish to answer” for any of the types of abuse, it cannot be determined how many types of abuse the respondent experienced. For this reason, they have been excluded from the analysis.
3. “Emotional abuse” was referred to as “psychological abuse” in previous publications.

Further breakdown on the number and types of abuse for adults who experienced emotional abuse before the age of 16 years can be found in [Table 4](#).

The CSEW estimates fill an important evidence gap but only of adults' past experiences of emotional abuse. They do not provide a measure of the current level of emotional abuse experienced by children in England and Wales. We are undertaking a feasibility study to determine whether a new survey could effectively measure the current scale and nature of child abuse and neglect. Findings from this feasibility study will be published later in 2020.

Notes for: What do we know about the prevalence of emotional abuse during childhood?

1. “Emotional abuse” was referred to as “psychological abuse” in previous publications.

5 . Child emotional abuse recorded by the police

Some victims of child emotional abuse remain hidden. Understanding how many victims (or potential victims) do come to the attention of authorities is important to get a sense of the resources needed to support the child protection system.

Some offences recorded by the police will have come to their attention through the child protection system. A child protection investigation is mainly the responsibility of social workers within children's services. However, they work closely with the police, health workers and other professionals who are connected to the child and family.

As part of this, the police will investigate whether a criminal offence has been committed. They will not always record an offence because it is sometimes judged that it is not in the best interests of the child. Other action, such as a referral to the local authority, may be more appropriate. The number of offences recorded by the police is therefore an underestimate of the demand on the police for child emotional abuse.

Emotional abuse is not a separate offence in police recorded crime. The best available indicator of child emotional abuse recorded by the police is stalking and harassment offences where the victim was under the age of 18 years. Stalking is persistent and unwanted attention that makes people feel pestered and harassed. It includes behaviour that causes people to feel alarmed or distressed or to fear that violence might be used against them. Stalking and harassment will not cover all emotional abuse cases handled by the police. Cruelty to children /young persons may include emotional abuse; these cases cannot be separately identified. See [Child neglect in England and Wales: year ending March 2019](#) for more information.

It is not possible to identify the number of children that the number of offences recorded by the police relate to, as the same child may be the victim of multiple offences

Both adults and children can be victims of stalking and harassment offences. Age of the victim is therefore needed to identify those that relate to child emotional abuse. The Home Office Data Hub¹ is a live database that allows police forces to provide the Home Office with record-level information on all crimes recorded. This includes the age of victims at the time of the offence. However, this information is not always provided. Therefore, not all stalking and harassment offences against children recorded by the police can be identified.

Malicious communications accounted for the majority of stalking and harassment offences against children in the last year

The police recorded 19,132 stalking and harassment offences in the year ending March 2019 where there are data to identify the victim was a child ([Table 12](#)).²

Malicious communications accounted for 62% of these offences ([Table 12](#)). Malicious communications include "disclosing private sexual photographs with intent to cause distress or anxiety" and "sending letters (including emails) with intent to cause distress or anxiety". Harassment accounted for a further 34% of these offences ([Table 12](#)).

All police recorded crime data relate to offences recorded in the given year, regardless of when the offence took place.

The number of police recorded stalking and harassment offences have been impacted by recording improvements. This is particularly relevant to malicious communications offences, because of improved compliance in recording of these offences since their introduction in April 2015.

There was also a change to the Home Office Counting Rules in April 2018. Stalking or harassment is now recorded in addition to the most serious offence involving the same victim and offender. It is likely that the number of such offences recorded will increase until the rule changes have become regularly implemented across all forces.

Notes for: Child emotional abuse recorded by the police

1. The majority of police forces use the Data Hub, but some information is only available for a subset of forces, depending on the quality of information supplied. The Home Office is continuing to develop and implement this system.
2. This only includes offences where a victim's age was recorded.

6 . Child emotional abuse cases that come to the attention of children's services

Children may be referred to their local authority children's services because of concerns they are at risk of harm. As children's services work with the police to investigate concerns and safeguard children, there will be overlap in the cases handled by both agencies.

There will be additional cases that are not recorded by the police as a criminal offence, but the police may still be involved in the child protection investigation. Cases handled by children's services will also include children at risk of emotional abuse. Such cases would not be included in offences recorded by the police as a crime has not yet been committed. The aim of the local authority intervention is to prevent emotional abuse from occurring.

