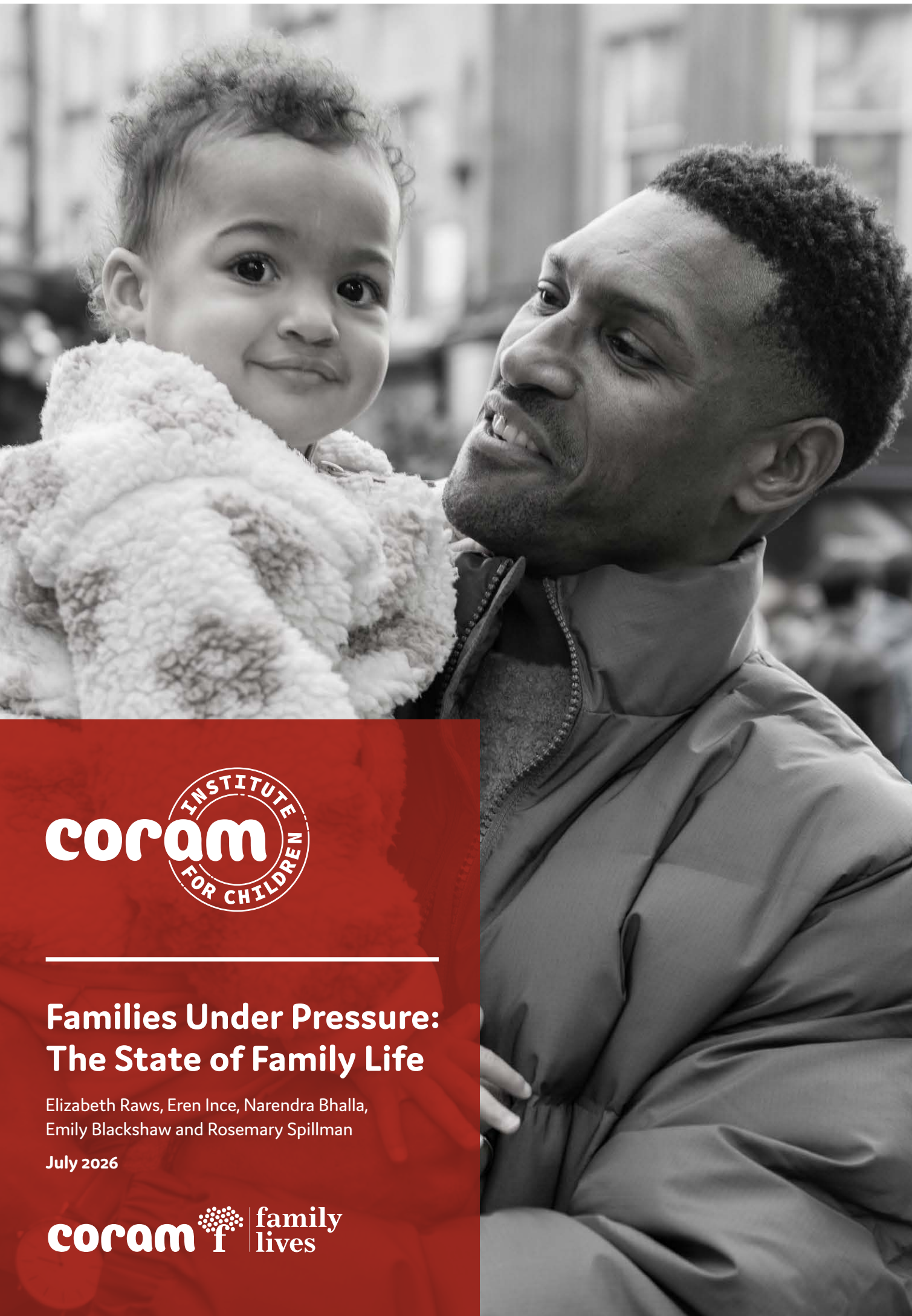




Families Under Pressure: The State of Family Life

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July 2026





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Acknowledgments – we would like to thank Christina Penny and Rosemary Spillman from Coram Family Lives for providing all the data that went into this report and for their guidance in producing it. Thank you also to Jeremy Todd and Rachel Tonkin for their contributions and guidance.

Funding and competing interests – This report was funded by Coram Family Lives and produced by members of the Coram Research, Impact and Evaluation team and colleagues from Coram Family Lives.

About Coram – Coram is the first and longest continuing children's charity, established as The Foundling Hospital – the birthplace of children's social care – in 1739. Coram's vision for children is a society where every child has the best possible chance in life, regardless of their background or circumstances and the Coram Institute for Children is instrumental in realising this vision by turning insight into impact.

About Coram Family Lives – Coram Family Lives has for almost 50 years been the frontline universally accessible parent helpline, providing direct family support services in multiple locations across the country, supporting around 30,000 families annually through the national helpline, and receiving around three quarters of a million visits per annum to its digital advice centre. It joined the Coram Group and became known as Coram Family Lives on 1 April 2026.

About Coram Research, Impact and Evaluation – We are a team of mixed methods researchers within the Coram Institute for Children that works on internally and externally commissioned research and evaluation projects. We aim for all our work to be child-centred, rigorous, grounded in experience, collaborative, and impactful.

Foreword

Family life has always been complicated but families today are also living through a period of rapid social, technological and economic change. The challenge of distinguishing trustworthy information from misinformation, the pressures of poverty, and wider political and social uncertainty all contribute to a sense of instability for children, parents and carers alike.

At Coram Family Lives, we recognise that one of the most important roles we play is in providing early support before difficulties escalate and become significantly harder for families to manage. We also know that, for many parents and carers, simply feeling that they are not alone can be an important first step towards confidence, stability and change.

Regardless of social, economic or wider circumstance, there are some core things parents and carers can do to create greater stability for children in an often unstable world. These include making time, setting boundaries, providing consistency, and staying engaged.

Time is perhaps the most precious thing we can offer our children. In a world that often feels pressured, fragmented and fast-moving, the consistent presence of a parent or carer remains profoundly important. Whether a child is playing with friends in the park, spending time alone in their bedroom, gaming online or engaging with social media, adults continue to play a vital role in helping children feel safe, heard and understood.

At Coram Family Lives, we recognise that many families are navigating significant pressures. Mental health difficulties, financial strain, changing family structures, social isolation and increasing levels of diagnosed and undiagnosed neurodivergence all add complexity to family life. These pressures can make everyday parenting feel harder, particularly when parents and carers are trying to support children through experiences, platforms and social worlds that may feel unfamiliar or difficult to interpret.

This is why regular, meaningful engagement between adults and children matters so much. Parents and carers do not need to be experts in every aspect of their children's lives. They do not need to understand every game, app, trend or online interaction. What matters most is that they remain curious, available and trustworthy. The parental role is often to create the conditions in which children feel able to talk: to ask open questions, to listen without immediate judgement, and to offer reassurance even when the subject matter is complex, uncomfortable or uncertain.

Families under pressure need support, not blame. They need practical guidance, emotional reassurance and confidence that small, consistent moments of connection can make a real difference. At the heart of our work is the belief that when parents and carers are supported, children are more likely to feel secure, valued and able to thrive.

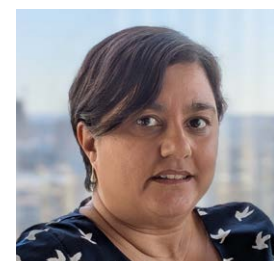
This report highlights a wide range of issues that we continue to encounter through our data, services and engagement with families. We commend it to you as a snapshot of family life across the UK: familiar in many of the pressures it describes, but also hopeful in what it reveals about the enduring importance of relationships. Even in a changing and uncertain world, the power of love, time, consistency and clear boundaries remain among the most important resources parents and carers have in helping children grow, feel safe and thrive.



Jeremy Todd
Managing Director,
Coram Family Lives



Neena Rupani,
Chair of Trustees,
Coram Family Lives



Families under pressure need practical help, timely intervention and trusted relationships – not delayed responses once difficulties have already become entrenched.

Executive summary



Family Lives was established in 1973 as Parentline Plus and is the frontline free national support service for families under pressure. Independent of statutory services, we are trusted by local authorities and individual families alike and support some 36,000 families every year to access the support they need.

This report marks Family Lives' entry into the Coram Group. It draws on analysis of data from Family Lives' flagship helpline service between 2021 and 2025, alongside an overview of its wider services and a new literature review. Together, these sources provide a picture of the state of parenting in England today. The report concludes with a set of policy recommendations aimed at improving outcomes for families across England in the years ahead.

In 2025, the Family Lives helpline received over 30,000 calls, 11,678 users registered for the organisation's online courses, and the Family Lives website reached over 356,000 active users. Together, these figures underline the first key finding on the scale of demand from families seeking trusted, accessible support.

Most people contacted the helpline by telephone, which accounted for 64% of contacts, followed by online live chat, which accounted for 22%. This demonstrates the continued need for immediate, accessible conversations with trained and trusted supporters, particularly at moments when families may be experiencing pressure, uncertainty or crisis.

We have examined and explored helpline usage and other sources of information from Family Lives' previous reports to identify primary issues for adults and children, demographics of service users, and risks of harm and their contexts. The analysis concentrates on data from 2025 (January–December) and compares it with data from the previous four years to uncover trends.

Overall the analysis points to a clear and consistent pattern: the pressures and consequences of relationship breakdown are a defining feature of the challenges facing families. In 2025, one in three helpline contacts were about divorce and separation which remains the most common issue affecting both adults and children.

Where gender was recorded, the majority of contacts were from women (66%), though a substantial proportion of men also sought support (33%). More than two-thirds of those contacting the helpline were parents, with the remainder being other family members or people connected to the family. Where family status was recorded, single-mother families accounted for nearly half (45%) of helpline contacts in 2025.

This highlights the particular pressures faced by lone-parent households, especially single mothers, in navigating the demands of family life and the data also suggests that these pressures often intersect with concerns around parental and child mental health, managing children's behaviour, and the additional complexity that can arise in the context of divorce and separation with parents reporting facing contact issues, unable to make a contact agreement with the other party, and dealing with the emotional impact of conflict.

Divorce and separation, emotional and mental health, social services involvement, and couple relationship issues have consistently dominated helpline contacts over the period. Since being added as a data option, legal difficulties have also remained among the top five issues affecting adults.

This is significant when considered alongside the increased volume of calls to the Child Law Advice Service, run by Coram Children's Legal Centre, where families seek more specialist legal advice and information. Taken together, this suggests that many families are navigating not only emotional and relational pressures, but also legal and statutory complexity that requires timely, accessible and trusted support.

In 2025 specifically, conversations about children's concerning behaviour comprised over a third (38%) of helpline contacts about children and about half of these cases related to children being verbally and/or physically aggressive and violent. These children were more often male, teenagers (12-15 years), and in families where there was neurodivergence and specifically centred around concerns about boundaries, verbal and physical aggression, and violence.

In addition, our data shows that the issues facing families are persistent rather than temporary, pointing to entrenched challenges within family life.

For children, four of the top five issues discussed on the helpline – divorce and separation, behaviour of young children aged 0–12, behaviour of teenagers, and emotional and mental health – have remained among the five most frequently raised issues over the last five years.

In 2025, over 3,300 contacts identified risks of harm, highlighting significant vulnerabilities and needs in families seeking support through the Coram Family Lives helpline. Emotional abuse was the more commonly recorded risk, accounting for a third of these cases (33%). Notably, a fifth of risk cases (21%) involved children displaying physical or threatening aggression towards their parents, underlining the growing prominence of child-to-parent violence as a serious issue within family life.

Recommendations

The Coram Family Lives helpline provides a crucial early warning system for statutory children's services and an essential open-access provision that helps families de-escalate difficulties before needs become entrenched or reach crisis point.

The government has set out a range of important reforms to support families, including the Best Start Family Hubs programme, work to tackle child poverty, proposed changes to benefit policy, and reforms to children's social care. Alongside the continuation of programmes such as Families First, these initiatives signal a welcome commitment to early intervention, prevention and more joined-up family support.

However, the evidence from Coram Family Lives shows that significant gaps remain. Without further targeted action, many families will continue to experience unmet need, particularly in relation to children and young people's mental health, neurodevelopmental support, single-parent family life, and child-on-parent aggression.

We therefore recommend that national and local policymakers:

- 1. Recognise and promote open-access family support** as part of the early help system. Helplines and digital support services should be treated as core prevention infrastructure, not as peripheral or discretionary provision. They provide a vital route

into support for families who may not meet statutory thresholds but whose difficulties are real, persistent, and at risk of escalation.

- 2. Target waiting times for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services.** Children and young people experiencing mental health difficulties must be able to access timely support from CAMHS and related specialist provision, before distress escalates and wider family relationships come under further strain. Long waits can intensify distress, increase pressure on parents and carers, and leave children without the support they need at a critical stage.
- 3. Increase capacity for ADHD and autism assessment,** diagnosis and support. Waiting times for neurodevelopmental assessment remain too long. Children, young people and families need earlier identification, clearer pathways and practical support before, during and after diagnosis. Earlier identification of neurodevelopmental needs must be matched by practical, family-centred support. Parents and carers need guidance before, during and after assessment, particularly where children's behaviour, school attendance, family relationships or parental mental health are under strain.
- 4. Develop targeted support for single parents in every area.** Single-parent families, particularly single mothers, are disproportionately represented among those seeking support. Policymakers should undertake a consultation with single parents, practitioners, charities and sector experts to better understand the pressures facing lone parent households and to design support that reflects their lived experience.
- 5. Respond earlier to child-on-parent aggression.** Child-on-parent aggression should be recognised as a serious and often hidden form of family distress. A compassionate, trauma-informed and whole-family approach is needed, balancing safety, accountability and support. Families should be able to access help before behaviour escalates into crisis, safeguarding or criminal justice responses.
- 6. Expand access to early legal advice,** including written follow-up, should be clearly advertised to families. Legal aid should be reinstated in all cases where there is local authority involvement in private law children's proceedings, including special guardianship orders. This would help parents and carers make better informed decisions, reduce conflict where possible, and improve outcomes for children.
- 7. Further research** should also be undertaken into effective interventions for child-on-parent aggression and violence, so that policymakers, commissioners and delivery organisations can respond with greater confidence and consistency.

Taken together, these recommendations would strengthen the early help system, reduce pressure on statutory services, and ensure that families can access the right support at the right time.

Research and policy context



Children do not grow up in isolation from the adults who care for them, and parents and carers cannot always provide the support children need without trusted guidance. Research shows that family support needs are shaped not only by financial pressures, but also by parental wellbeing, relationship stability, mental health, resilience and access to support networks. Against a backdrop of changing family structures, rising mental health needs and continued economic pressures, many families are navigating increasingly complex challenges, reinforcing the importance of accessible and timely support.

Cumulative change

There have been huge shifts in social attitudes towards families and parenting in the period since the second world war (Hunt, 2009; Oppenheim and Rehill, 2020). Family structures are changing, with more people delaying parenthood; choosing co-habitation rather than marriage while having children; and an increase in divorce and separation rates – meaning more children are raised by single parents than by those who are co-parenting (Kiernan, Crossman and Phimister, 2024).

