



# FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

## Definition

Problems in the caller's family including parents and siblings (birth/foster/adoptive/step/de facto/separated), extended family members or significant others (not peers or partners).

## The Importance of Family

Family relationships are the third most common reason that children and young people call What's Up, constituting 13% of all problems presented. This is consistent across all ages from 5 to 18, highlighting the importance of family to all children and young people.

The family is the primary source of socialisation and economic support for children. Research shows that for healthy development, children need, among other things<sup>1</sup>:

- Secure relationships with caregivers who love and nurture them;
- Strong families and whanau who are able to provide for the child's needs and model positive behaviours.

*"Caller said she feels stressed and can't get her schoolwork done because her mother leaves her to look after her younger siblings while she goes out clubbing."*

## Changes in Family Life

Most children in New Zealand live in two-parent families but the picture of family life is changing, with increasing numbers of children living with sole parents. Nearly a third of children lived in sole parent families in 2001—up from 26% in 1991<sup>2</sup>.

Sole parents tend to be disadvantaged in terms of income, employment, education and housing, which have a negative effect on the welfare of the children.

Sole parents also tend to be younger than partnered parents and have fewer children in the family. Only 1 child in 8 living in sole parent families is with their father.

About one in three marriages in New Zealand are between previously married partners<sup>3</sup>. Many of these new relationships will bring together children with different parents and require the establishment of relationships

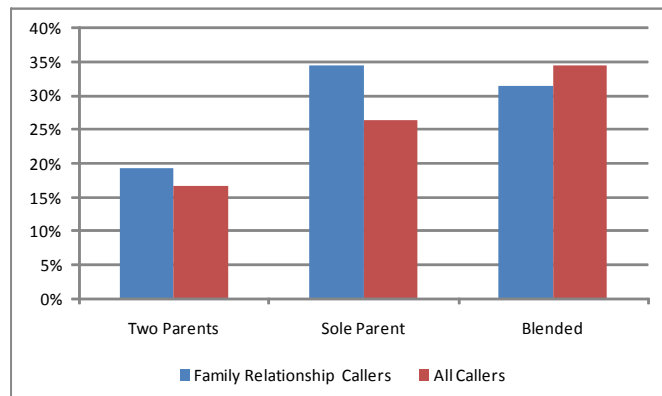
1. New Zealand's Agenda For Children. Ministry for Social Development, June 2002, p17
2. Census Snapshot: Children. Department of Statistics, October 2002, p10.
3. Demographic Trends 2006. Chapter 3, Marriage and divorce. Department of Statistics, 2007

between step-parents and step-children. Children in these circumstances are likely to have been exposed to parental conflict and emotional distress prior to separation and divorce as well as the stresses of forming new family groupings.

These factors are reflected in the calls to What's Up.

*"Mother and father are separated and the caller stays with her dad every second weekend. Dad has his fiancée and her son living in the house. The caller says her things are always going missing and she thinks it is the fiancée taking them to make life difficult for her. There was a custody battle and it cost a lot of money and her dad has said he won't go to court again. She is afraid that if things keep going missing, her dad will be mad at her she will have to stay with her mother always."*

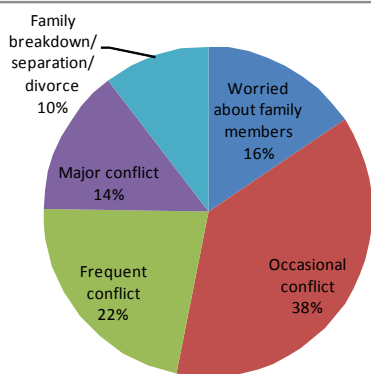
The graph below shows that children and young people ringing What's Up about family relationship problems are much more likely to come from sole parent families than families with two parents, although children from blended families are more likely overall to ring What's Up than children with sole-parents.



## Nature of Family Relationship Calls

Over half (52%) of calls to What's Up about family relationship problems are reporting signs of serious family problems, ranging from frequent conflict to separation or divorce.

*"Caller is worried about her Mum and Dad fighting a lot. They have had a big row tonight and she is afraid her Dad is going to leave because he says he has "had enough". Her uncle and aunt are there to try to help out but she really wanted someone else to talk to about what has been happening."*



The concerns raised by callers about family issues can be divided into seven main groups:

- Consequences of the separation or divorce of parents

*“Her parents have divorced. She lives with her Mum during the school term and with her Dad during the holidays. She doesn’t like moving between them and would like them to get back together or for her father to move back to their hometown so she doesn’t have to move between parents all the time.”*

- Current conflict between parents/caregivers

*“Her parents argue and yell at each other all the time and she feels it could be partly her fault because they sometimes fight about her. This has been happening for three years but has got worse recently. She has tried telling her parents how she feels but they wouldn’t listen and she has no-one else to talk to about it.”*

- Conflict with brothers or sisters

*“Rang because he and his brother have been arguing a lot. He said all he wants is for his brother to listen to him and acknowledge him”.*

- Conflict with step-parents

*“Caller is living with her Dad and his partner of two years because her Mum has moved overseas. She likes living with her father but doesn’t like his partner, who is mean to her when her father isn’t watching. She has tried talking to her about this, but it made no difference. She thinks she will try telling her Dad next.”*

- Estrangement from parents or siblings (often following parental separation)

*“Just moved in with Mum after living with Dad for a long time. Feels that Mum doesn’t take any notice of her and spends little time with her”.*

- Worries about a family member’s health or welfare

*“Their parents are divorcing and her sister ran away from home a few days ago. Her sister is going out with an older guy and she is worried that he is beating her. She saw bad bruises on her sister, who she said she had fallen in the shower, but the caller doesn’t believe this.”*

## Age & Sex Of Callers

Callers with family relationship problems tend to be slightly younger (average age 12.53 years) than the total What’s Up caller group (average age 12.84 years). Pre-teens make up 48.1% of family relationship callers compared with 40.7% of all callers.

They also are more likely to be female (77.8%) than callers overall (58.0%).

## Abuse and Neglect

Although families are an important source of strength for children and young people, some children and young people are harmed by family members.

Approximately 2.8% of the problems presented to What’s Up involve physical, sexual or emotional abuse, neglect or domestic violence.

The majority of these calls (40%) are about physical abuse, followed by sexual abuse (31%), domestic violence (15%), neglect (8%) and emotional abuse (6%).

A quarter of these callers are reporting regular incidents of abuse. What’s Up’s policy is to engage appropriate agencies to safeguard callers who are at risk.

## Conclusion

Because families are so important in the lives of children and young people, they are an important source of challenges and even harm. Calls to What’s Up show how parents, siblings and other family members present children and young people with important formative experiences, from which they can learn feelings of either competence or inadequacy. Because these challenges occur within the family, the caller might not perceive family members as a useful resource to assist with the problem and What’s Up can prove particularly valuable in helping the caller learn how to deal with the problem at hand.

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