Each indicator identified in this article does not necessarily refer to the same cohort of cases. Direct comparisons therefore cannot be made.

The Department for Education (DfE) collects data on children who come to the attention of local authority children's services in England. The Welsh Government collects similar data for Wales. These data provide an insight into cases where the child needed support from a local authority.

Factors identified at end of assessment following a referral to children's services

Once a referral has been made to the local authority, they will decide what action to take, which may include an assessment. If the local authority identifies there is reasonable cause to suspect the child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm, it will carry out an assessment under [section 47 of the Children Act 1989](#) to determine if it needs to take steps to safeguard and promote the welfare of the child.

Factors contributing to concerns about the child are identified at the end of an assessment; more than one factor can be identified. The factors are designed only to identify what kinds of pressures are placed on children's services. The data are based on the opinions of the social workers assessing the cases. Care should be taken when drawing conclusions using this information.

In the year ending March 2019, there were 105,070 assessments in England where emotional abuse was identified as a factor at the end of the assessment ([Table 16](#)). Similar data are not available for Wales.

Children identified by children's services as needing support because of emotional abuse

Where concerns about a child's welfare are verified after assessment, a child protection case conference is held. The available evidence is drawn together to determine whether further action needs to be taken. Following this, a child may be subject to a [child protection plan](#) (CPP; England) or be placed on the [child protection register](#) (CPR; Wales). These set out actions to keep the child safe from harm.

Although the terminology between nations differs slightly, both record information relating to children whose safety is an ongoing concern. However, the two sources should not be compared.

At 31 March 2019, 18,460 children in England (15 per 10,000) were subject to a CPP for emotional abuse ([Table 17](#)), a 2% decrease compared with the previous year.^{1,2} A further 1,295³ children in Wales (21 per 10,000) were on the CPR for emotional abuse ([Table 21](#)). This was a 2% increase compared with the previous year.⁴

Emotional abuse was the second most common initial category of abuse, after neglect, for children on a CPP in England, accounting for 35% at 31 March 2019 ([Table 17](#)). This proportion has remained relatively stable since 31 March 2013, ranging between 32% and 35%.

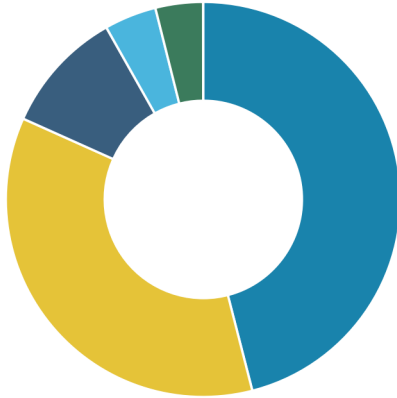
Emotional abuse was the most common category for children on the CPR in Wales at 31 March 2019, accounting for 46% of cases (Figure 2; [Table 21](#)). This proportion has been increasing in recent years, from 37% at 31 March 2017 to 43% at 31 March 2018, and emotional abuse has replaced neglect as the most common category.

Figure 2: Emotional abuse was the most common category for children on the child protection register

Wales, 31 March 2019

Figure 2: Emotional abuse was the most common category for children on the child protection register

Wales, 31 March 2019



Source: Welsh Government – Children receiving care and support (aggregate) return

Notes:

1. Data from 2016 to 2017 summarises information on assessments and care and support provided to children aged under 18 years by local authorities in Wales. The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act came into effect in April 2016. It is the new legal framework that brings together and modernises social services law in Wales. The Act changes the way people's needs are assessed and the way care and support is delivered.
2. These statistics are Experimental Statistics.

Children returning to a child protection plan

Of the 23,650 CPPs for emotional abuse that were started during the year ending March 2019, around one-fifth were a second or subsequent plan. ([Table 20](#)). Previous plans were not necessarily for the same type of abuse as the current plan. This indicates how many children are in recurring circumstances of abuse, but it could also indicate that the decision to remove a child initially from a CPP was premature.

Further information on children on CPPs or the CPR for emotional abuse can be found in [Tables 17 to 23](#).