Married couples have been found to have greater resources for childrearing than co-habiting couples, with lone parents having the fewest resources (Kiernan, Crossman and Phimister, 2024). This leaves many parents attempting to meet their children's physical, social, and emotional needs with less support.

There is evidence that parental separation has negative impacts on parents themselves and their children (Amato, 2000; Salman Akhtar, 2017; D'Onofrio and Emery, 2019; Ritzema, 2025). Although, more research is needed to establish how these results compare with the impacts on families where parents do not separate even where there is significant conflict.

Financial pressures

In addition to social changes, austerity, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the cost-of-living crisis have put significant financial strain on families and reduced resources allocated by the government to support parents and children (Rodrigues, Silva and Franco, 2021; Barnardo's, 2022; Mari and Keizer, 2024). Yougov (working on behalf of UNICEF UK) found that almost half (47%) of parents of 0-4 years olds in Britain worry a lot of the time or all of the time about making ends meet and two-thirds (66%) say the rising cost of living has negatively impacted their family life (Yougov, 2024).

Child Poverty Action Group (2025) found that families are able to cover far less of the cost of having children than in 2008, largely due to real-terms cuts to social security and the two-child benefit cap, though this should be somewhat alleviated by the removal of the two-child benefit cap, which was actioned in April 2026 (Department for Work & Pensions, 2025). According to Hall and Perry (2013) the four key drivers of stress in family life during austerity were: the cost of living, the cost of owning and running a car, depending on credit to finance family costs and the significant price of childcare, none of which have yet been alleviated.

Are families really put first?

There have been some policy developments that aim to address some of these pressures through early intervention and systems-level responses.

The previous Conservative government established the Families First Partnership Programme, which aimed to improve children's social care through prioritising early intervention, improved multi-agency working, and enhanced family support.

The current government has rolled out the Best Start Family Hubs programme, creating centralised hubs in communities across England where families can go to learn what support they are entitled to and how to access it. It has also removed the two-child benefit cap and launched a strategy to tackle child poverty.

The expansion of childcare entitlements means that the costs of childcare for working families has been alleviated, but children in non-working households still experience disadvantage in access to early education (Hodges et al., 2025). However, there remain gaps that these policies do not address.

The 2025 Childcare Survey (Hodges et al., 2025) shows that recent entitlement expansions have dramatically reduced childcare costs for working families in England, with parents paying less than half as much for part-time care, and more than twenty percent less for full-time care, for under-threes. However, these gains are not shared by non-working households, who face substantially higher costs and may be priced out of early education altogether. This creates a growing equity gap, particularly concerning given the developmental benefits of early years provision.

At the same time, persistent shortages – especially for children with SEND and families with atypical working patterns – highlight ongoing structural weaknesses in childcare access. There are also significant gaps in emotional and practical support for families where parents or carers have separated or where there is neurodivergence.

These issues are reflected in the stories of the families that the Coram Family Lives helpline supports, which are included in this report.

Reality of daily life

Coram Family Lives has a unique relationship with families across the UK who are seeking help. It connects with parents and carers at an early-intervention stage (through its local programmes, online resources, and helpline) and at points of crisis (through its support helpline). This provides a window onto the challenges families face, as well as how unaddressed needs can spiral into situations where families are pushed to breaking point.

Through the organisational data Coram Family Lives collects on its service users, we can see how and why families may be struggling, how they draw on their strengths to navigate issues they face, and where there are gaps in support.

A rapid review of recent evidence on the key non-financial drivers of family support needs, providing context for the

helpline findings and situating them within broader trends affecting families across England.

Together, these sources of evidence have helped us to shape policy recommendations (included towards the end of this report) that would help to address unmet family needs and evidence gaps.

Existing evidence on parenting pressures: a brief literature review

The aim of this literature review is to provide a wider context on the key themes that have come up in the Coram Family Lives data, to give readers a picture of what the national landscape looks like when it comes to families experiencing these issues.

Divorce and Separation: Impact on parents, carers, children and families

Parental divorce and union dissolution has been an increasingly common experience for children in all developed countries across the world. In the financial year ending 2025, it is estimated that there were 2.4 million separated families in Great Britain and 3.9 million children in those separated families (DWP, 2026). Over a quarter of children in the UK experienced nonconventional family trajectories (i.e., they did not grow up with their two biological parents) and one in five children experienced some form of family instability (i.e., parental separation or re-partnering) between birth and age 10 (Šťastná et al., 2024). With more and more high-quality longitudinal data becoming available,¹ there is an increasing number of studies using this data to explore the longer-term impact of going through this change in both parents and carers and their children.

Research has consistently demonstrated that experiencing a complex or unstable family environment is linked to worse child mental health (Amato, 2000; Härkönen et al., 2017; Kiernan et al., 2011). More recent studies also found that children with continuous married parents had better mental health outcomes at age 11, compared with children whose parents had separated (Goisis et al., 2016). Further, White adolescents appeared to experience much lower levels of mental health when living with a divorced or separated mother or mother partnered with a non-biological father, compared with non-White adolescents (Šťastná et al., 2024).

A study using data from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) found that dissolution of high-quality parental unions had the most harmful effects on children, especially concerning conduct problems (Garriga & Pennoni, 2020). Paternal departure in childhood was associated with an increase in both

¹ Most studies referenced in this review measuring long term outcomes using longitudinal data are linked to the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), the UK Household Longitudinal Survey (UKHLS) or the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS).



externalising and internalising behaviours in males (Fitzsimons & Villadsen, 2019; Culpin et al., 2015; Culpin et al., 2013).²

Father absence also negatively impacted externalising problems for boys, but the evidence was mixed around the impact on externalising behaviour in girls (Fitzsimons & Villadsen, 2019; McLanahan et al., 2013). Evidence also suggests that separation impacted more negatively on internalising behaviours among children from lower-income families than children from higher-income families (Weaver and Schofield, 2015).

Some studies showed that young people's physical health was also impacted. Separation during childhood can be associated with higher likelihood of daily smoking in late adolescence (Soares et al., 2017), and in the longer term, with a lower or higher body mass index (Goisis et al., 2019).

Effects on education and wellbeing

There is also evidence present to suggest that parental separation/divorce impacted children's educational outcomes and wellbeing. In a report published by the Department for Education (DfE) looking at family stressors and children's outcomes, separation or divorce (that occurred after age seven) had negative associations with achievement at age 16 as well as emotional, behavioural and social wellbeing at age 13. For wellbeing, these associations continued to be significant, even controlling for previous wellbeing, free school meals eligibility, and SEND. Teenagers who experienced parental conflict also had lower test and exam scores and emotional, behavioural, and/or social wellbeing (DfE, 2013).

In a qualitative study on the experience of family members with separation, parents described separation as a process, rather than a single event, both in terms of the difficulties encountered in the build-up, as well as the adjustment required after the end of the legal aspect (Symonds et al., 2022). Separation was linked to worsening mental distress (measured using the General Health Questionnaire) and reduced subjective wellbeing among parents – however, values recovered to pre-split levels quite quickly (Brewer & Nandi, 2014).

A review article including UK data also found that conflict between ex-spouses could leave parents emotionally drained and thus less attentive to their child, in turn negatively impacting post-divorce child adjustment (van Dijk et al. 2020). Furthermore, four in 10 parents that were separated and/or divorced said they had experienced Parental Alienating Behaviours (PABs),³ and those at the receiving end showed

greater signs of serious mental stress, like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms, depression, and thoughts of suicide (Hine et al., 2025).

There were also gendered patterns. The enhanced risks of maternal mental ill-health and child behavioural problems accounted for a drop in mothers' perceived parenting competence after separation (Platt et al., 2015). Children and their mothers also saw living standards fall by more, on average, after separation, than fathers did. Correspondingly, around 15 to 20% of children and their mothers fell into relative poverty rates upon separation (Brewer & Nandi, 2014). The association of lone parenthood with family poverty was also widely recognised as being associated with worse outcomes for children at different ages and on a range of measures (Ermisch, 2008; Sabates and Dex, 2012; Washbrook, 2010).

Aggression and violence among children and teens

Children's use of violence towards parents is a complex social problem which has seen increasing interest within the academic, public, and policy arenas over the past 15 years. Formally Child and Adolescent to Parent/guardian Violence and Abuse (CAPVA) is recognised as a complex pattern of harmful behaviours that take place within the context and dynamics of the family unit.

Such behaviours can range from direct and indirect physical violence, coercive control, emotional abuse (for example, humiliating language and threats, belittlement), economic/financial abuse, and heightened sexualised behaviours (Holt, 2013, 2016). Population and community survey studies in the US, Canada, UK and Spain indicate that more serious physical violence towards parents is likely to sit somewhere between 3 and 5% with multidimensional definitions including patterned physical and psychological aggression sitting around 10% (Baker & Bonnick, 2021).

Child on parent or guardian violence is susceptible to under-reporting. Analysis of the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) revealed that approximately 40% of CAPVA victims identified in the survey did not report the offence to the police (Brennan et al., 2022). Research also highlights the "double stigma" (Holt, 2011) and shame associated with CAPVA (Brennan et al., 2022; Holt, 2022) in which parents/carers would either view a child's problematic behaviour as being representative of their own failings as a parent or worry that they will be blamed by the police and other agencies. Fear of criminalising their children also acted as a barrier to reporting incidents (Condry & Miles, 2014, p. 2021). Contested definitions and inconsistent terminology also mean that problems remain in recognising, identifying and quantifying the scale of the issue, as well as the understanding and awareness and the commissioning of services (Holt, 2022; Home Office, 2023).

² Whereas internalising problem behaviour is focused on the own self (e.g., withdrawal, anxiety, depression, emotional problems), externalizing problem behaviour particularly occurs in interaction with the social environment (e.g., aggression, impulsivity, deviance, hyperactivity). Source: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7089526/>.

³ Parental Alienating Behaviours (PABs) are the actions taken when one parent tries to harm the relationship between their child and the other parent.

Child and Adolescent to Parent/guardian Violence and Abuse (CAPVA) is a highly gendered phenomenon, with the majority of population, community, criminal justice and clinical and service studies finding that mothers are significantly more likely than fathers to experience physical, verbal, emotional and psychological aggression from their children. As regards the gender of children and adolescents, findings are mixed (Simmons et al., 2018). However, the most typical presentation in clinical and criminal justice samples is adolescent sons abusing mothers (Holt, 2012; Condry & Miles, 2014; Moulds et al., 2019).

There are multiple complex, and intersecting, common pathways which increase the vulnerability of both parents/carers and young people to CAPVA. These include (but are not limited to) Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and trauma, structural factors that impact on parental capacity, exploitation and extra-familial harm, exposure to domestic abuse, unmet emotional and psychological needs and unidentified SEND needs (Brennan et al., 2022).

CAPVA can have wide ranging impacts on parents, siblings, wider family and young people themselves. Harm can be physical, emotional and psychological, material and financial, and legal. The dynamic can also impact on parents' and young people's space, movement and personal agency and on their relationships with one another. For young people, their education and life chances can also be affected. In the most severe cases, parents and their children may even be separated, with young people taken into local authority, or even institutional, care (Baker & Bonnick, 2021).

Neurodivergence and its relation to violent behaviours towards family members

Children and young people with ADHD and/or autism are more likely to display behavioural difficulties which can be a route into violence, through 'acting out' or lashing out physically when in a state of frustration or trying to communicate their needs (Hamblin, 2016). Indeed, ADHD has been stated as the most common diagnosis among CAPVA perpetrators in contact with agencies (Simmons et al., 2018).

Studies of ADHD have found emotion dysregulation to be a core aspect of the disorder (Shaw et al., 2014), with a meta-synthesis of young people's experiences indicating a lack of control in the face of overwhelming emotions (Ringer, 2019). This framing of the child's behaviour can result in parents being more likely to tolerate violence and abuse from children when it does occur and less likely to take actions to mitigate it (Gallagher, 2008; Haw, 2010). Indeed, in interviews, some mothers that experienced violence from neurodivergent children framed their victimisation as a practice of "ideal motherhood" by constructing themselves as a "safe space" through which their child could manage

A disproportionate number of families with neurodivergent children seek help for Child on Parent Violence.

their distress and, in the aftermath of violence, by focusing on their child's cognitive and emotional development and on alleviating their child's suffering (Holt, 2024).

Evidence suggests that a disproportionate number of families with neurodivergent children seek help for Child on Parent Violence (CPV). In their annual survey of parents and carers receiving support for CPV from across the United Kingdom, PEGS (2022) reports that over 50% of their cases involve children who are neurodivergent. Similarly, in a survey of practitioners across London who undertake CPV intervention work with families, neurodivergent children are reported as making up the majority of their caseloads (Brennan et al. 2022). High levels of stress in mothers is also arguably related to the limited state support for neurodivergent children who, in a neurotypical world, have additional care needs that are not accommodated (Holt, 2023). Unmet needs for such children also put them at risk of particularly poor educational attendance and educational attainment. These are, in turn, risk factors for violence, crime, and Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE), particularly where behavioural or attainment challenges have led to school exclusions (Just for Kids Law, 2020; Children's Commissioner, 2021).

Emotional and mental health of parents/carers and children

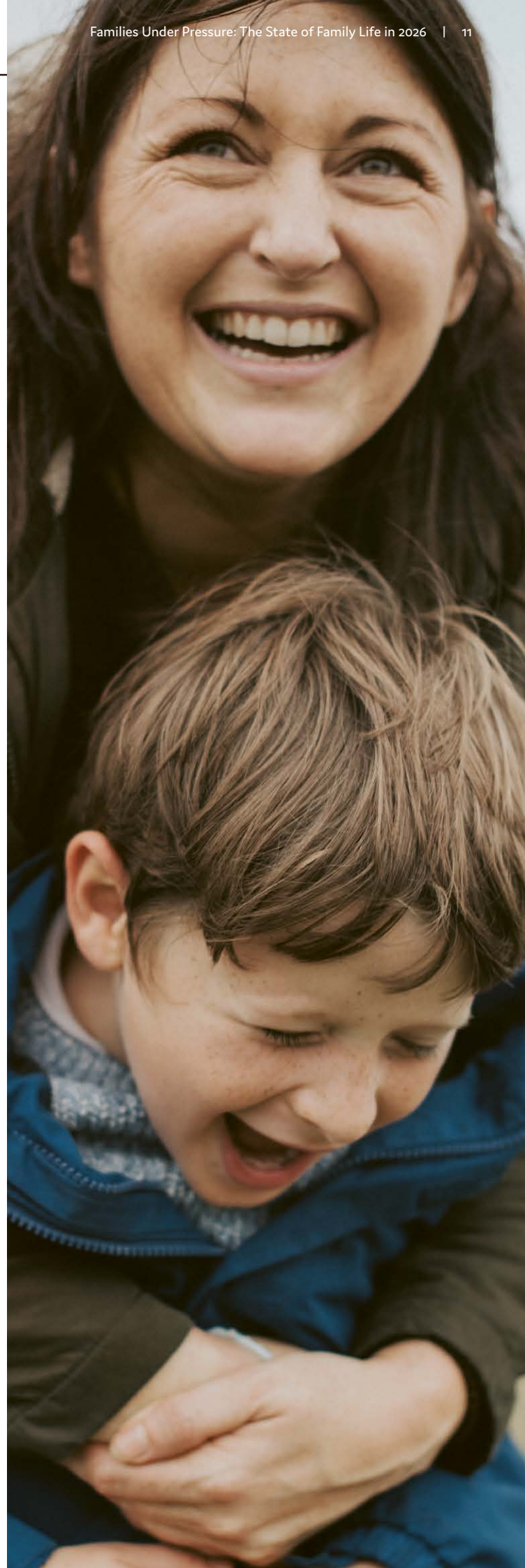
About one in five children and young people in England aged eight to 25 years (20.3%) had a probable mental disorder, a stark increase from one in eight (12.5%) since the collection of this data began in 2017 (NHS Digital, 2023). One of the biggest drivers of this increased incidence is financial insecurity. NHS research also shows that children with a probable mental disorder were more than twice as likely to live in a household that had fallen behind on rent, bills or mortgage payments than those unlikely to have a mental disorder (NHS Digital, 2023). Some other key drivers identified in a 2025 report by Mind were linked to experiences within education (academic pressures, bullying and racism), systemic inequalities (disproportionate effect on minoritised communities) and poor sleep quality, with mixed evidence on the impact of social media use on mental health (Mind, 2025).

