



## Definition

Where a child feels lonely, isolated, left out and/or has no significant relationship meeting their needs. They may be home alone.

Most of us experience loneliness at some point in our lives. Traditionally loneliness was considered to be just one aspect of more encompassing psychological distress, such as depression or anxiety, then about a decade ago loneliness began to be viewed as a unique phenomenon – a problem in its own right (McWhirter, 1990).

In that time there has also been recognition that it is not only adults and adolescents who experience loneliness. Whilst it was originally thought that true loneliness could not be experienced until adolescence - when more sophisticated cognitive abilities and greater friendship intimacy needs emerged - children have demonstrated that they do have well developed notions of loneliness. In fact, children as young as three have shown they too feel the pain of social isolation. The details may be different from the loneliness of adolescents and adults, but the basic experience is the same (Erwin, 1993).

*At home alone. Lives on outskirts of city and her school is 1½ hours drive away so she rarely gets the opportunity to see friends outside of school time. No close neighbours to hang out with.*

*Female aged 10*

## Caller Information

Kids Help Line counsellors answer around 2,000 calls relating to loneliness each year. When the service commenced in 1993, 2.6% of calls dealt with loneliness issues. This has been steadily falling over the years, and in 1999 represented 1.4% of all calls received at KHL.

Loneliness is of particular concern for children and young people outside metropolitan areas, with 41% of calls from regional Australia. Across all call types, usually around one-third of callers are from regional areas.

The ethnic background of the caller was recorded for just over a quarter of loneliness calls. Of these, 87% were Anglo-Australian, 3.3% Aboriginal, and the remaining 9.7% from other backgrounds.

Loneliness can be particularly poignant in adolescence and has been reported as among the most frequent problem teenagers mention (Brennah, 1982). Brennah goes even further stating that loneliness is an important social problem that affects 65% of adolescents. It is therefore no surprise that two-thirds (66%) of those who call Kids Help Line because they are lonely are aged between 13 and 18 years.

## Age and Gender

Forty-five percent of callers were aged between 15 and 18 years, and likewise for those aged 10 to 14. Females made the majority of calls concerning loneliness, representing 67% of the callers.

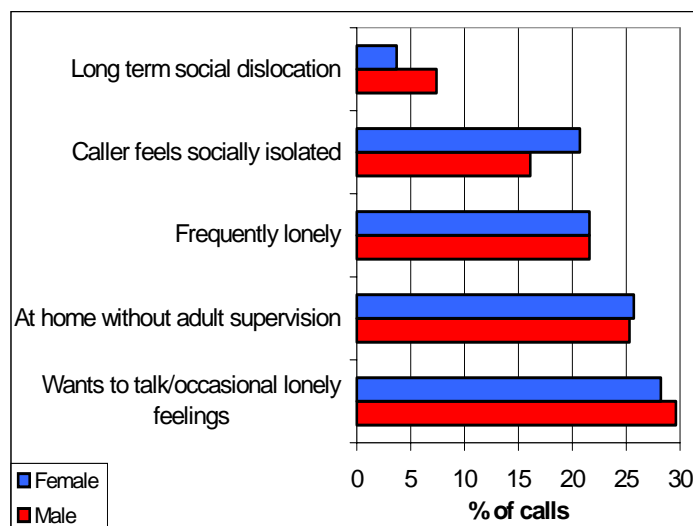
The table below provides a breakdown of the age and gender of the callers who phoned concerning loneliness.

AGE	FEMALE N=2,721	MALE N=1,318
5-9	7%	3%
10-14	31%	14%
15-18	29%	16%

*Caller feels lonely and like no one understands him. His family is distant and he can't remember them being any different. Finds it hard to let anyone in yet feels very alone because of that. His best friend moved away a little while ago and he is really missing him.*

*Male aged 17*

The graph below provides a breakdown of the severity levels of the calls received for males and females between 1997 and 1999.



An examination of the severity of the calls received concerning loneliness reveals some interesting information. Twenty-nine percent of the callers stated they phoned because they wanted to talk or occasionally had feelings of loneliness.

A further 26% were at home without adult supervision.

*Felt very scared as she was home alone with her 2 year old brother. Said she was imagining that every door creaking was a ghost. Her parents were both working late.*

*Female aged 9*

Almost a quarter of callers (21%) said they frequently felt lonely, with 19% involving the caller feeling socially isolated. The remaining 5% were suffering from long term social dislocation.

Many of the callers aged between five and fourteen call about being left at home without adult supervision. A large proportion within this age group also call simply because they want to talk, or because they occasionally feel lonely.

With the more severe forms of loneliness, such as social isolation and long term social dislocation, the older age group (those aged 15 to 18) make the majority of calls. This is not surprising given that loneliness is purported to peak during adolescence (Brennah, 1982).

*Based on 1997 to 1999 data.*

Whilst females make a larger proportion of calls about loneliness (66%), males who phone are more likely to be experiencing more severe forms of loneliness, such as long term social dislocation. This suggests that males, who are generally less likely to seek help than females, reach out when the problem is more severe.

*Lives in a caravan park in an isolated location. Her mother is on a pension so going out is not an option at the moment.... is looking to get part-time work ... her only social contact is with the other residents of the caravan park who are much older.*

*Female aged 16*

### Outcome of Calls

KHL counsellors are supported by an extensive database of relevant welfare and support services. Counsellors have the option of referring callers to another service if they feel the support would be beneficial.

In 1999, 4.5% of calls where loneliness was an issue required referral to other support services. The most common referrals were to community health centres, and various family and youth services.

Callers can also contract with a counsellor to call back and discuss their problems further. Almost 6% of the callers who rang because they were lonely agreed to do this.

KHL plays an important role for young people wanting to talk about loneliness and being home alone. Counsellors support and encourage callers to fully explore issues which enable them to make informed decisions about their situation. The anonymity and confidentiality of the service provides a safe environment for young people to freely and openly discuss their concerns.

### References

Brennah, T. (1982). *Loneliness in adolescence*. John Wiley, New York.

Erwin, P. (1993). *Friendship and Peer Relations in Children*. John Wiley, New York.

McWhirter, B. T. (1990). *Loneliness: A review of current literature, with implications for counseling and research*. Journal of Counseling and Development, March/April 1990, Volume 68.

*Updated: June 2000*

### For more information

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