Notes for: Child emotional abuse cases that come to the attention of children's services

1. Figures are rounded to the nearest 10.
2. At 31 March 2019, there were 230 unborn children subject to a CPP for emotional abuse because of concerns that the unborn baby was suffering or was likely to suffer significant harm once born ([Table 18](#)).
3. Figures are rounded to the nearest five.
4. As a result of changes in the legislation, comparable data are only available since the year ending March 2017.

7 . Use of child abuse support services

Some victims are not able to recognise that they are being emotionally abused, and adults cannot always spot the signs that child emotional abuse is taking place. Those that do recognise abuse may not seek help or report this abuse to a support service. However, data from child abuse support services provide some indication of the outreach of victims of child emotional abuse as well as those who are concerned about emotional abuse. The data also provide an indication of the level of demand on services in this sector.

There are a number of support services for victims of child abuse. The support services covered in this section may not be representative of all services.

There will be overlap in cases handled by authorities and dealt with by support services. Some cases that come to the attention of support services may already have been identified by the child protection system. The support service may also refer cases to external agencies.

Each indicator identified in this article does not necessarily refer to the same cohort of cases and so direct comparisons cannot be made.

Increase seen in counselling sessions where emotional abuse was the main concern

If a child has any concerns, they may contact Childline. This is a free service where children and young people in the UK can talk to a counsellor about anything. Information about Childline counselling sessions, which include calls, online chats and emails, indicates the levels and nature of current concerns about abuse from children who turn to Childline for support. The number and reasons for counselling sessions can be affected by Childline campaigns and other external factors such as high-profile news stories. Children may talk about a range of different issues over the course of a counselling session, but the issue they talked about the most is recorded.

There were 3,925 counselling sessions delivered to children in the UK where emotional abuse was the primary concern in the year ending March 2019 (Figure 3). This accounted for around one in five of all sessions for abuse (19,847; [Table 24](#)).

It is not possible to identify the number of children who are speaking to Childline as the same child may make multiple contacts.

The number of emotional abuse-related counselling sessions has increased by 5% from the previous year and is in contrast to a decrease in the overall number of counselling sessions and in all abuse-related sessions ([Table 24](#)).

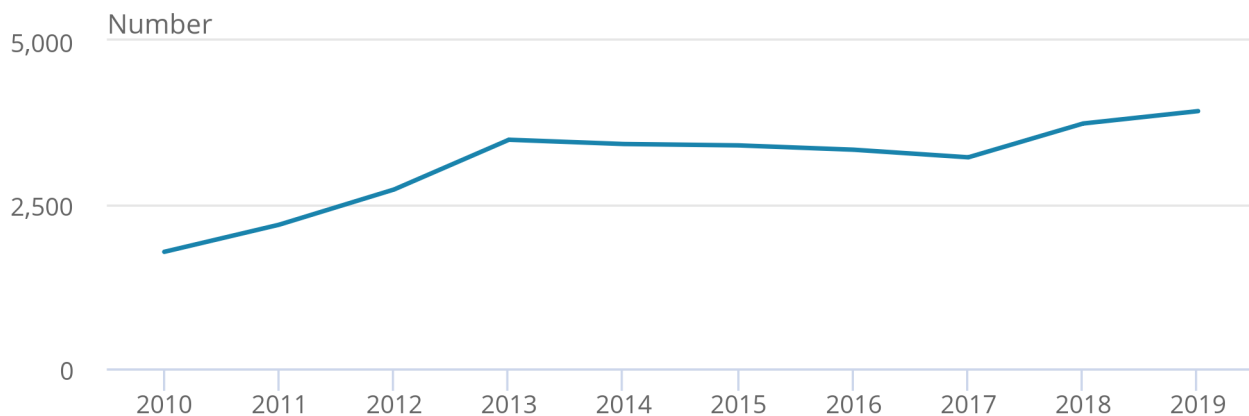
The increase could be partially explained by increased public awareness of the damage caused by emotional abuse. According to [research by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children \(NSPCC\)](#), in recent years Childline has seen a shift in what young people are talking about, with an increasing focus on issues related to mental and emotional health and well-being.