The existing systems are not equipped well enough to take on this increase in prevalence of mental health problems among young people. As of the end of July 2025, over half a million referrals to Children and Young People's Mental Health Services (CYPMHS) were young people still waiting to start treatment. Half of these young people had been waiting over a year, and 29% had been waiting over two years (NHS Digital, 2025). It was estimated that around 75% of young people experiencing a mental health problem were forced to wait so long that their condition got worse, or they were unable to access any treatment at all (Local Government Association, 2023).

In a survey conducted by Young Minds, over a quarter of young people surveyed said they had tried to end their own life while waiting for mental health support (Young Minds, 2022). Longer term impacts of failing to provide early support were a higher likelihood to have an impact on physical health after 30 (Place2Be, 2025), fall in life expectancy by 15-20 years for people with severe illnesses (NHS England, 2024), and a higher chance of being more economically inactive and pessimistic about future employment prospects (The Resolution Foundation, 2024). In a survey conducted by Mind (2025), just over half of young people reported not being confident that access to mental health support would meaningfully improve within the next five years.

As per a nationally representative poll in 2022, 59% of parents in the UK with young children said they were struggling with their mental health, and 66% reported being negatively affected by the rising cost of living (UNICEF UK, 2022). Research in Northern Ireland also found that living in the most deprived areas, being in receipt of benefits, having poor family support, a history of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), and having a child with conduct problems and poor health, were all associated factors to higher levels of mental health problems (Grant et al., 2024). Parents with very young children also cited a lack of support as a key factor in their struggle, with one in three struggling to see a health care professional as services were stretched to breaking point following the pandemic – despite the efforts of overstretched staff (UNICEF, 2022).

As demonstrated in the previous section, the mental health of parents and children are intrinsically linked together. Based on Census 2021 data looking at these links, among children aged five to 16 years living in two-parent households in England, having a parent who experiences mental ill health significantly increased their probability of also experiencing mental ill health (ONS, 2026). Conversely, the probability of a mother experiencing mental ill health nearly tripled if the child presented at hospital with mental health issues, while the probability of a father experiencing mental ill health nearly quadrupled (ONS, 2026).



Coram Family Lives services

Integrated Frontline

Coram Family Lives offers regional, national and online provisions addressing many of the challenges families face. These include their helpline and signposting service, online parenting workshops, local support and befriending programmes, online advisory resources, and parenting community forums. These existing programmes act as important reference points for understanding what works in practice.

Confidential helpline

The confidential helpline serves as a point of entry for many families accessing the services of Coram Family Lives. As both a signposting and support service, the helpline identifies the issues impacting families whilst also acting as the first step to addressing those issues. Offered as a free service for families in England and Wales, it operates Monday to Friday, 9am to 9pm, and on weekends, 10am to 3pm. Call takers – those who respond to people reaching out to the helpline – include experienced family support workers and trained volunteers, all equipped to provide effective support in any area of family life. Coram Family Lives' telephone helpline demonstrates a highly efficient volunteer-led model.

In 2024/25, volunteers contributed over 10,000 hours of support – equivalent to approximately £232,000 in time and associated costs (estimated for 2012/13; SROI Network, 2012).

This substantial in-kind contribution underpins strong value for money, with estimates suggesting that every £1 invested in the helpline generates around £3.42 in social value (within a range of £3.10 to £4.00).

Conversations hosted on the helpline are caller led, with call takers providing a listening space for families to talk, explore their situation and discuss ways forward. Helpline call takers also provide a signposting function, connecting families to specialised services – internal and external to Coram Family Lives and the Coram Group – where more targeted support is required.

In 2024/25, 98% of helpline callers and 92% of live chat users felt more confident to deal with their situations as a result of using the service.

The helpline is accessible via multiple channels, including phone, live chat, email, and WhatsApp. This helps to ensure that families can reach support in the way that feels safest and most manageable for them – whether they need immediate human connection or a more private, controlled way to communicate.

Coram Family Lives' 2025 survey of helpline users found that different channels meet different needs around emotional readiness, privacy, speed, and convenience, allowing people to stay in control of how and when they engage. For example, some users were more comfortable and familiar with emailing as they felt too emotional to speak, whereas telephone callers wanted to speak to a 'real' person and felt it was quick and easy. Almost all (96%) users surveyed said they used the right communication method, which indicates that the breadth of contact options is effectively meeting a range of needs.

“Family Lives helped us navigate a whole professional approach, find a voice and ensure all professionals support as well as they can.”



Online Parenting Programmes

Parenting programmes delivered by Coram Family Lives provide longer term and specialised support for the issues families most frequently report experiencing. Free to access and often delivered online, these programmes are either nationally or locally focused.

Between January 2025 and December 2025, 11,678 users registered for the organisation's online courses, with 8,351 users starting courses and 3,711 completing them.

On a national level, programmes take the form of self-paced parenting courses covering specialised topics like reducing family conflict, co-parenting after divorce or separation, managing challenging behaviour in teens, and parenting neurodivergent children. Open to self-enrolment and adaptable around parent schedules, these online courses provide families with the information and tools needed to address the issues they are facing.

In the year January 2025 to December 2025, the most popular courses were: 'Co-parenting', which 1,923 users registered for and 798 completed; 'Parents Together', which 2,827 users registered for and 749 completed; and 'Confident Children', which 1,695 users registered for and 617 completed.

For those seeking more interactive or localised support, however, regional programmes are also delivered.

Regional parenting programmes

Regional programmes take place in local authorities across England and Wales and provide a mixture of support services, workshops, and parenting courses. These include several programmes addressing divorce, separation and couple relationship issues. For example, one programme that previously ran in Enfield provided support to parents of neurodivergent children. It delivered online groups and workshops for parents, both separated and together, who wished to reduce conflict and improve their co-parenting relationship.

Local programmes also frequently address behavioural issues in children and teenagers.

This includes work in Tower Hamlets where Coram Family Lives delivers Empowering Parents Empowering Communities (EPEC): an international programme supporting parents through evidence-based, peer-led parenting groups.

Also encompassing the 10-week "Being a Parent" course, the EPEC programme explores – amongst other topics – positive behaviour management strategies, attachment and parent-child relationships, communication, and managing feelings. Parentchild+, a programme that operates in Westminster and Kensington & Chelsea supports parents to help their children aged between 20 months and 2.5 years old get ready to start school through weekly sessions with Home Visitors who work with children on social and learning skills.

Other local programmes include befriending services, parent-to-parent support networks, online groups for parents of young people facing involvement from social services or the youth justice system, in addition to violence reduction services for parents struggling with or worried about their teenagers.

We have detailed three examples of regional parenting programmes that demonstrate the value of Coram Family Lives' local programme work – these programmes are centred around lived experience delivery, early intervention, strengths-based approaches, and leveraging local support networks.

Doncaster early years family support

This service demonstrates the value of targeted early intervention in the first 1,001 days, and has so far supported 61 families in 2025/26 with young children to build the confidence, skills and resilience needed to promote healthy development. By focusing on strengthening parental capacity and sustaining behaviour change, it helps prevent escalation. A distinctive feature is its integration with wider local systems, including partnership delivery of safe sleep interventions through Family Hubs. This combines practical support with relationship-based engagement, enabling wider needs to be identified early and connecting families to ongoing support.

The majority of parents report that the service has increased their understanding of their child's behaviour, development and support needs, that they have developed coping strategies, techniques or are using new resources, and feel more empowered and confident.

Overall, the model contributes to reducing health inequalities, strengthening local support networks, and improving long-term child outcomes, illustrating how preventative, community-based provision can both improve family wellbeing and reduce demand on specialist services.

Parents Matter (Perinatal and Antenatal) Wellbeing Service in Camden

This service demonstrates the value of volunteer-led, early relational support in the peri- and antenatal period, targeting parents at risk of isolation and poor mental health. Its distinctive contribution lies in combining culturally matched peer support with structured intervention, enabling trust, engagement and sustained improvements in parent wellbeing and parent–infant relationships. The service has engaged 103 families with perinatal support and 43 families with antenatal support.

By strengthening parental confidence and reducing isolation early, the model supports better developmental outcomes and reduces demand on more intensive services. Its integration of home-based support with group provision and local signposting helps embed families within community networks beyond the life of the intervention.

The model also delivers wider system and community benefits: volunteers extend reach cost effectively, improve access for underserved groups, and progress into education and employment—demonstrating a dual impact on both families and communities.

Cardiff and Vale Parental Wellbeing Support

This service provides targeted peer support for parents and carers of children with emotional or mental health needs—many of whom feel overwhelmed and struggle to navigate support systems. Delivered by practitioners with lived experience, it combines emotional and practical support to build parents' confidence, coping strategies, and ability to support their child.

The services supported 116 families across 1:1, groups, drop-ins, and signposting, with 80 referrals for 1:1 support, delivering 182 sessions including triage. Group-based provision reached 29 families through 6 sessions and 9 drop-ins. 100% of parents reported an improvement in their own wellbeing and felt better able to support their child's mental health.

This model illustrates how targeted, relational support—particularly when delivered by those with lived experience and delivered early—can drive meaningful improvements in both parent wellbeing and children's outcomes.



Online resources

Coram Family Lives provides a wide range of online resources to help families access trusted information and practical guidance at the point they need it.

This includes an extensive catalogue of accessible articles for parents and carers of children of all ages, from babies through to teenagers. The resources cover many of the most common pressures within family life, including child and teenage behaviour, parent-child relationships, setting boundaries, family communication and parental wellbeing.

The website also provides a dedicated series of articles offering advice to parents at different stages of separation and divorce. Other resources address areas such as parenting neurodivergent and disabled children, single parenting, social services involvement, and the wellbeing of both parents and children.

The Coram Family Lives YouTube channel provides videos that explore similar content, with material produced in collaboration with subject specialists and field experts.

Between January and December 2025, these videos were viewed 39,804 times, demonstrating the continued value of accessible, flexible digital guidance for families.

The Coram Family Lives website continues to reach a significant audience.

Between January and December 2025, the Coram Family Lives website received 744,803 visits and reached 356,040 active users.

The majority (85%) of website users were female and the website is also reaching families experiencing additional pressures and disadvantage. In 2024/25, 35% of website users considered themselves to have a disability or additional need, while 30% were parents or carers of a child with a disability or additional need.

A further 11% said that English was not their first language, and 34% reported an income of under £15,599.

Online parenting forums

Alongside written and video resources, Coram Family Lives also offers a number of online parenting forums. These provide parents and carers with access to online community and peer support, enabling them to share experiences, seek advice and feel less isolated.

In addition to a general forum for a wide range of family issues, there are dedicated forums focused on specific areas, including parenting neurodiverse children, parenting teenagers and young adults, and navigating relationships, divorce and separation.

The forums are among the most visited areas of the website and were viewed 134,767 times between January and December 2025.

The most used forums were *Teenagers and young adults*, accounting for 12% of total forum views, followed by *Parenting neurodiverse children* at 5%, and *Relationships, divorce and separation* at 4%.

For many families, contacting the Coram Family Lives helpline remains a crucial first step into support.

The 2025 helpline survey, completed by 227 individuals, found that 60% had not previously accessed information on the website.

However, after speaking directly with Coram Family Lives, nearly nine in ten respondents, at 89%, said they would go on to access other Coram Family Lives services, including the website, forums or parenting courses.

This demonstrates the importance of a blended model of support. Digital resources provide scale, flexibility and accessibility, while direct contact through the helpline builds trust, confidence and connection. Together, these services create a pathway through which families can move from immediate reassurance and guidance into wider support that helps them manage challenges before they escalate.

“Listened, gave reassurance, I was made to feel that my feelings were valid.”



Lifeline for families in need

Coram Family Lives provides open access services within a complex landscape of voluntary, community and statutory support. For many parents and carers, this landscape can be difficult to understand and even harder to navigate, particularly when they are already under pressure.

Over a third (37%) of respondents completing a Coram Family Lives user survey (2025) said they had already sought help from other organisations before contacting Coram Family Lives. These included CAFCASS, Citizens Advice, Young Minds and Women's Aid. Despite this contact, many families had not found the guidance, reassurance or practical help they felt they needed and the majority 63% had not accessed any other service.

When respondents were asked where they would have turned if Coram Family Lives had not been available, the most common answer was a search engine or Google. This highlights a serious gap in the current support system. Too often, parents and carers are left to navigate complex emotional, legal, relational and statutory challenges alone, without a clear or trusted route into help. This reinforces the importance of open-access family support as part of the wider early help system.

Services, such as Coram Family Lives, provide a trusted point of entry for families who may not know where else to turn, who may not meet statutory thresholds, or who need help to understand the options available to them. In this context, the helpline and wider digital offer are not simply sources of information; they are a critical bridge between families, specialist services, and the wider support landscape, often diverting demand from statutory services and providing access to those who are otherwise marginalised.

The Parent Champions scheme, run by Coram Family and Childcare trains and supports parent volunteers to connect with other parents in their local communities, helping them understand what support is available and how to access it. The scheme supported 40,000 parents last year alone. Its focus on reaching marginalised and isolated parents is closely aligned with the work of Coram Family Lives, particularly in ensuring that families who may otherwise miss out on support are able to access trusted guidance at an earlier stage.

Where specialist support is needed for family legal issues, the Child Law Advice Service provided by the Coram Children's Legal Centre is the only free legally assured open access provision in a context where eligibility for Legal Aid is narrowly drawn. The majority of calls were able to be supported in line with need but the Child Law Advice Service CLAS was the programme Coram Family Lives most frequently referred helpline callers to reinforcing the importance of complex issues in family breakdown.

