

Sometimes I have a dream, and it haunts me.

A little boy, 10 years old, is in a dark room, possibly a cellar, definitely somewhere black, bleak and wretched.

It's extremely dark in the room but there's something clearly wrong with the child. He has raw, bloody scars across the palms of his hands and he is whimpering: a low-pitched wail of anguish that seems too quiet for the pain he is suffering. The boy is desperate to howl out, to let the world hear his agony - but he is too scared to scream and yell and holler. He doesn't dare let anyone hear the pain he's in, not even his parents.

There's a telephone in the room and in my dream I'm screaming at the boy to pick it up and call for help.

'Pick it up, pick it up', I plead, but of course he can't hear me.

I know he's seen the phone, though; I see him looking at it. The problem is he doesn't know who to call: he trusts nobody anymore - not his family, not his school teachers. Nobody. He is utterly alone and frightened and I keep seeing his frail body trembling.

But I know who he should call and I scream a number at him, always the same one: 0808 800 5000.

It is like the combination number to a safe. Dial it and it will open a door to safety, security and salvation. Dial it and the child's pain will start to subside and the wounds heal.

'Trust me,' I plead. 'I know this number, I know who will answer and I trust them - so you must trust them, too'.

But still the boy can't hear and my nightmare slowly begins to fade.

That dream, which still recurs to this day, was one of the reasons I became involved with the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children; the number in my dream is their helpline.

It is there for every tortured and abused and abandoned child to call when they no longer trust anyone else in the world.

And it is there for anyone who suspects they know a child in desperate need.