Figure 3: The number of counselling sessions where emotional abuse was the main concern has increased

UK, year ending March 2010 to year ending March 2019

Figure 3: The number of counselling sessions where emotional abuse was the main concern has increased

UK, year ending March 2010 to year ending March 2019



Source: National Society for the Prevention Cruelty to Children – Childline

Notes:

1. Data relate to the number of counselling sessions delivered by Childline (as opposed to the number of children speaking to Childline). The same child may have multiple counselling sessions with Childline.
2. Data relate to counselling sessions where the young person talked about their own worries. Data from counselling sessions where young people had concerns about another child are not included in these breakdowns.
3. Data relates to the “main concern” young people talked about in each counselling session. This is the issue that children and young people talked about most in their counselling session, but children may talk about a range of different issues over the course of a counselling session.

Childline is a [confidential service](#) but in exceptional circumstances, for example, if a child is requesting direct help or is in a life-threatening situation, Childline may make a referral to an external agency. In the year ending March 2019, Childline made 81 emotional abuse-related referrals on behalf of children ([Table 26](#)).

Emotional abuse-related contacts to the NSPCC have increased in the last year

Data from the NSPCC's helpline provide information on contacts from those who are worried about the safety or welfare of a child across the UK.¹ These contacts are based on the caller's own perceptions of abuse and neglect.

The number of contacts cannot tell you the total number of children about whom there are concerns. One contact can relate to multiple children, while multiple contacts can relate to the same child.

There were 9,460 contacts to the NSPCC's helpline where there was a concern of emotional abuse in the year ending March 2019 ([Table 27](#)). This was an increase of 6% from the previous year (8,887). This compares with an overall increase of 12% in helpline contacts over the same period.

Over half of contacts to the NSPCC for emotional abuse result in a referral

Callers to the NSPCC's helpline can receive advice or, when there is a serious concern about a child, a referral may be made to the local authority for support. For a referral to be made, information about the child's identity must be provided. Therefore, in some cases, it may only be possible for advice to be given even where there is a serious concern. The police will also be contacted if the child is at immediate risk.

Of the 9,460 emotional abuse-related contacts to the NSPCC's helpline in the year ending March 2019, around 6 in 10 (58%) resulted in referral to an external agency, with around 4 in 10 (42%) receiving advice ([Table 27](#)).²

Information on who contacted the NSPCC's helpline for concerns of emotional abuse can be found in [Tables 28 and 29](#).

Adults who experienced emotional abuse as a child may require support later in life

The National Association for People Abused in Childhood's (NAPAC's) helpline offers support to adult survivors of child abuse across the UK.³ Data from the NAPAC's helpline indicate the support adult survivors of child emotional abuse require later in life and the demand on the support services after the abuse has ended.

In the year ending March 2019, the NAPAC's helpline received 1,840 calls that included reports of emotional abuse, though callers could disclose more than one type of abuse during the call. This accounted for 45% of calls to the NAPAC's helpline in that year ([Table 30](#)). More information on calls to the NAPAC's helpline can be found in [Tables 30 to 32](#).

Notes for: Use of child abuse support services

1. A small proportion of calls in the latest year to the NSPCC's helpline are from children experiencing abuse themselves (3%) ([Table 28](#)).
2. This includes referral updates, where the helpline received additional information about an existing referral.
3. A small proportion of calls to the NAPAC's helpline in the latest year were from children, (2%) ([Table 32](#)).

8 . Characteristics of victims of child emotional abuse

Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) data on adults' experience of abuse before the age of 16 years provide a good indicator of the groups of children that are most likely to be victims of emotional abuse.

In the year ending March 2019, the CSEW estimated that women were more likely to have experienced emotional abuse before the age of 16 years than men, at 2.4 million women compared with 1.4 million men ([Table 1](#)).

[Child abuse extent and nature, England and Wales: year ending March 2019](#) provides more detailed commentary on the groups most likely to be victims.

The characteristics of those who come to the attention of the police and children's services also provide valuable insights into groups that are more likely to be known to the authorities.

Females accounted for the majority of victims of stalking and harassment offences against children recorded by the police in the year ending March 2019 (63% female compared with 37% male; [Table 13](#)).