Analysis of helpline

In this section, we break down data from the Coram Family Lives helpline, focusing on:

- Who contacts the helpline and how?
- What families are experiencing in terms of parenting issues of those contacting the helpline discussed, broken down into issues affecting children and affecting adults.
- How these have changed over the last five years, between 2021 and 2025.
- The impacts these issues have had on families and children.
- Risks of harm families are facing, and the situations these arise from.
- Referrals and support pathways provided through the helpline.

The organisation saw a significant drop in demand during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially during lockdowns which could mean that some callers found it more difficult to contact the helpline when there were other family members in the house. Live online chat as a helpline contact method returned in 2020 (after being used initially between April 2010 and April 2015) and WhatsApp was introduced in late 2024, both of which offer more discreet ways to ask for help than making a phone call. Early findings suggest that WhatsApp contacts were more likely to involve a risk of harm, which may mean people may be more likely to use it during a crisis. To read the full methodology, see Appendix I.

Who contacted the helpline in 2025 and how?

There were around 30,060 contacts to the helpline between January and December 2025. This figure is based on the number of telephone calls that were answered, online live chats, emails that were replied to, and WhatsApp messages from unique phones. This means that there were, in fact, many more contacts to the Coram Family Lives helpline, but many of these may have been from repeat callers or were not answered by a call taker.⁴

In 2025, the majority of successful helpline contacts (where calls were answered) were made by **telephone** (64%, $n=19,277$) and just over a fifth (22%, $n=6,480$) of contacts were through **live chats**. People also used email and WhatsApp to contact the helpline, but this was less common.

Figure 1. Chart shows proportion of ways people contacted the helpline in 2025 through telephone calls, live chat, email, and WhatsApp.

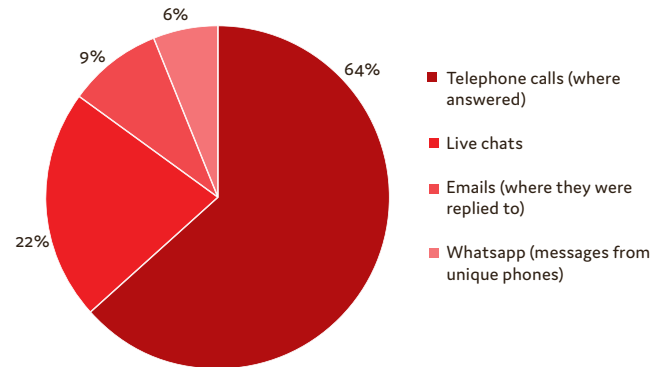


Figure 2. Chart showing the gender of people contacting the helpline in 2025, where this information was recorded.

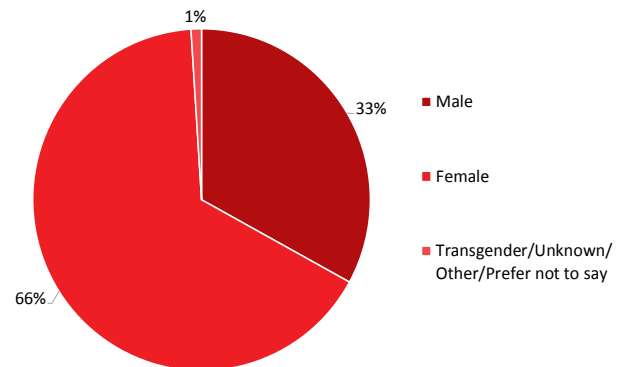
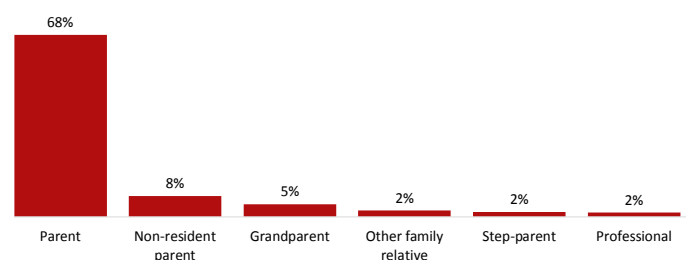


Figure 3. Graph showing the status of people contacting the helpline in 2025 in terms of their relation to the person of concern or the family where there is a concern. Graph only shows percentages for top six categories.⁵



⁴ Call takers may not fill out a service user form if a contact has not included enough information to put in the form. For example, someone may have called the helpline simply requesting signposting advice without giving details about their situation. In this case, a call taker would give them signposting information but would not fill out a service user form, so the contact will appear in the figure of calls to the service but not in the service user form data.

⁵ We have excluded the categories 'Calling about themselves', 'Adult calling about themselves', and 'Child calling about themselves', which also exist under 'Status of person contacting helpline', as they appear to have been used inconsistently and add confusion. For example, it is not clear whether a parent calling about stress they are experiencing would be logged under the category 'Parent' or 'Adult calling about themselves'.

Telephone calls to the helpline tended to range between an average length of **14 and just under 16 minutes**. This has not changed notably over the last five years. Call takers are trained to keep call length to a maximum of 30 minutes, unless there is a significant issue that requires a longer conversation.

For many parents, reaching out to the Coram Family Lives helpline comes at a breaking point. The survey run by Coram Family Lives in 2025 found that the majority of individuals reaching out to their services were feeling completely overwhelmed, exhausted or unable to cope (27%), or were struggling most days, feeling constantly anxious, low, or stressed (22%).

Where the gender of the person contacting the helpline in 2025 was recorded,⁶ the **majority identified as female** – they comprised two-thirds (66%, $n=11,005$) of contacts. A further third (33%, $n=5,566$) of those contacting the helpline identified as male.

The majority (68%, $n=11,372$) of people who contacted the helpline in 2025 said they were a (resident) **parent**. The next most common group was **non-resident parents**, who comprised nearly one in ten (8%, $n=1,296$) people contacting the helpline. Around one in twenty people said they were a grandparent (5%, $n=777$). It was not just family members who used the helpline: 2% ($n=257$) of people contacting the helpline in 2025 were Professionals.

Those contacting the helpline in 2025 were most often **36-45 years old**, with over a third (35%, $n=3,695$) in this age group. The next largest age group was 46-55 years old, who made up over a fifth (22%, $n=2,305$) of people contacting the helpline overall.

Half (50%, $n=3,304$) of children for whom the person contacting the helpline was concerned were male. Just under half (46%, $n=3,051$) were female. A small number (4%, $n=254$) were either transgender, their gender was unknown, or this was recorded as "prefer not to say".

Previous research by Coram Family Lives found that **almost a third (32%) of those contacting the helpline had an income level under £16,000** – well below the poverty line (Helpline User Survey Phase 1: Autumn/Winter 2025, 2025). It also found that over two-fifths (44%) reported an income of £16,000 to £50,000 and just under a quarter (24%) said their income was over £50,000.

Understanding who contacts the helpline provides important context for the issues families face, which are explored in the following section.

Figure 4. Graph showing the age group to which people contacting the helpline in 2025 belonged

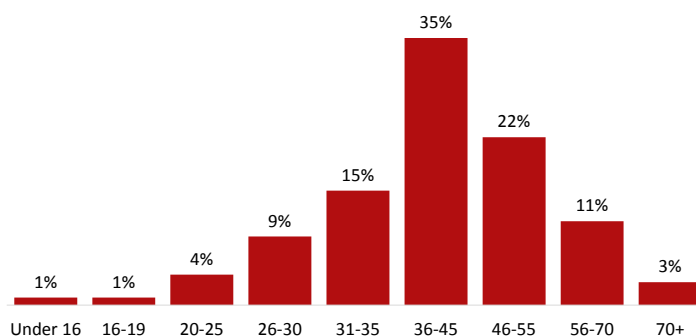


Figure 5. Chart showing the gender of the child the person contacting the helpline was concerned about for contacts made in 2025

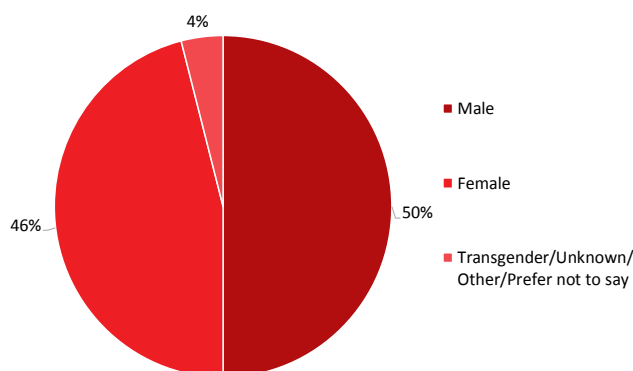
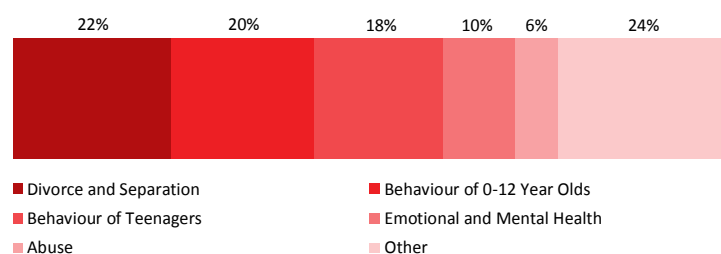


Figure 6. Chart showing the top five issues related to children mentioned in helpline contacts in 2025⁷



⁶ The service user form allows call takers to record the identity of the person making contact is, in terms of their relationship to the person they are concerned about or their position within the family with whom their concerns are associated. This information is not always discovered and recorded during communications, so the data throughout this section is based on what has been recorded.

⁷ The 'other' category included in this chart is an amalgamation of the issues affecting children brought up in conversations that did not fit into the five most commonly mentioned categories. It includes issues such as: 'School and Education', 'Bullying', and 'Addiction', amongst others.

What families are experiencing

Data from contacts made to the Coram Family Lives helpline provides insight into some of the key difficulties families have contacted the charity about over the last five years. We have focused on the top five issues that have been most often recorded as the primary issue those contacting the helpline wanted support with.

Issues affecting children

In 2025, the most common issue raised about children was **divorce and separation**, which was mentioned in **over one in five** helpline contacts (22%, $n=1,904$). The other issues that related to children in 2025, in order of most to least frequently mentioned in communications with the helpline, were:

- Behaviour of young children (0–12 years; discussed in 20%, $n=1,703$)
- Behaviour of teenagers (discussed in 18%, $n=1,503$)
- Emotional and mental Health (10%, $n=865$)
- Abuse (6%, $n=552$).

This breakdown is shown in the chart in Figure 6.

Nearly three quarters (72%, $n=1,362$) of the contacts about divorce and separation involved discussion about **contact issues**. More than two fifths (45%, $n=864$) of contacts involved **living arrangements**. Finally, 20% ($n=389$) of contacts involved the **impact of the divorce and separation on a child's behaviour**. These figures are included in Figure 7.

When it came to the **behaviour of young children** (0–12-year-olds), two-thirds (66%, $n=1,128$) of people who contacted the helpline were concerned about **boundaries** with these children. Almost half (46%, $n=783$) were worried about their **physical aggression and violence**. Over two-fifths (43%, $n=729$) wanted support regarding a 0–12-year-old's **verbal aggression and violence**. For a breakdown of these numbers, see Figure 8.

Boundaries were also the most common issue regarding the **behaviour of teenagers**, featuring in almost two-thirds (61%, $n=917$) of such contacts people made to the helpline. Nearly six in ten (58%, $n=867$) people who contacted the helpline about the behaviour of a teenager were concerned about a **parent-child relationship**. **Verbal aggression and violence** was the third most common sub-issue related to the behaviour of teenagers, with almost half (46%, $n=698$) such contacts involving this. For a chart of these figures, see Figure 9.

If we combine the figures on contacts about the behaviour of 0–12-year-olds with the behaviour of teenagers and compare these to contacts about the other top five issues, we can see that concerns about children's behaviour dominated around a half of contacts every year over the last five years.

Figure 7. Chart showing sub-issues related to children mentioned in helpline contacts in 2025 that come under 'Divorce and Separation'

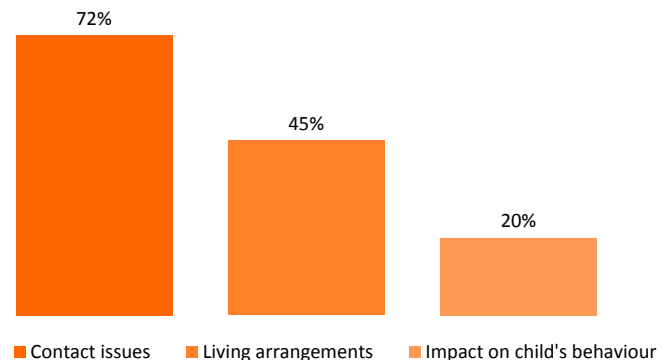


Figure 8. Chart showing sub-issues related to children mentioned in helpline contacts in 2025 that come under 'Behaviour of 0–12 year olds'

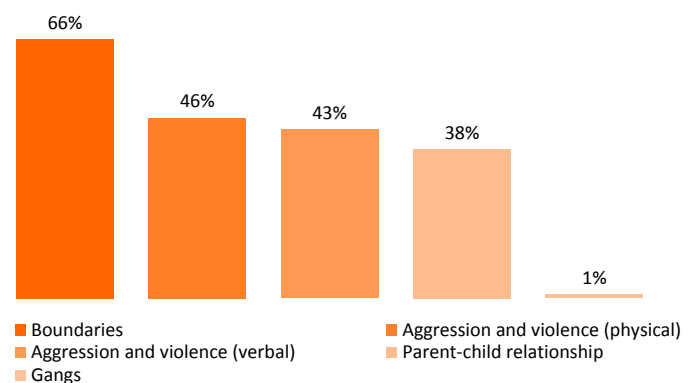
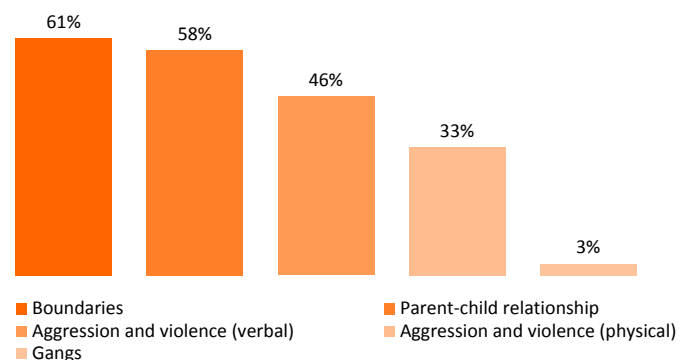


Figure 9. Chart showing sub-issues related to children mentioned in helpline contacts in 2025 that come under 'Behaviour of Teenagers'



This peaked in 2023, when call handlers recorded the behaviour of 0-12-year-olds and teenagers as the primary issue for children in almost six in ten (57%, $n=4,137$) contacts. Figure 10 shows these figures in full.

Children being physically aggressive or threatening aggression accounted for the second most common reason for call takers flagging a contact as containing a risk of harm.

