

# Peer Relationships

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## Definition

Problems between caller and friend/s. Includes concerns for a friend's well-being, peer group pressure, making friends, jealousy, friendship breakdowns. Excludes: bullying, pregnancy, drug and alcohol use, suicide, mental health, and physical health.

Relationships with peers and friends play an important role in the social and psychological development of young people. Specifically, children tend to depend upon parents during middle through late childhood. This is followed by an increasing degree of dependency upon peers during early to middle adolescence. During late adolescence, individuals begin to resist peer pressure and have a greater capacity for autonomous behaviours.

*Caller is the quiet one amongst her friends and feels as if they trample all over her and boss her around. She is scared that if she speaks up for herself they won't like her.*

*Female Aged 12*

Although the influence of peers increases with age, most research shows that this influence is situation specific. Peers provide adolescents with a reference group for information and also with opportunities to explore new roles. Dating, social events, types of dress, drinking, drug use, sport, and hobbies all take place largely in the company of age mates. Peers are a critical part of the adolescent's transition to independence outside of the family. As such, issues of friendship consistently receive high ratings of importance from teenagers.

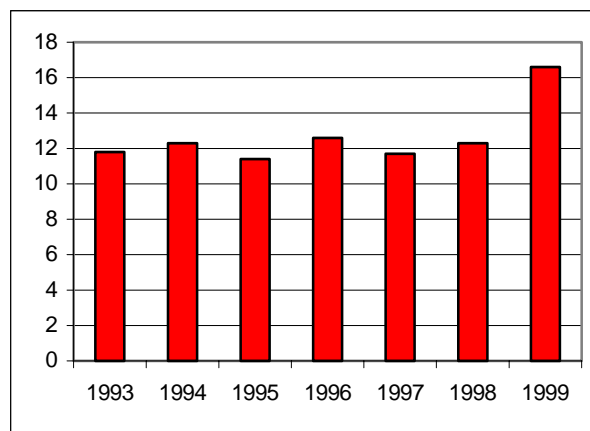
Parents are more typically consulted for important decisions such as educational or occupational plans. For many adolescents, the move towards a peer social orientation does not necessarily involve a rejection of parents opinions and values (Sabatelli and Anderson, 1991; Wilks, 1992).

*Caller concerned for a friend who has become increasingly angry and violent since his parent's separation.*

*Female Aged 17*

## Caller Information

Since KHL began nationally in May 1993, the proportion of counselling calls relating to peer relationship issues has remained between 11 and 13 percent, with a significant increase in 1999 to almost 17%. The graph below details this trend.



This averages to around 13,100 calls per year for this particular issue, accounting for 12.6% of all calls.

Almost two-thirds of callers are from metropolitan areas, with the remainder from regional Australia.

Ethnic background of the caller was recorded for a quarter of calls, 92% are Anglo-Australian, 1% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and the remainder from other backgrounds.

The largest proportion of callers (67%) are aged between 10 and 14 years. Females make the majority of calls concerning relationships with peers, representing 85% of calls. The table below provides a breakdown of the age and gender of callers who phoned concerning

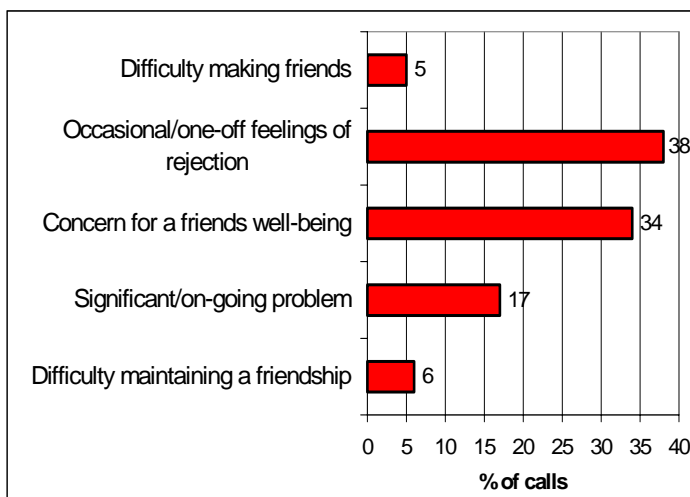
AGE	FEMALES	MALES
5-9	5%	1%
10-14	58%	9%
15-18	22%	5%

*Callers best friend is going to live overseas in two months. Discussed ways of enjoying remaining time together and staying in touch.*  
Male Aged 10

An examination of the severity of the calls received by Kids Help Line concerning relationships with peers reveals some interesting information. Thirty-four percent of the callers stated they phoned out of concern for a friend's well-being. The remaining 66% were experiencing difficulties with a relationship with their peers. Of these:

- five percent were experiencing difficulties making friends,
- 38% reporting experiencing occasional or one-off feelings of rejection,
- 23% stated experiencing a significant or ongoing problem or were experiencing difficulties maintaining a friendship.

The graph below provides a breakdown of the severity levels of the calls received.



As previously mentioned, concern about a friend's well-being is a common theme in these calls. Another common theme is problems with choosing friends, making friends, and feeling shy, lonely or excluded. Some of these callers have moved to new areas or changed schools. Others' friends are changing or finding new friends and these callers are dealing with feelings of rejection and jealousy. Sometimes callers phone about being teased, humiliated or being the brunt of hurtful comments.

*Based on 1997 to 1999 data.*

Peer pressure to conform to various activities such as smoking, drug and/or alcohol use, running away from home, dangerous play, or sex are common problems in calls concerning relationships with friends.

Trust and communication are also significant issues for young people in their friendships with each other. Honesty and openness are highly valued - lies, betrayal of trust and breaking of confidences are regular aspects of these calls.

KHL plays an important role for young people wanting to explore problems in relationships with their peers. 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. Frequently, counsellors work with the caller to develop and practice clear communication and assertiveness skills that may be used to improve the situation.

### *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, 5.2% of calls where peer relationships were an issue required referral to other support services. The most common referrals were to Crisis Care, Child Protection and Family Crisis Service, Department of Community Services, Human Services, and Crisis Response & Child Abuse Service.

### *References*

Sabatelli, R.M. and Anderson, S.A. 1991, "Family System Dynamics, Peer Relationships, and Adolescents' Psychological Adjustment", *Family Relations* 362-369.

Wilks, J., 1991, "What Really Matters, Important Issues in Adolescence", *Youth Studies Australia* 49-54.

*Updated: May 2001*

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