Boys and girls were equally likely to be subject to a child protection plan (CPP) in England (15 per 10,000) or on the child protection register (CPR) in Wales for emotional abuse (16 per 10,000; [Table 18 and Table 23](#)).¹

Children aged under one year were more likely than other age groups to be subject to a CPP or on the CPR for emotional abuse, with 21 in 10,000 children subject to a CPP and 31 in 10,000 children on the CPR ([Table 18 and Table 22](#)).²

Characteristics of those who use support services

Some children are more likely to use Childline than others, so counselling sessions will disproportionately reflect their experiences. [Childline data](#) show that the majority of counselling sessions are with girls and the most common age is 15 years.

Of the counselling sessions provided for emotional abuse in the year ending March 2019 ([Table 25](#)), where gender was known, 81% or 2,738 sessions were delivered to females³, and where age was known, age 12 to 15 years was the most common age group, accounting for 49% or 1,706 sessions.⁴

Around three-quarters (77%) of emotional abuse-related calls to the National Association for People Abused in Childhood's (NAPAC's) helpline in the year ending March 2019 were from females ([Table 32](#)).⁵ Comparing this with CSEW estimates suggests that females are more likely than males to seek support for emotional abuse later in life, after the abuse has ended.

Notes for: Characteristics of victims of child emotional abuse

1. Data for Wales refer to at 31 March 2018. These are the latest data available.
2. There were 230 unborn children subject to a CPP for emotional abuse. These unborn children have been excluded from the analysis.
3. There were 557 counselling sessions delivered to children whose gender was unknown. These sessions have been excluded from the analysis.
4. There were 461 counselling sessions delivered to children whose age was unknown. These sessions have been excluded from the analysis.
5. Analysis excludes 39 callers where gender was undisclosed.

9 . What do we know about perpetrators of emotional abuse?

The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) provides information on the relationships between adults who experienced emotional abuse before the age of 16 years and their perpetrator(s). Knowledge of perpetrators is useful in tackling abuse as it can inform approaches that could be used to identify and prevent emotional abuse against children.

Parents were the most common perpetrators of child emotional abuse

Around 5 in 10 victims of emotional abuse before the age of 16 years were abused by their mother (45%) and around 4 in 10 were abused by their father (41%). Women who experienced emotional abuse were more likely to have been abused by their mother than anyone else, at 47% (Figure 4; [Table 11](#)). Men were more likely to have been abused by their father, at 48%.

These were the most common perpetrators for both men and women, but (Figure 4):

- women were around twice as likely as men to have been emotionally abused by a partner or ex-partner before the age of 16 years, at 20% compared with 11%
- men were more likely than women to have experienced emotional abuse by a person in a position of trust or authority, such as a teacher, doctor or youth worker, than women, at 8% compared with 5%
- men were more likely than women to have experienced emotional abuse by a stranger, at 7% compared with 4%
- men were more likely than women to have experienced emotional abuse by a step-father, at 12% compared with 8%

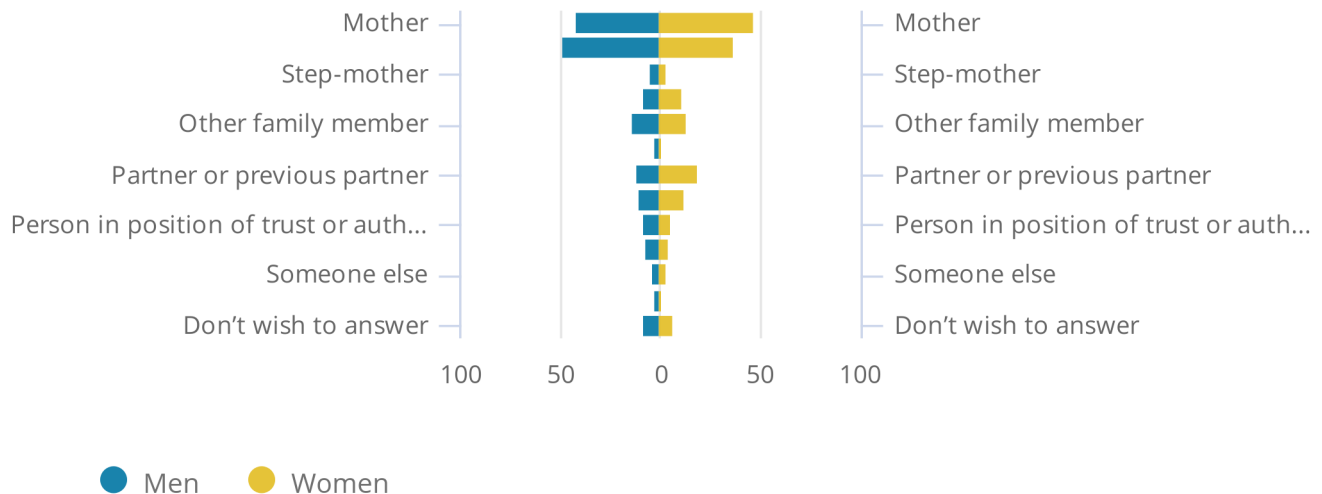
Other apparent differences between men and women are not statistically significant.

