

ICS Safeguarding Newsletter 22

When a child is hurting: Understanding self-harm with care and compassion

I am writing this week about a topic that is difficult, sensitive, and deeply emotional for families: self-harm.

Even seeing the words can feel alarming. As parents, our instinct is to protect. We want to believe our children are safe, coping, and coming to us if something is wrong. The idea that a child might intentionally hurt themselves can feel frightening and overwhelming.

This article is not written to cause fear. It is written to increase understanding.

Self-harm is not attention-seeking. It is not 'dramatic behaviour'. It is not a parenting failure.

It is usually a sign of distress that a young person does not yet have the skills, words, or confidence to express in another way.

What do we mean by self-harm?

Self-harm refers to when a young person deliberately hurts themselves as a way of coping with emotional pain. It can include cutting, scratching, burning, picking at hair and/ or eyelashes, hitting themselves, interfering with wound healing, or other behaviours that cause physical harm.

In younger children, self-harm can sometimes look different. It may present as persistent skin picking, hair pulling, biting themselves, or repetitive self-injurious behaviour when overwhelmed.

It is important to say clearly: Self-harm does not always mean a child wants to end their life. In many cases, it is a coping strategy, albeit an unsafe one, to manage intense feelings.

However, any self-harm must be taken seriously.

Why might a child self-harm?

There is no single reason. It is rarely about one event. More often, it is an accumulation of internal distress.

Young people describe self-harm as a way to:

- Release overwhelming emotions
- Feel 'something' when they feel numb
- Express pain they cannot put into words

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- Regain a sense of control
- Punish themselves due to feelings of shame or guilt
- Distract from intrusive thoughts

In our international context, additional pressures can sometimes contribute:

- Academic expectations
- Identity and belonging questions
- Social comparison (particularly online)
- Friendship breakdowns
- Cultural or family pressures
- Transitions and mobility

For some students, perfectionism and fear of disappointing others are significant internal drivers. They may appear high-achieving, compliant, and 'fine' on the outside.

Self-harm often coexists with anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, or friendship difficulties, but not always visibly.

What Might the Early Signs Look Like?

There is no single 'look'. Many young people go to great lengths to hide self-harm. However, some early indicators may include:

Physical signs

- Unexplained cuts, scratches, burns or bruises
- Wearing long sleeves or trousers even in warm weather
- Frequently 'accidental' injuries
- Blood stains on clothing or tissues
- Sharp objects missing from home

Emotional and behavioural signs

- Withdrawal from family or friends
- Increased irritability or mood swings
- Heightened sensitivity to criticism
- Sudden drop in self-esteem
- Expressions of worthlessness
- Changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- Increased secrecy around devices
- Avoiding activities that expose arms or legs (e.g., swimming)

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In younger children, you may notice:

- Repetitive picking at skin
- Biting or scratching themselves when distressed
- Intense emotional reactions disproportionate to events

It is important to remember: these signs do not automatically mean a child is self-harming. But patterns of change are worth gentle curiosity.

Often, parents tell me, 'I just felt something wasn't right'. Trust that instinct.

If You Discover Self-Harm

If you see evidence or your child tells you they have self-harmed, your reaction in that first moment matters enormously.

It is completely natural to feel shock, fear, anger, or panic. But try, as much as possible, to respond with calm.

What helps:

- Take a slow breath before responding
- Thank them for telling you
- Say, 'I'm really glad you told me'
- Express concern without blame
- Focus on their feelings, not the behaviour

What can unintentionally shut communication down:

- 'Why would you do this?'
- 'How could you do this to us?'
- Immediate punishment or removal of all privacy
- Threatening consequences
- Minimising ('It's just a phase')

Children often already feel shame. A strong emotional reaction can reinforce secrecy.

You do not need to solve everything in one conversation. The goal is to keep the door open.

What Should Parents Do Next?

1. Stay connected. Increase gentle check-ins without constant interrogation.
2. Reduce access to means. Without creating a prison-like atmosphere, consider how to limit access to sharp objects if risk is ongoing.

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3. Seek professional support. Speak with your doctor, a qualified psychologist, or mental health professional.
4. Inform the school. Please let us know. Even if the behaviour is occurring at home, we need to support your child during the school day.

At school, we do not judge. We support.

When we are aware, we can:

- Monitor wellbeing discreetly
- Provide a trusted adult check-in
- Offer counselling support
- Adjust academic pressure if appropriate
- Ensure staff are appropriately informed on a need-to-know basis

Safeguarding is about partnership. We cannot support what we do not know.

What If Your Child Denies It?

Sometimes parents raise concerns and the child strongly denies self-harm.

If you remain worried:

- Keep communication open
- Avoid constant body-checking, which can feel invasive
- Focus conversations on feelings rather than behaviour
- Monitor patterns over time
- Consider seeking professional advice even without confirmation

Remember: self-harm thrives in secrecy. Your consistent, calm presence is protective.

Protective Factors That Matter

Research consistently shows that the following significantly reduce risk:

- At least one trusted adult
- Strong parent-child connection
- Emotional literacy (naming feelings)
- Balanced expectations
- Healthy peer relationships
- Managed screen use
- Sleep routines

You do not need to be a perfect parent. You need to be a present one.

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Small daily interactions - shared meals, lifts in the car, quiet conversations before bed - build emotional safety.

A Final Word

If you are reading this and feeling anxious, please pause.

The majority of young people do not self-harm. And when they do, with the right support, they recover.

Our role as adults is not to eliminate every challenge from our children's lives. It is to ensure they never face those challenges alone.

If you are concerned about your child, even slightly, please reach out. No worry is too small. Early support makes a profound difference.

As DSL, I would always rather have a conversation that turns out to be unnecessary than miss an opportunity to help.

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