Most of the people who contacted the helpline about children behaving aggressively or violently reported these children were boys. Many were in families where there was neurodivergence. Many were also in families where there was divorce and separation and single mother families, in particular, faced difficulty with children behaving aggressively, compared with single father families.

For those contacting the helpline about the **emotional and mental health of a child**, over two fifths of (42%, $n=360$) contacts involved discussion of **anxiety**, over two in ten involved **self-harm** (22%, $n=194$) and just under two in ten involved **depression** (18%, $n=156$). For these and other sub-issues related to the emotional and mental health of a child, see Figure 11.

There have been two marked shifts in contacts made about children over the last five years:

1. Concerns about abuse becoming more prominent in calls than concerns about bullying.
2. Divorce and separation replacing the behaviour of young children as the most discussed issue affecting children.

From 2021 to 2023, bullying was the fifth most commonly logged primary issue for contacts related to children, mentioned in around one in ten contacts (10% or $n=833$ in 2021; 10% or $n=1,011$ in 2022; and 8% or $n=1,058$ in 2023). However, in 2024 and 2025, this issue was replaced by abuse as the fifth most often recorded primary issue affecting children, discussed in just over one in twenty contacts both years (6% or $n=571$ in 2024 and 6% or $n=552$ in 2025).

While four of the top five issues affecting children have remained in the top five over the last five years, divorce and separation replaced the behaviour of 0-12-year-olds as the most discussed issue affecting children in 2025. From 2021 to 2024, the most common issue helpline service users spoke about regarding children was the behaviour of 0-12-year-olds. This was discussed in 21% of helpline contacts in 2024, 21% in 2023, 19% in 2022, and 16% in 2021, showing a steady increase between 2021 and 2023 and then remaining steady in 2024. However, this proportion dipped slightly to 20% in 2025. At the same time, the proportion of contacts where the primary issue affecting children was divorce and separation grew from 19% in 2024 to 22% in 2025.

Figure 10. Chart shows the behaviour of children as proportion of contacts about top 5 issues related to children between 2021 and 2025

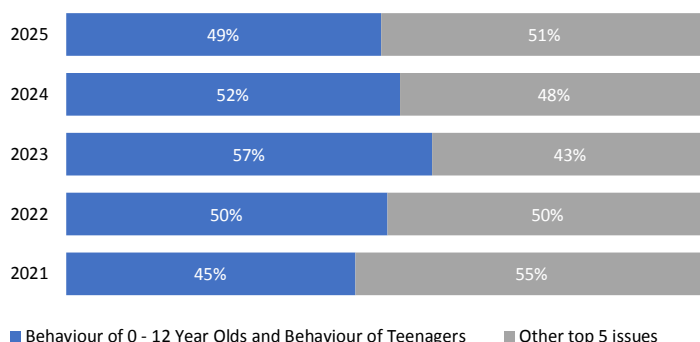


Figure 11. Chart showing sub-issues related to children mentioned in helpline contacts in 2025 that come under 'Emotional and mental health'

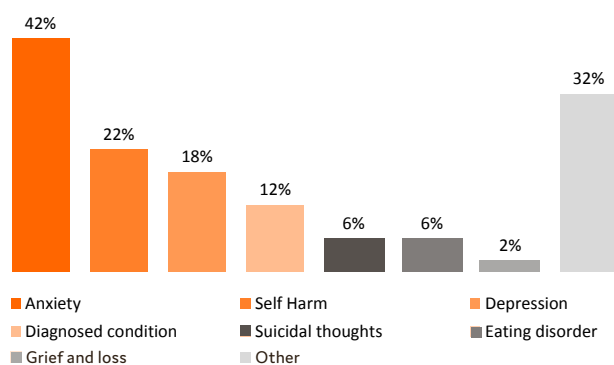
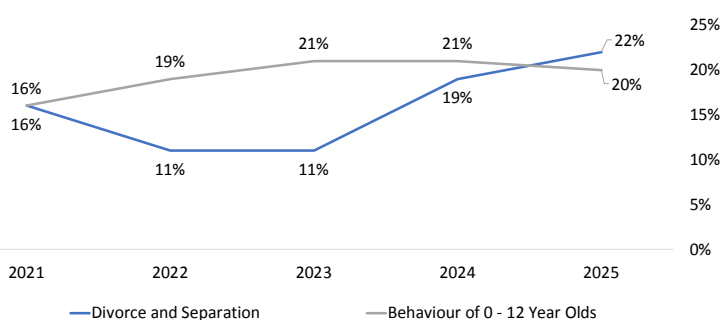


Figure 12. Graph showing how proportion of contacts about how 'Divorce and separation' and 'Behaviour of 0-12 Year Olds' (issues affecting children) changed from 2021 to 2025, with 'Divorce and separation' overtaking 'Behaviour of 0-12 Year Olds' in 2025



The four issues affecting children that have remained in the top five issues over the last five years are:

- Divorce and separation
- The behaviour of 0-12-year-olds
- The behaviour of teenagers
- Emotional and mental health

However, the proportion of contacts related to each issue has changed over time, with some issues discussed by more people contacting the helpline in some years compared to others. To see these figures in full, see Figure 12.

The behaviour of teenagers was a primary concern in almost a fifth (18%, $n=1,741$ in 2024 and $n=1,503$ in 2025) of contacts to the helpline in 2024 and 2025, although this is a decrease compared to 2023, when the proportion of contacts was 20% ($n=2,027$). Emotional and mental health has remained an issue commonly affecting children over the last five years, with the proportion of contacts related to it staying between 10% and 14%. For a full breakdown of these figures, see Figure 13.

Issues affecting adults

In 2025, as with issues affecting children, the most common issue affecting adults was **divorce and separation**.

This was discussed in over a third of conversations (34%, $n=4,983$) service users had on the Coram Family Lives helpline where a primary adult issue was logged.

The other issues that affected adults in 2025, in order of most to least frequently mentioned in communications with the helpline, were:

- Emotional and Mental Health (discussed in 22%, $n=3,290$, of conversations)
- Legal (discussed in 6%, $n=955$)
- Social Service Involvement in Family (5%, $n=781$)
- Couple relationship Issues (5%, $n=731$).

This breakdown is shown in the chart in Figure 14.

Nearly three quarters (73%, $n=3,654$) of the contacts about **divorce and separation** involved discussion about **contact issues**. More than a third (36%, $n=1,814$) of contacts were about **parents or carers being unable to reach an agreement about an aspect of their situation**. Nearly two in ten (17%, $n=859$) contacts were about the **emotional impact** of a divorce and separation on an adult. For a full breakdown of figures on this sub-issue, see Figure 15.

The helpline data analysis suggested that many families (both adults and children) were being affected by divorce and separation or conflict between couples. If we combine the figures on couple relationship issues with the figures on divorce and separation, we can see that difficulties related to romantic relationships within the family were a primary issue in at least half of contacts to the helpline over the last five years. Figure 16 shows these figures in full.

Figure 13. Proportions of the top five issues service users discussed that affected children in 2025 and mentions of these same issues in helpline communications in the preceding four years

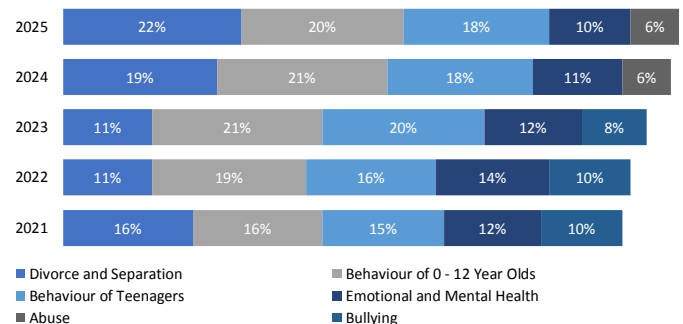


Figure 14. Chart showing the top five issues affecting adults mentioned in helpline contacts in 2025⁸

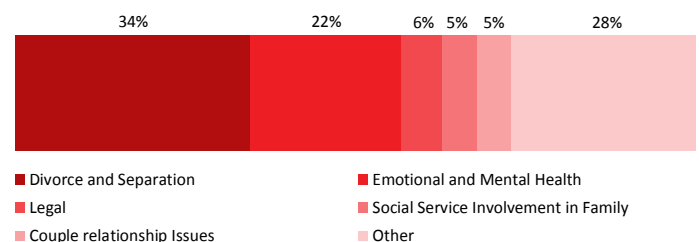
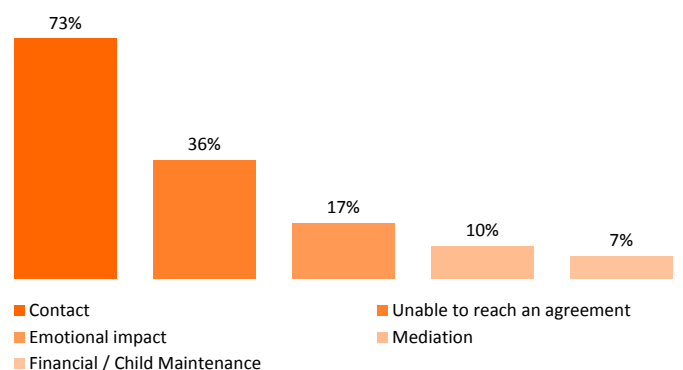


Figure 15. Chart showing sub-issues related to adults mentioned in helpline contacts in 2025 that come under 'Divorce and Separation'



8 The 'other' category included in this chart is an amalgamation of the issues affecting adults brought up in conversations that did not fit into the five most commonly mentioned categories. It includes issues such as: 'Physical Health and Disability', 'Abuse', and 'Adoption Issues', amongst others. Please note that percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding. This will be the case for many charts in this report.

The analysis found that common outcomes of families experiencing divorce and separation and issues between couples were contact issues, deciding on living arrangements, the emotional impacts of separation on couples and their children, and familial conflict. The top two organisations call takers signposted people to in 2025 offer support with legal issues and parental rights (Child Law Advice and Both Parents Matter).

Analysis suggested that single father families were significantly affected by divorce and separation, more often using helpline support to address this issue than single mother families, who were found to be more significantly affected by emotional and mental health difficulties and children behaving aggressively and violently.

Call takers noted divorce and separation was one of the contexts in which children were sometimes behaving aggressively towards other family members, particularly parents.

For those contacting the helpline about the **emotional and mental health of an adult**, over half (55%, $n=711$) of contacts were about **anxiety** and just under three in ten (29%, $n=374$) were about **depression**.⁹ These and further emotional and mental health difficulties are detailed in Figure 17.

Helpline data analysis showed that children and adults were facing considerable challenges regarding their emotional and mental health. Most prominent among these were experiences of anxiety and depression. Concerningly, analysis found that children and young people were more likely than adults to be struggling with self-harm, according to those contacting the helpline.

As noted above, the helpline data analysis suggested single mother families were particularly likely to be affected by emotional and mental health difficulties, compared to single father families. We found they also struggled to know how to manage their children's challenging behaviour and sought advice through the helpline on this. Analysis discovered that people disproportionately sought support through the helpline regarding single mother families: these contacts made up over two in five (43%) contacts through telephone and live chat.

Four of the top five issues affecting adults have dominated contacts to the helpline over the last five years. These are:

- Difficulties related to divorce and separation
- Emotional and mental health
- Social service involvement in the family
- Couple relationship issues.

Difficulties related to divorce and separation have continued to be the most frequently discussed issue for adults contacting the helpline over the last five years. They were mentioned in a third (33%, $n=5,386$) of conversations in 2024, 32% ($n=6,101$) in 2023, and 30% in both 2022 ($n=6,224$) and 2021 ($n=7,161$).

Figure 16. Chart shows difficulties in romantic relationships in families as proportion of contacts about top 5 issues related to adults between 2021 and 2025

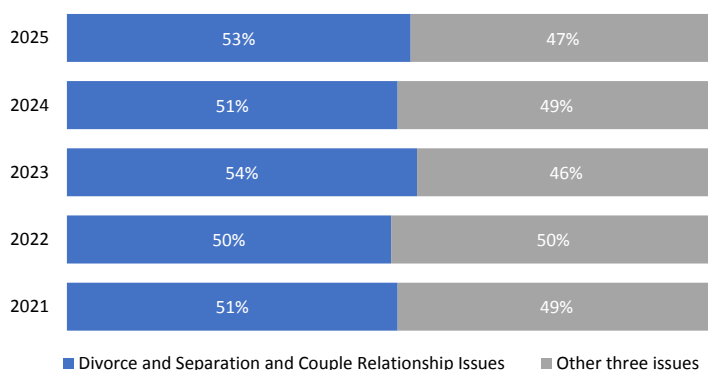


Figure 17. Chart showing sub-issues related to adults mentioned in helpline contacts from Jul-Dec 2025 that come under 'Emotional and mental health'

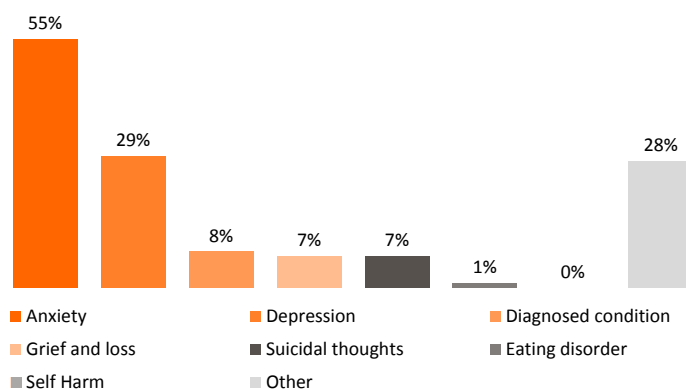
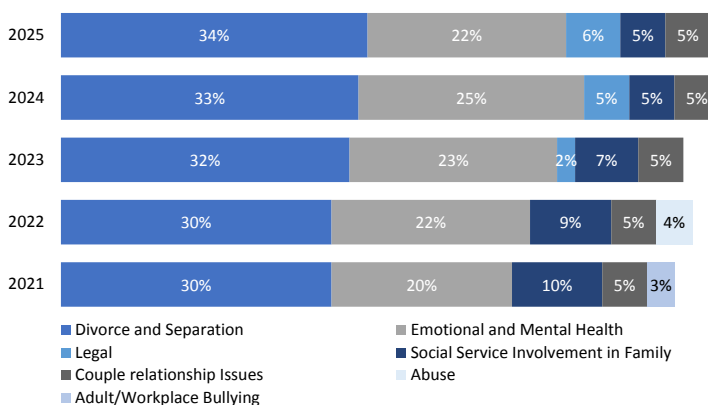


Figure 18. Chart shows the proportions of the top five issues service users discussed that affected adults in 2025. It also shows the proportion of times service users mentioned these same issues in helpline communications in the preceding four years¹⁰



⁹ The sub-issues for adults with 'Emotional and Mental Health' as the primary issue were changed halfway through the year. So, the figures here are based only on those contacting the helpline from July 2025 to December 2025.

¹⁰ Please note that percentages for each year do not add to 100 because only the top five issues mentioned have been included – there are other issues that make up the remaining percentages.