Figure 4: Men were more likely than women to have been emotionally abused by their father

England and Wales, year ending March 2019

Figure 4: Men were more likely than women to have been emotionally abused by their father

England and Wales, year ending March 2019



Source: Office for National Statistics – Crime Survey for England and Wales

10 . Quality and methodology

All differences reported in this article, based on the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW), are [statistically significant](#) at the 5% level, unless stated otherwise. More information about the methodology of the CSEW can be found in the [User guide to crime statistics for England and Wales](#).

Any rates reported in this article are calculated using [mid-year population estimates](#) for the child population (those aged 0 to 17 years). For example, figures for the year ending March 2019 will be based on mid-year 2018 population estimates.

Further commentary on child abuse, and quality and methodology information, can be found in [Child abuse in England and Wales](#).

Child abuse cases that come to the attention of children's services

Children may be known and referred to children's services following emergency intervention by the police or a court order. Where there is a risk to the life of a child or a likelihood of serious immediate harm, local authority social workers, the police or the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) should use their statutory child protection powers to act immediately to secure the safety of the child. Whenever there is reasonable cause to suspect that a child is suffering or is likely to suffer significant harm, there should be a strategy discussion involving local authority children's social care (including the residential or fostering service, if the child is looked after), the police, and health and other bodies such as the referring agency. This might take the form of a multi-agency meeting or phone calls, and more than one discussion may be necessary.

Child abuse cases referred to the child protection system are only a partial picture

Although data on child emotional abuse cases that come to the attention of the authorities provide valuable information, they can only ever provide a partial picture of child emotional abuse as many cases remain hidden.

A [study conducted by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children \(NSPCC\) in 2009](#) looked at the prevalence of child abuse and neglect in the UK and estimated that 3.6% of children aged under 11 years, 6.8% of children aged 11 to 17 years and 6.9% of those aged 18 to 24 years had experienced emotional abuse by a parent or carer at some point in childhood. However, these findings are now more than 10 years old. It is not known whether, or how, the picture of child emotional abuse has changed since then.

Estimates from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) provided in this report help to address this evidence gap by providing [official statistics](#) on the prevalence of adults who experienced emotional abuse before the age of 16 years perpetrated by someone aged 16 years or over. They are based on a set of self-completion questions asking a representative sample of adults aged 18 to 74 years in England and Wales.

It was not possible to ask respondents about abuse that occurred under the age of 18 years within the constraints of the CSEW. This is because of an overlap with existing survey questions on abuse experienced since the age of 16 years.

For the self-completion questionnaire, respondents are given a tablet computer on which to complete their answers. This is designed to be anonymous, to give the respondent privacy and to encourage full disclosure. But some may still be unwilling to disclose. While the level of disclosure is unknown, it is reasonable to assume some element of under-reporting.

The CSEW defines emotional abuse as someone experiencing any of the following:

- being told they were not loved
- being told that they should never have been born
- being threatened to be abandoned or thrown out of the family home
- being repeatedly belittled to the extent that they felt worthless
- being physically threatened or having someone close to them physically threatened
- being emotionally neglected

The CSEW estimates in this report cannot be compared with [NSPCC's 2009 survey results](#). The definitions and methodology used across the two sources are not directly comparable. For example, children and young people were surveyed within their homes. As a result, a level of under-reporting is expected as the perpetrator may have been present while the survey was being carried out. Furthermore, the estimates for children aged under 11 years were derived from interviewing the child's parent or guardian. For more information on the methodology used in the NSPCC survey, see [Child abuse and neglect in the UK today](#).