



Rutland
County Council

Self-harm

Rutland County Council 'Guidance' for Educational Settings (September 2017)

Self-harm in school-aged children and young people is a very real issue that all schools need to take seriously. Self-harm is increasingly recognised as an issue schools have to deal with and therefore it is important that all school staff have a general understanding of self-harm, signs to look out for and what to do if they become aware that a pupil is self-harming.

Self-harming should not be minimised or dismissed as 'attention seeking' or a 'fad'. Any child or young person making the decision to harm themselves needs to be taken seriously and provided with the support they need.

What is Self-harm?

Self-harming is when someone chooses to inflict pain on themselves in some way. It includes, but is not limited to cutting, overdosing (self-poisoning), hitting, burning or scalding, self-asphyxiation or ingesting toxic substances. Some young people harm themselves in less obvious, but still serious ways such as taking drugs, having unsafe sex, or binge drinking. Some simply starve themselves (Royal College of Psychiatrists 2012). It is usually a sign that something is wrong. (Young Minds 2014).

What Self-harm is not?

Attention Seeking - For many children and young people self-harm is a way to communicate emotional distress. Self-harm is a behaviour, and behaviours are a way of communicating feelings. Therefore self-harm is one way of communicating high levels of distress and is often an expression of need for hard-to-manage feelings. Like any behaviour, self-harm may be used to seek help for unmet needs. It is important to understand what these needs are and how they might be met. It is important to remember that the needs are legitimate; the young person may need to find more functional ways to get them met. It could be that there is a problem at home, an issue of bullying, and they feel no one is listening to them or hearing them.

Cultural norms - There is not one 'type' of person who self-harms. Some groups are more vulnerable than others but each case is individual. Whilst self-harm may be used to attract attention to unmet needs, self-harm is not about seeking attention per se. It is not a way of fitting in. These sort of prejudices and misconceptions about self-harming behaviour may lead people to believe they 'know' who self-harms and why. Each person is unique and will have found the practice of self-harm by their own route, and rely on it at times of stress due to the release and relief it offers them. The reality is that:

- Boys are affected by self-harm as well as girls but are less likely to tell anyone about it
- Self-harm is not attention seeking behaviour or a 'fashion fad'
- It is not easy for a young person to stop self-harming behaviour
- Young people from all walks of life can be affected by self-harm, regardless of their social or ethnic background

Is there a link between suicides and self-harm?

If a person is self-harming it can be very upsetting. People often think that self-harm is closely linked to suicide; however the vast majority of people who self-harm are not trying to kill themselves. It's their way of coping with difficult feelings and circumstances, and people who self-harm say their behaviour is about trying to stay alive and coping, rather than killing themselves. It is not always clear from the apparent severity of the self-harm what the intention of the young person is. If you find that someone you know is self-harming, it gives you a real opportunity to help

them deal with the underlying problems they are wrestling with. Therefore, it is important that each individual's intent when hurting themselves is explored.

It is possible that some incidents of self-harm may go too far and accidentally end up as suicide. But in essence, the two are very different, with different intended outcomes.

Risk Factors

There are many factors that contribute to the risk of self-harm. Some of the issues most commonly identified include:

- Attempted suicide or self-harm by a family member
 - Low self-esteem
 - Mental health problems such as depression
 - Family conflict (periods in Local Authority care, parental separation)
 - On-going family relationship problems
 - Family circumstances (parental criminality / poverty / step children / single parents / more than 5 children in the family)
 - Past or present physical or sexual abuse
 - Family models of self-harm
 - Bullying, including cyberbullying and homophobic bullying
- (Supporting Children at Risk of Suicide, 2013)

It is important to recognise that none of these risk factors may appear to be present. Sometimes it is the outwardly happy, high achieving person with a seemingly stable background who is suffering internally and hurting themselves in order to cope.

Warning signs

There may be no warning signs, and often people who self-harm go to great lengths to conceal their injuries so it can be hard to know for sure if a person does self-harm.

If you notice any change in a child or young person that concerns you it is important to open up a conversation with that child or young person. If you do not feel able to do this ask an appropriate staff member (consider your Safeguarding Lead where appropriate) and follow your school's safeguarding procedures.

A change in behaviour, attitudes or presence at school (are they absent or not engaging, which is unlike them) can be significant and should be followed up.

Disclosures and Confidentiality

Pupils must be made aware of their schools policy on self-harming and know what to expect if they disclose their self-harm to a teacher or member of staff. Confidentiality will, no doubt, be a key concern for pupils, and they need to know that it will not be possible for their support member of staff to offer complete confidentiality.

It can be very challenging to decide whether to break a young person's confidentiality and disclose self-harm to their parents, or to other important adults. However, a young person who is hurting him or herself is often struggling to manage intense distress without enough support and/or is struggling to communicate this. Very often a reluctant young person can be persuaded to tell (or let you tell) their parents what has been happening.

Where this is not the case and/or there are concerns for the child or young person's well-being, a referral should be made to the school nurse. Where there are concerns for the immediate safety of the child or young person, a referral should be made to the local authority duty team.

RAIS (Referral, Assessment & Intervention Service - Children's Duty)

01572 758407

The child's or young person's history, attendance record and consideration of any escalating concern should always be considered when deciding on the use of any action.