The second most commonly discussed issue affecting adults across the last five years was **emotional and mental health**. The proportion of calls about this issue varied slightly, but remained between a fifth and a quarter (20-25%) of all contacts.

The proportion of contacts to the helpline where people primarily discussed **social service involvement in the family** has halved over the last five years, from 10% ($n=2,413$) of contacts in 2021 to 5% ($n=781$) in 2025.

Legal difficulties only emerged as one of the top five most commonly discussed issues affecting adults in 2023, when it was added to the service user form. Since 2023, the issue of **legal difficulties** has been increasingly discussed in contacts to the helpline, with it being noted as a primary issue in 5% ($n=869$) of contacts in 2024 and 6% ($n=955$) of contacts in 2025.

Before legal issues emerged as one of the top five issues in 2023, there were two other issues – one each year – that were part of the top five, alongside divorce and separation, emotional and mental health, social service involvement in family, and couple relationship issues. They were:

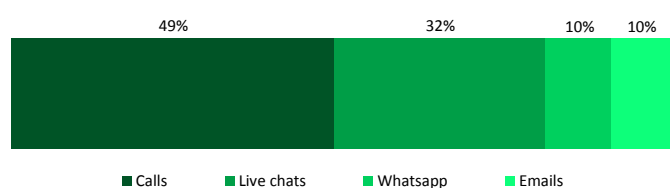
- **Abuse**, was mentioned in 4% ($n=732$) of contacts in 2022, and
- **Adult/workplace bullying**, which was mentioned in 3% ($n=770$) of contacts in 2021.

For a full breakdown of the top five issues affecting adults that were discussed in helpline contacts in 2025 and how frequently they were logged as a primary issue in the preceding four years (2021-2024), see Figure 18.

Risk of harm

In 2025, there were **3,351 risks of harm** recorded for helpline contacts. This comprises **11%** of total successful contacts to the helpline.¹¹ Most identified risks of harm (49%, $n=1,627$) came through telephone calls to the helpline, with a further third (32%, $n=1,062$) from online chats. One in ten of the total number of risks of harm identified came from WhatsApp messages (10%, $n=334$) and emails (10%, $n=328$). To see this breakdown, see Figure 19.

Figure 19. Chart showing risks of harm recorded for difference types of contact to the helpline



¹¹ This was calculated using 30,060 as the base number of successful contacts to the helpline, meaning where phone calls, live chats, and emails were answered by call takers and includes WhatsApp messages came from unique phones.



Though the lowest number of contacts to the helpline in 2025 came through WhatsApp messages, this contact method had the highest proportion of risks of harm recorded compared to other methods of contact. Call takers identified a risk of harm in one in every five contacts (20%, $n=334$) that people made **through WhatsApp messages**.¹²

As mentioned above in 'Who contacted the helpline in 2025 and how?', the most common way people contacted the helpline was by telephone. Call takers recorded a risk of harm in nearly one in ten (8%) calls. For a full breakdown of the methods people used to contact the helpline and the proportion of these where a risk of harm was identified, see Figure 20.

Where the call taker was able to identify who the person contacting the helpline was in situations where there was a risk of harm, almost three quarters (71%, $n=2,364$) were **(resident) parents**. Beyond parents, people making these contacts tended to be grandparents (5% of contacts, $n=171$), non-resident parents (5%, $n=156$), or other family relatives (5%, $n=155$). For a full breakdown of these figures, see Figure 21.

When call takers identify a risk of harm, they are prompted to log the reason they are concerned. In 2025, a third (33%, $n=1,100$) of risks of harm were logged as relating to **emotional abuse**.¹³

The second most reported reason was **a child being physical or threatening aggression towards parents**. This was present for more than one fifth (21%, $n=715$) of contacts where risk of harm was identified. **Physical abuse** was the third most common reason; relating to nearly one fifth (17%, $n=558$) contacts with recorded risks of harm. For a full breakdown of these figures and further reasons call takers reported a risk of harm, see Figure 22.

When there is a risk of harm recorded, the on-call rota manager will review the contact and decides if the concern is significant enough to require reporting to an external organisation. Of the 3,351 risks of harm recorded in 2025, only eight cases were reported externally. In six cases, just the police were contacted. For one further case, the police and social services were contacted. For the final case, an ambulance was called for the family.

Figure 20. Chart showing risks of harm recorded for difference types of contact to the helpline compared to total number of contacts for each contact method

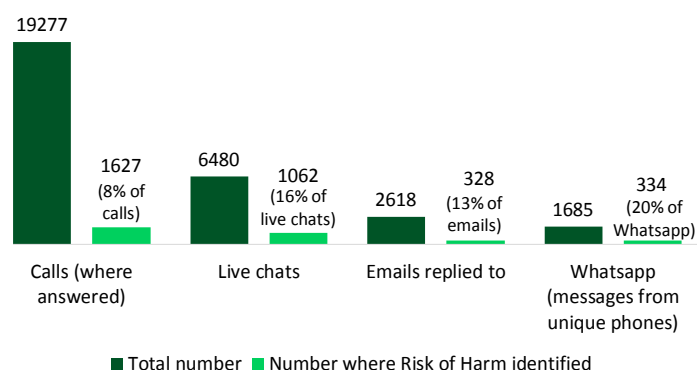


Figure 21. Chart showing status of person contacting helpline for contacts where risk of harm was identified¹⁴

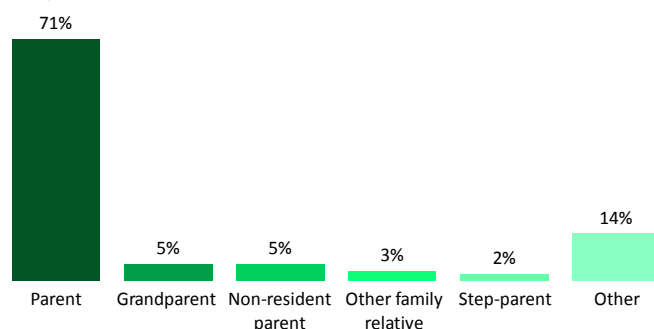


Figure 22. Chart showing top reasons call takers recorded a risk of harm for contacts in 2025

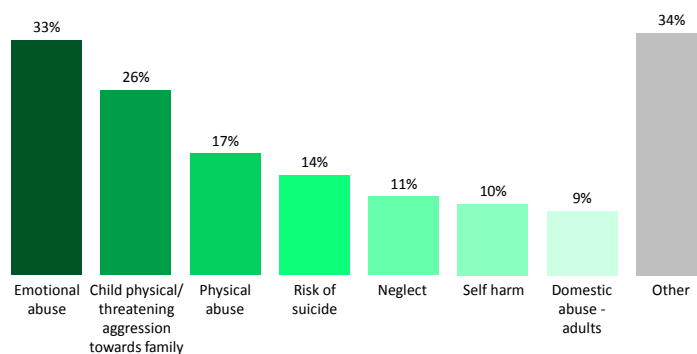
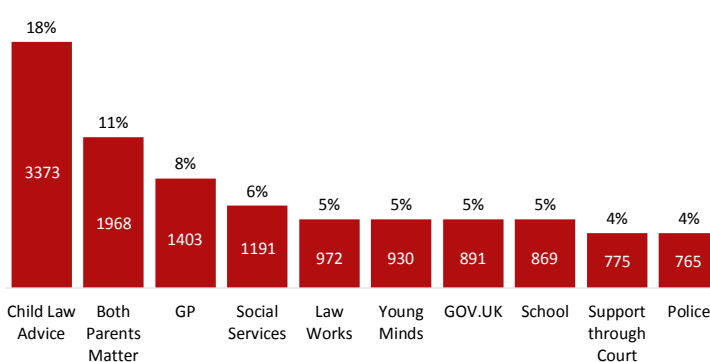


Figure 23. Chart showing the top ten organisations call takers signposted people to in 2025



¹² Specifically, for WhatsApp messages from unique phones, meaning that these messages likely came from different people.

¹³ Emotional abuse' (also known as 'psychological abuse') is defined by SafeLives as "the regular and deliberate use of words and non-physical actions to manipulate, hurt, weaken or frighten a person and to distort, confuse or influence their thoughts and actions" (SafeLives, 2023). For more information, visit <https://safelives.org.uk/about-domestic-abuse/what-is-domestic-abuse/psychological-abuse/>. For more information on emotional abuse towards children, visit <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/types-of-abuse/emotional-abuse/>.

¹⁴ We have excluded the categories 'Calling about themselves', 'Adult calling about themselves', and 'Child calling about themselves', which also exist under 'Status of person contacting helpline', as they appear to have been used inconsistently and add confusion. For example, it is not clear whether a parent calling about stress they are experiencing would be logged under the category 'Parent' or 'Adult calling about themselves'.

Referrals and support pathways

Call takers frequently signpost those contacting the helpline to organisations that may be able to offer further advice and support for them. Information about where signposting happens and which organisations the call taker signposts to is only recorded for telephone calls and live chat, so the following figures do not include signposting in WhatsApp or email contacts.

There were many organisations call takers signposted people to, so we have considered the top ten most frequently used organisations in this analysis. Where people contacting the helpline were given signposting information for one of the top ten organisations most often signposted to by call takers, almost a fifth (18%, $n=3,373$) were signposted towards **Child Law Advice** (an organisation operated by Coram Children's Legal Centre).¹⁵

A further 11% ($n=1,968$) were signposted to **Both Parents Matter**, a charity that supports children maintaining meaningful relationships with both parents and other relatives after separation.¹⁶

Just under one in ten (8%, $n=1,403$) were **advised to speak to their GP**. For further figures on the top ten organisations signposted to, see Figure 23.

It seems that Coram Family Lives' signposting can empower parents to seek out further support. The 2025 survey found that just over half (54%) of those in touch with Coram Family Lives (through the helpline and other routes to support) did intend to get support from another service, including children's social care, CAMHS, the police, and Child Law Advice. Almost three quarters (74%) felt they knew the right services to contact for further support going forwards.

"We have started to receive more post-adoptive care and are hoping this will help with trauma. I was referred for counselling... to help me to talk through the children's needs."

¹⁵ To learn more about Child Law Advice, visit: <https://childlawadvice.org.uk/>.

¹⁶ To learn more about Both Parents Matter, visit: <https://bothparentsmatter.org.uk/>.



SPOTLIGHT

Children being physically and verbally aggressive

Data collected over the last five years of the helpline's operations indicates the behaviour of children and young people is a consistent concern for families.

This subject formed two of the top five issues people wanted advice and support about regarding a child over the last five years. In 2025 specifically, **conversations about children's behaviour dominated over a third (38%, $n=3,206$) of contacts** about children made to the helpline.¹⁷

Of even greater worry is the fact that such behaviour often constituted **aggression and violence towards parents or other family members**. In 2025, well over half (58%, $n=848$) of contacts where the primary issue discussed was the behaviour of 0-12 years olds specified that the child or children were being verbally and/or physically aggressive and violent.¹⁸

Where the primary issue was the behaviour of teenagers, verbally or physically aggressive behaviour was a sub-issue in 53% ($n=690$) of contacts. As noted above in 'Reasons for risk of harm', children being physical or threatening aggression towards family was the cause for concern in 26% ($n=878$) of contacts where call takers identified a risk of harm in 2025.

The Coram Family Lives' Feeling Under Siege report on child and adolescent family violence in calls to the helpline in 2020-2022 also shone a light on this issue. Physical aggression described by callers included being punched, kicked, strangled/choked, and having objects thrown at them, as well as damage to property and household items.

¹⁷ This is the sum of figure for the two categories: 'Behaviour of 0-12- year olds' (20%, $n=1703$) and 'Behaviour of teenagers' (18%, $n=1503$), across all methods of contact to the helpline out of the 8,549 of contacts where a child issue was logged in 2025.

¹⁸ This figure includes where either one or both of the sub-issue categories: 'Aggression and violence (physical)' and 'Aggression and violence (verbal)' were selected by a call taker for calls where the primary child issue was the 'Behaviour of 0-12 Year Olds'.



Figure 24. Chart showing the gender of children where the call taker logged 'Child physical/threatening aggression towards parents' as reason for concern in helpline contacts in 2025 – these contacts were flagged by call takers as indicating a 'risk of harm'

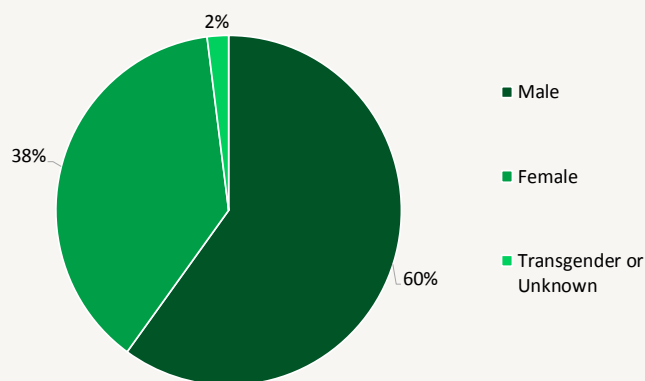
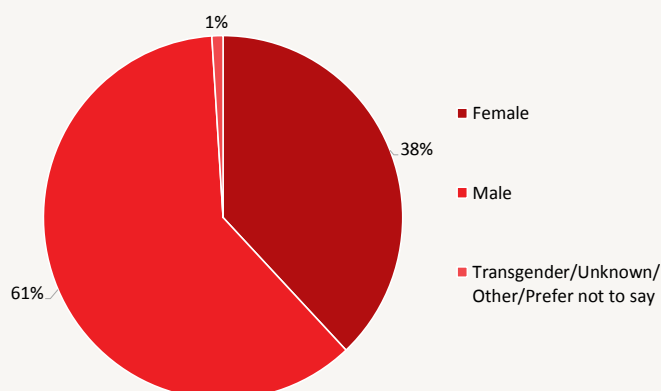


Figure 25. Chart showing the gender of children displaying aggressive or violent behaviour as the primary sub-issue affecting children, where gender was collected by the call taker



In a small minority of cases (4%), callers reported use of weapons, such as a knife. Verbal aggression included screaming, shouting, yelling, and using abusive language. The impact of this aggression was described by helpline staff/volunteers in emotive language, saying that callers felt 'in fear of their lives', 'afraid to be in the house', were 'reaching the end of the line', and 'feeling under siege'.

The helpline analysis indicated that families appeared to be experiencing significant challenges with children and young people's behaviour. Specifically, families reported struggling with children displaying verbal and physical aggression, threats of aggression or violence, and conflict between children and parents.

Context and characteristics of children

Helpline data from the year 2025 provides some insight into the context surrounding aggressive and violent behaviour by children reported to call takers and indicates some

characteristics that appear to be associated with this behaviour. It suggests that children about whom people have contacted the helpline and who have shown threatening, aggressive, or violent behaviour were most often:

- Male
- Between **12 and 15 years old**
- In families where there is **neurodivergence** (diagnosed or suspected).

According to helpline data in 2025, in six out of ten (60%, $n=635$) contacts where children being physical or threatening aggression towards parents was recorded as a cause of concern, the gender of the child or children being physical or aggressive was male. Nearly four in ten (38%, $n=403$) were female. For a full breakdown of these figures, see Figure 24.

Looking at children displaying aggressive or violent behaviour as the primary sub-issue affecting children identified in contacts more widely – not just those where the call taker flagged a risk of harm – the **children of concern were also more often male**. Just over six in ten (61%, $n=963$) of these children were male and almost four in ten (38%, $n=611$) were female. The gender of children is not always mentioned in contacts, so we are only able to report on where this data was recorded. For a full breakdown of these figures, see Figure 25.

Where the age of the child was recorded for contacts where the primary sub-issue affecting children was children behaving aggressively, these children were most likely to be in their **early teens or late pre-teens**. The most common ages for children reported to be behaving aggressively were:

- 13 years old – 10% of children behaving aggressively ($n=153$)
- 14 years old – 10% of children behaving aggressively ($n=160$)
- 15 years old – 9% of children behaving aggressively ($n=141$)
- 12 years old – 8% of children behaving aggressively ($n=128$)
- 16 years old – 7% of children behaving aggressively ($n=113$).

For a full breakdown of the figures on the age of children behaving aggressively, see Figure 26.

Where the familial or situational context in which children were behaving aggressively was recorded, helpline data suggested a link between **neurodivergence** in families and experience of children behaving aggressively. This was, by far, the most often logged context, logged in just over half (52%, $n=244$) of situations where child aggression was mentioned in contacts. The next most commonly recorded context was **school refusal or avoidance**, which was mentioned in 13% ($n=60$) of contacts where children were being aggressive. **Divorce or separation** was the third most often reported context for child aggression and related to 10% ($n=47$) of contacts. For a full breakdown of these numbers, see Figure 27.

Mark: A dad struggling with his daughter's behaviour

Background

Mark is a 46-year-old dad who works in a warehouse. He is married and lives with his partner and their children, who are age 15, 12 and eight.

Mark contacted the Family Lives helpline through WhatsApp to ask for advice and emotional support related to the increasing aggressive behaviour of his 15 year-old daughter, Lily.

Presenting Issues

Mark is a father of three, including his 15-year-old daughter, Lily. She is displaying increasingly defiant behaviour, refusing to follow boundaries at home and becoming verbally abusive towards her parents. Mark and his partner feel worn down and unable to cope with the constant conflict. The atmosphere in the household is tense, and the younger children are becoming anxious and distressed, describing home as "like walking on eggshells."

Support Provided

The family support worker (FSW) provides Mark with a calm, non-judgemental space to talk openly about what is happening at home. The FSW helps him explore possible underlying causes of Lily's behaviour, including emotional distress and unmet needs, rather than viewing it solely as defiance. Practical guidance is given on setting clear, consistent boundaries, responding to verbal aggression safely, and reducing conflict in the home. The FSW also discusses strategies to protect the wellbeing of the younger children and encourages both parents to work together using a united approach. They also refer him and his partner to the free online parenting course on challenging behaviour in teens from Family Lives.

Outcomes

Mark reports feeling less overwhelmed and more hopeful after the call. He feels better equipped to respond to Lily's behaviour in a calmer and more structured way. He feels confident that together they can introduce clearer boundaries and communication strategies at home, which will help to reduce daily conflict. Mark also feels reassured that the situation is not his fault and that support is available. The conversation helps him regain confidence and take steps towards restoring a safer, more stable family environment. He intends to register for the online course.

SPOTLIGHT

Single parents, mental health, and child behaviour

Many contacts to the helpline in 2025 related to single parent families.

Around two-fifths (43%, $n=5,402$) telephone calls or online chats were about **single mother families** and just under one in ten (9%, $n=1,143$) were about single father families.¹⁹ For a full breakdown of these figures, see Figure 28. Single parents also comprise a substantial sector of other users of Coram Family Lives services, comprising 31% of local services users (Coram Family Lives Impact Report, 2025).

One of the themes that came up in the helpline data was single parents having **difficulties with their mental health** and **managing the behaviour of their children**.²⁰ These issues particularly affected single mother families.

For **both** single mother families and single father families, **'divorce and separation'** and **'emotional and mental health'** were the top two issues most reported by call takers in 2025. Single father families were significantly more likely than single mother families to be struggling with divorce and separation, with 53% ($n=552$) of their contacts having this as the primary issue. Though this was also the top issue for single mother families, with 47% ($n=2,098$) of people contacting the helpline about single mother families contacting the helpline about this.

However, single mother families were significantly more likely than single father families to have difficulties with **emotional and mental health**. One in five (20%, $n=887$) contacts about single mother families focused on this while just over one in ten (13%, $n=137$) contacts about single father families did. For a breakdown of these numbers, see Figure 29.

In addition, single mother families were significantly more likely than single father families to experience **struggling with a child's behaviour**, though similar proportions of single mother families (6%, $n=144$) and single father families (6%, $n=30$) experienced conflict with a child. For nearly one in five single mother families, the primary issue affecting their child or children was the **behaviour of teenagers** (19%, $n=446$) or the **behaviour of 0-12 year olds** (17%, $n=393$). Whereas, for single father families, these issues were only discussed in one in ten (10%, $n=47$) contacts and just over one in twenty (6%, $n=30$) contacts, respectively. For a full breakdown of these figures, see Figure 30.

Figure 26. Chart showing the ages of children identified in helpline contacts where the primary sub-issue affecting children was aggressive and violent

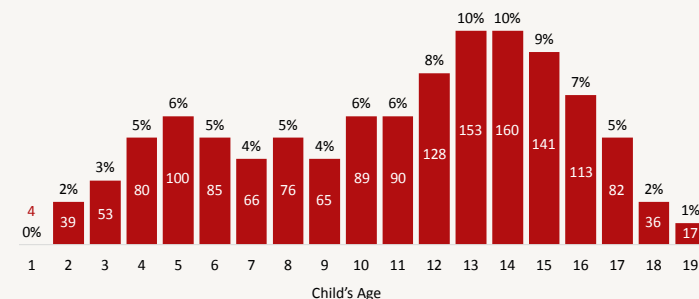


Figure 27. Chart showing the top five most commonly reported contexts in which children behaved aggressively according to contacts to the helpline in 2025. More than one context may have been selected for each contact

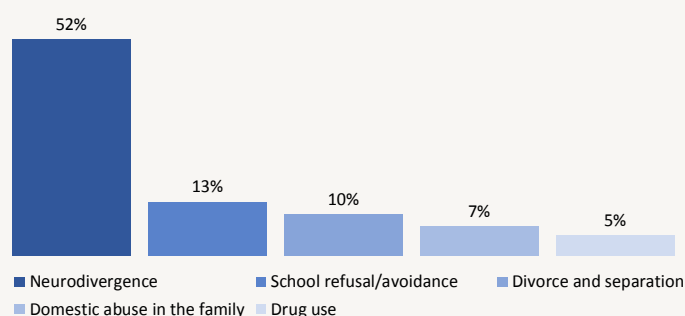
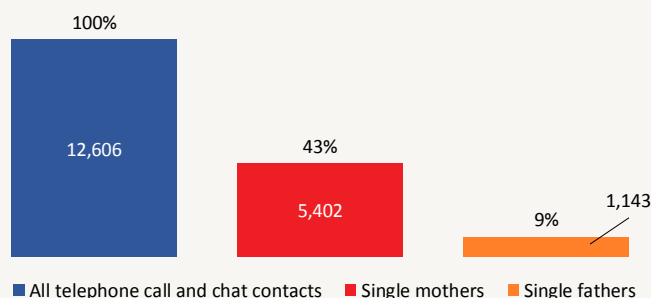


Figure 28. Chart showing contacts from about single mother families and single fathers families as proportion of all contacts through telephone calls and chats in 2025, where the family type was recorded



¹⁹ Note that this is for contacts where the family type of the family the person contacting the helpline about was recorded – 12,606 contacts. That leaves 13,151 contacts where we do not know the family type.

²⁰ The data in this section relates to contacts to the helpline through telephone calls and online chat only, as service user forms collecting family type are rarely filled out for WhatsApp messages and emails.

Single mother families were significantly more likely than single father families to have difficulties with emotional and mental health and to experience struggling with a child's behaviour.

Figure 29. Chart showing top two issues affecting adults in 2025, comparing responses for single mother families and single father families regarding 'divorce and separation' and 'emotional and mental health'

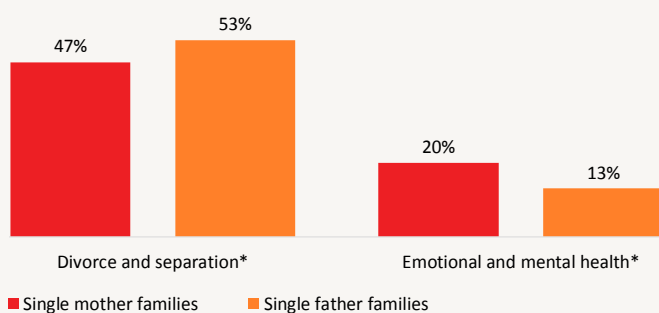
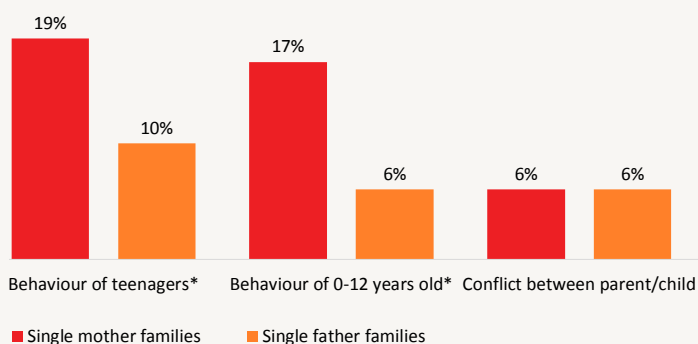


Figure 30. Chart showing issues affecting children in 2025 that relate to behaviour of children towards parents, comparing responses about single mother families and single father families



Emma: A Mum with a neurodivergent child and limited support

Background

Emma is a 42-year-old Mum who is not working at present. She's single and has a child, Josh, who is 12 years old and is diagnosed with autism and ADHD. Emma rents privately.

Emma contacted the family lives helpline to ask for advice and emotional support related to her own mental health and managing Josh's behaviour.

Presenting Issues

Josh is unable to attend school due to emotional distress and behaviour challenges. The School have said they cannot meet his needs regarding his autism and ADHD, and the Local Authority are struggling to find Josh a place at a specialist school. As a result, Emma has had to stop working and spends most days at home supporting him. She feels exhausted, isolated, and overwhelmed, and is struggling to manage Josh's behaviour whilst also coping with her own declining mental health.

Support provided

The helpline volunteer provided a structured and empathetic response, offering Emma a safe, non-judgemental space to talk about her situation. The volunteer validates her feelings and helps her understand Josh's behaviour as communication linked to stress and unmet needs. Practical guidance is provided around managing behaviour at home, reducing pressure on Josh, and introducing predictable routines. The volunteer also supports Emma to think about next steps with school and local services and encourages her to prioritise her own wellbeing and reduce isolation by accessing appropriate local support. The volunteer gave Emma a link to a free online parenting course on parenting neurodivergent children from Family Lives.

Outcome

Emma says she's feeling less alone and more confident after speaking to Family Lives. She has strategies of her own to manage Josh's behaviour and more emotionally equipped to cope with daily challenges. Emma takes more steps to rebuild routine and stability at home. The call helps her feel listened to, reassured and supported at a critical point of crisis.

Conclusion

The evidence presented in this report shows that **Coram Family Lives provides vital, trusted and accessible support to thousands of families across the country.** Through its national helpline, online resources, digital courses, parenting forums and local area programmes, the organisation reaches families with a wide range of needs, circumstances and levels of complexity. Its work sits at the intersection of early help, emotional support, parenting guidance, safeguarding awareness and family resilience.

In 2025, the Coram Family Lives helpline handled over 30,000 contacts. This demonstrates substantial and sustained demand for direct family support, although **the true level of need is likely to be higher when unanswered contacts, repeat contacts and families who do not know where to turn** are taken into account. Most people accessed support by telephone or live chat, underlining the continued importance of immediate, person-to-person contact with trained and trusted supporters. WhatsApp also appears to offer an important route into help, particularly for families in higher-risk situations, where this form of communication may offer a safer and easier way to disclose a risk of harm.

The profile of helpline users shows that the service is primarily used by parents, especially **women** and those aged 36–45, but it also reaches **fathers, non-resident parents, grandparents, extended family members** and others involved in children's lives. This breadth matters. It shows that **family support cannot be narrowly understood as support only for one type of parent or household.** The pressures experienced by families cut across income groups, family structures and caring roles, although the data also shows that the helpline is especially important for those with primary caregiving responsibilities and for families facing financial hardship.



A central finding is that families are not presenting with single, isolated problems. **Relationship breakdown, parental mental health, children's behaviour, legal difficulty, neurodivergence, poverty and statutory involvement are often deeply interconnected.** Divorce and separation emerged as a particularly significant issue, affecting both adults and children and frequently involving conflict over contact, living arrangements and co-parenting. This is consistent with wider evidence that one in five children experience some form of family instability, such as parental separation, between birth and age 10 (Šťastná et al., 2024), and that this can have negative impacts on both physical health (Soares et al., 2017; Goisis et al., 2019) and mental health (Garriga & Pennoni, 2020; Fitzsimons & Villadsen, 2019).

The need for support with separation and family conflict is also reflected in engagement with Coram Family Lives' online courses and forums. One of the most accessed courses is *Co-parenting* which supports users to parent positively through conflict and separation. Similarly, one of the most popular website forums focuses on relationships, divorce and separation.

These findings reinforce the importance of a whole-family model of early help. **Families experiencing separation, conflict or stress often require more than information alone. They need practical tools, emotional reassurance, legal signposting and relational support that helps them reduce conflict and keep children's needs at the centre.** In this context, the complementary roles of Coram Family Lives and Coram Children's Legal Centre are especially important. Coram Family Lives provides wider emotional, relational and practical family support, while the Child Law Advice Service, delivered by Coram Children's Legal Centre, provides specialist legal information and guidance. The overlap in presenting issues, together with referral pathways between the services, demonstrates the value of a joined-up Coram response for families navigating both legal and relational complexity.

Compounding issues

The report also highlights the **significant role of poverty and financial pressure in family life.** Previous Coram Family Lives research found that almost a third, 32%, of helpline users had an income below £16,000, well below the poverty line (Helpline User Survey Phase 1: Autumn/Winter 2025, 2025), with a similar proportion of website users reporting the same income level. A further 44% of helpline users reported an income of £16,000 to £50,000, while just under a quarter (24%) reported an income above £50,000. This suggests that family pressure is not confined to one economic group, but that poverty and low income intensify the risks and reduce the capacity of families to manage conflict, mental health difficulties, children's behaviour and statutory involvement.

Children's behaviour is another major theme. Concerns about **boundaries, aggression, parent-child relationships and emotional regulation** feature prominently in the helpline data. A notable proportion of contacts involve verbal or physical aggression towards parents. These issues are often associated with parental separation, parental stress and neurodivergence. The findings are important because child-to-parent aggression remains under-recognised and under-reported, often due to shame, fear of blame, or concerns about criminalising children (Holt, 2011; Condry & Miles, 2014, p. 2021). Wider research suggests that the prevalence of serious physical violence towards parents is approximately 3–5%, but that when broader definitions of abuse are used, including psychological aggression, this rises to around 10% (Baker & Bonnick, 2021). Families are turning to Coram Family Lives because they need help to understand, reduce and respond to this behaviour before it escalates further.

Parental mental health is also a significant and recurring concern. Many adults contacting the helpline report anxiety, depression, emotional overwhelm or distress. These difficulties are often linked to relationship breakdown, financial strain, children's behaviour and the demands of parenting under pressure. This reflects wider research suggesting that over half of children are exposed to parental mental health problems by the age of 16 (Abel et al., 2019). The impact appears particularly acute for single-parent families, especially single mothers, who are overrepresented among helpline contacts and who often report overlapping concerns around mental health, behaviour and family conflict. This reinforces the need for policy and practice to recognise lone-parent households as a priority group for targeted early support.

While the core issues raised by families have remained consistent over the last five years, there are clear signs of intensification. Divorce and separation has become the most prominent issue affecting children in the helpline data, while reports of abusive behaviour within the family have grown. More than one in ten contacts involved concerns about harm, most commonly emotional abuse, with a significant proportion also involving child-to-parent aggression. These **patterns suggest that families are often reaching out at a point where difficulties are already serious, but still potentially capable of being de-escalated if timely and appropriate support is available.**

Referral patterns further demonstrate the extent of unmet need, especially in relation to legal advice, mental health support, neurodevelopmental support and services linked to separation. At the same time, high levels of intended follow-up show that the helpline plays a crucial role in helping families move into wider support. For many parents and carers, Coram Family Lives is not simply an advice service; it is a gateway into the wider system.

Improving outcomes for families

The evidence also demonstrates that **the helpline has the potential to improve outcomes for families.** Earlier research into the helpline found that 97% of callers reported that their parenting skills had improved as a result of calling, while 72% felt that their family relationships and overall welfare had improved (SROI, 2012). A more recent follow-up user survey run by Coram Family Lives had a small sample size, $n=9$, but provided valuable insight into how the helpline can help callers. Respondents described Coram Family Lives as providing an empathetic ear, a space to vent and a different perspective.

The helpline should therefore be understood as a cost-effective form of early intervention. A 2012 report by the Social Return on Investment Network found that every £1 invested in the Coram Family Lives helpline was likely to generate £3.42 of social value (SROI Network, 2012). This value was generated through callers receiving advice and referrals that improved parenting skills, confidence, understanding of their situation and self-esteem, alongside wider benefits for families, including improved family relationships and better conduct among children. The report concluded that this form of early intervention could reduce costs for the Department for Education, local authorities, the Ministry of Justice and the NHS.

The conclusion from this report is clear: **families are under sustained and increasing pressure, and many are struggling to find timely, trusted and joined-up support.** Coram Family Lives provides an essential early help function, supporting families before difficulties become further entrenched or escalate into crisis. Its helpline, digital resources, courses, forums and local programmes provide a blended model of support that combines scale, accessibility and relational depth.

As part of the wider Coram Group, Coram Family Lives is now well placed to strengthen this impact further. The integration with Coram brings together family support, children's legal advice, advocacy, education, research, policy expertise and specialist services. This creates an **opportunity to build a more coherent and preventative model of support for families: one that listens to children, supports parents and carers, identifies risk earlier, and helps families navigate complex systems with greater confidence.**

Families should not have to reach crisis before they receive help. The evidence in this report demonstrates the urgent need to invest in open-access family support as core prevention infrastructure. Coram Family Lives is already providing that support at scale. The policy challenge now is to recognise, fund and embed this kind of provision within the wider early help system, so that families can access the right help, in the right way, at the right time.

Recommendations

This report shows clearly that families are under sustained pressure. Economic insecurity, social change, relationship breakdown, mental health difficulties and the complexity of statutory systems are placing significant strain on parents, carers and children. However, these challenges should not be seen as too complex to address. With timely, accessible and relational support, families can be helped earlier, protective factors can be strengthened, and better outcomes for children and parents are possible.

The current policy context provides an important opportunity. The government has introduced and announced a number of measures aimed at supporting children and families, including the Best Start Family Hubs programme, the development of a child poverty strategy, the removal of the two-child benefit limit, and the *Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive* plan to reform children's social care. These sit alongside the continuation of programmes such as the Families First Partnership Programme, which seeks to strengthen early intervention, multi-agency working and family support.

These developments are welcome. However, significant gaps remain. Without further targeted action, many families will continue to experience unmet need, particularly in relation to children's mental health, neurodevelopmental support, single-parent family life, child-on-parent aggression, and access to early legal advice.

We recommend that policymakers:

- 1. Recognise and promote open-access family support** as part of the early help system. Helplines and digital support services should be treated as core prevention infrastructure, not as peripheral or discretionary provision. They provide a vital route into support for families who may not meet statutory thresholds but whose difficulties are real, persistent, and at risk of escalation.
- 2. Target waiting times for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services.** Children and young people experiencing mental health difficulties must be able to access timely support from CAMHS and related specialist provision, before distress escalates and wider family relationships come under further strain. Long waits can intensify distress, increase pressure on parents and carers, and leave children without the support they need at a critical stage.
- 3. Increase capacity for ADHD and autism assessment,** diagnosis and support. Waiting times for neurodevelopmental assessment remain too long. Children, young people and families need earlier identification, clearer pathways and practical support before, during and after diagnosis. Earlier identification of neurodevelopmental needs must be matched by practical, family-centred support. Parents and carers need guidance before, during and after assessment, particularly where children's behaviour, school attendance, family relationships or parental mental health are under strain.

4. Develop targeted support for single parents in every area.

Single-parent families, particularly single mothers, are disproportionately represented among those seeking support. Policymakers should undertake a consultation with single parents, practitioners, charities and sector experts to better understand the pressures facing lone parent households and to design support that reflects their lived experience.

5. Respond earlier to child-on-parent aggression.

Child-on-parent aggression should be recognised as a serious and often hidden form of family distress. A compassionate, trauma-informed and whole-family approach is needed, balancing safety, accountability and support. Families should be able to access help before behaviour escalates into crisis, safeguarding or criminal justice responses.

- 6. Expand access to early legal advice,** including written follow-up, should be clearly advertised to families. Legal aid should be reinstated in all cases where there is local authority involvement in private law children's proceedings, including special guardianship orders. This would help parents and carers make better informed decisions, reduce conflict where possible, and improve outcomes for children.

- 7. Further research** should also be undertaken into effective interventions for child-on-parent aggression and violence, so that policymakers, commissioners and delivery organisations can respond with greater confidence and consistency.

The Families First Partnership Programme provides a particularly important policy opportunity. Coram Family Lives shares its ambition to deliver accessible, family-centred early help and to strengthen partnership working with local authorities, safeguarding systems and the Department for Education.

Coram Family Lives is well placed to contribute to this agenda through its trusted relational support, parenting expertise, digital prevention, neurodiversity-informed guidance, and insight into the lived experience of families. Its helpline occupies a unique position at the frontline: independent of statutory services, accessible to families in the moment, and able to provide trusted support before difficulties become entrenched.

The Coram Family Lives helpline should therefore be recognised as essential early help infrastructure. It provides a first point of contact for parents and carers who might otherwise go unsupported, helps reduce escalation, improves outcomes for children and families, and relieves pressure on overstretched public services.

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Appendix I: Detailed methods

Data overview

The data in this section has come from service user forms completed for helpline users between January 2021 and December 2025 and previous reports published by Coram Family Lives: 'Feeling under siege: Reports of child/adolescent family violence in calls to Coram Family Lives UK helpline (2020-2022)' (2023), 'Annual Report and Accounts 2024-2025' (2025), and 'Helpline User Survey Phase 1: Autumn/Winter 2025' (2025).

There are numerous ways to contact the Coram Family Lives helpline: telephone, online live chat via the Coram Family Lives website, email, and WhatsApp. After a phone call or live chat, the call handler completes a form about the interaction called a service user form.²¹ This form records details about the contact, including:

- The primary issue affecting the adult/adults in the situation
- The primary issue affecting the child/children in the situation
- The identity of the caller in relation to those about whom they are concerned, for example a parent, a neighbour, a friend
- The type of family the issue is affecting, for example, single parent household, cohabiting household
- If there is a risk of harm to anyone
- If a risk of harm requires a report to be made to an external agency, such as the police, whether this has been done and to which agency a report has been made.²²

Call takers will consider which issue from a drop-down list in the form best summarises the focus of the conversation in terms of primary issues. Some issues have a further list of options – called 'Sub-issues' – where the call taker can record a further level of specificity about the issue. For example, if 'Abuse' is the primary issue affecting adults, a call taker will be prompted to select one or more sub-issues, such as "Domestic", "Elder", "Emotional", and so on.

There are also fields in the form to capture the gender and age range of the caller, the county, and if there are children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in the family, but this information is not always collected. This is because the focus in the conversation is the support the helpline can offer, the caller may not wish to tell the call handler this information, or the handler may not have the

opportunity to ask this information before the caller hangs up. Call handlers prioritise supporting the caller and collecting the information listed above, with any further information collected treated as optional and additional. Regarding whether there are children with SEND in the family, call handlers are trained not to ask this specifically, but simply to log in the service user form if this information is given in the call.

Call takers monitor whether there is a risk of harm present in a family's situation when they contact the helpline. In this context, a "risk of harm" is considered to be present where the call taker reasonably believes someone may present an immediate or ongoing danger to themselves or someone else.²³ If a call taker identifies a risk of harm during a call, online chat, or in a WhatsApp message or email, they record this in the service user form. They also log the reason they are concerned someone in the situation may be at risk of harm and any further demographic information about the person contacting the helpline they are able to capture.

For contacts made to the helpline through email and WhatsApp, the handler does not fill out a service user form, unless a risk of harm is identified, at which point they would only fill in this part of the form for the contact. This is because contacts made through these routes typically do not contain enough information to put into the form, so it is not practice to complete one. This means the helpline data analysed in this report only reflects telephone calls and live chats. There are further contacts made by members of the public to the helpline through email and WhatsApp, but information on these contacts is not contained in this report.

Additional data to support give context and depth to our analysis was gathered through previous reports and data sources. These include:

- A user survey conducted for Coram Family Lives National Services in 2025, which obtained 227 responses. The majority of respondents were from helpline users (n=149), with 58 Live Chat users, 17 WhatsApp users, and 3 email respondents. There was also a phase 2 survey which had 9 responses, across helpline, email, and Live Chat.
- A report carried out by the Social Return on Investment (SROI) network into the Coram Family Lives telephone helpline between 2012 and 2013.
- The Coram Family Lives Annual Report and Accounts 2024/25.
- The Coram Family Lives 'Feeling Under Siege' report of child/adolescent family violence in calls to the helpline between 2020-2022.

²¹ This is only for contacts that contain enough information to put into the service user form; no service user form is completed for calls shorter than roughly 3 minutes or for frequent callers.

²² For contacts through WhatsApp and email, the primary issues are recorded in a separate system (Puzzle) so a service user form is not completed by the call taker.

²³ In other words, where there may be safeguarding issue.

Analysis

The vast majority of the data in this report is quantitative and we have analysed it using basic descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages, generated in Excel. We explore helpline usage, primary issues for adults and children, some demographics of service users, and risks of harm and their contexts. We have focused most of our analysis on data from the year 2025 (January – December) but have also compared parts of this data to similar data from the years 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2024 to find any trends.

Beyond this, we have used chi-square tables to find where there are statistically significant differences for some of the data – we have clearly noted in the report where data has been tested this way. We checked statistical significance to the 95% confidence level.

It was not possible to do much analysis on sub-groups within the data, such as those contacting the helpline who belonged to a particular ethnicity, because the way the data was originally collected did not allow for much data linkage. The sub-groups we have been able to report more detailed insights on are:

- Single parents (with a focus on mental health and child behaviour)
- Children who are behaving aggressively or violently, where a risk of harm has been logged by the call taker.

We have included sections of more focused analysis on these groups, which we have called a “SPOTLIGHT”.

We have also included two case studies in this report that we have called “Case study A” and “Case study B”. These are not direct reflections of any real helpline user journey but are instead created from the details of many different users and are designed to show examples of typical user journeys. They are placed alongside relevant quantitative analysis, to bring this data to life. They show in greater detail how people experience accessing and being supported by the helpline, as well as the nuances in the challenges they are facing.

Methodological considerations

We have used the number of contacts to the helpline as a measure of demand, however the data is much more complicated than this headline figure. This figure may not include contacts from people who gave very limited information, as call takers will only fill in a service user form to log the contact where there is enough information in the contact to make this worthwhile. It also likely does not include people who are repeat callers to the helpline, as call takers will not fill out additional service user forms for those who contact the helpline frequently about the same issues. Additionally, Coram Family Lives has an arrangement with

Both Parents Matter – who also offer a helpline – that when the BPM helpline is closed, callers can choose to be transferred to the Coram Family Lives helpline, if it is open. Calls that come through this way cannot be differentiated in the data, so it is not possible to say how many have come from this source. These three factors mean that the actual number of people contacting the helpline may be higher than the number of contacts that has been recorded and reported here.

The main source of the data in this report is the service user forms call takers use to record information about each helpline contact. This form has undergone changes over the last five years. Specifically, the categories in the drop-down lists for primary issues discussed have been adjusted, with some categories added and some removed. This affects how comparable the data from different years are. However, the primary issues most commonly chosen by call takers have been present under the same label for the last five years, apart from “Legal” issues, which was added in 2023.

Furthermore, call takers operate on a principal of listening to the concerns of helpline users, allowing them to lead the interaction. This means that call takers will only record most of the information in the service user form only if it is brought up spontaneously during the interaction; they will not ask directly if a child has Special Educational Needs or Disabilities (SEND), for example. This means the data we have does not reflect the full context or demographics of helpline users – any data reported on is what call takers have been able to record.

The organisation saw a large drop in demand during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially during lockdowns. They attribute this demand change to people finding it more difficult to contact the helpline when there are other family members in the house with them. WhatsApp was not introduced as a contact method until November 2024, so this was not available as a more discreet way of contacting the helpline during the pandemic.

The data in this report focuses on the last five years the helpline has operated. However, live chat was not reintroduced as a contact method until June 2020 (it was initially in use between April 2010 and April 2015) and WhatsApp was not introduced until November 2024. These methods offered a more discreet, convenient way to contact the helpline. Data analysis indicates that, compared to the other ways people can contact the helpline, WhatsApp contacts had the highest percentage of risks of harm associated with them. This indicates people may be more likely to use WhatsApp to contact the helpline at times of crisis, when issues they are facing have reached a head.

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