

The reasons children and teenagers can self-harm are often complicated and will be different for every child or young person. Sometimes a child or teenager may not know the reasons they self-harm.

For many young people, self-harm can feel like a way to cope with difficult feelings or to release tension. The physical pain of hurting themselves can feel like a distraction from the emotional pain they're struggling with.

Some difficult experiences or emotions can make self-harm more likely in children:

- experiencing depression, anxiety or eating problems
- having low self-esteem or feeling like they're not good enough
- being bullied (coercive behaviours by others) or feeling alone
- experiencing emotional, physical or sexual abuse, or neglect
- grieving or having problems with relationships
- feeling angry, numb or like they don't have control over their lives.

It can be hard to recognise the signs of self-harm in children and teenagers, but it's important to trust your instincts if you're worried something's wrong. 5% of all of all Childline counselling sessions related to self-harm in 2020/21.

Signs to look out for can include:

- covering up, for example by wearing long sleeves a lot of the time, especially in summer
- unexplained bruises, cuts, burns or bite-marks on their body
- blood stains on clothing, or finding tissues with blood in their room
- becoming withdrawn and spending a lot of time alone in their room
- avoiding friends and family and being at home
- feeling down, low self-esteem or blaming themselves for things
- outbursts of anger, or risky behaviour like drinking or taking drugs.

Advice for parent/carers:

- Self-harm is often caused by an underlying problem, like depression or anxiety, or being bullied. It can be more helpful to focus on helping them with what's causing their feelings rather than on the self-harm itself.
- Parent/carers can help them to get support for a mental health problem, such as by talking to their GP or to Childline. It can also help to ask their GP about a referral to Child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS).

- Sometimes hiding or taking away something a child is using to self-harm can lead to them finding other ways to hurt themselves. Parent/Carers could try asking the child what would be most helpful for them and ask them to tell you when they feel they want to hurt themselves.
- Sometimes, parent/carers might be able to come to an agreement where the child says when they've hurt themselves. It's important to make sure any injuries or cuts are cleaned and properly taken care of. Any serious injuries should be treated right away in a hospital.

Instead of asking a child to stop self-harming, it can be helpful to suggest something they could do instead to cope with difficult feelings.

Some things young people who've spoken to us have found helpful are:

- paint, draw or scribble in red ink
- hold an ice cube in your hand until it melts
- write down your negative feelings then rip the paper up
- wear an elastic band on your wrist and snap it every time you feel the urge to self-harm
- listen to music
- punching or screaming into a pillow
- talk to friends or family
- take a bath or shower
- exercise
- watch your favourite funny film.

Childline also has many more self-harm coping techniques for children and young people.

- Many children who self-harm suffer from low self-esteem or confidence. Parent/carers can help by reminding them about the things they do well or help them to learn something new together, like playing guitar or making crafts.
- Parent/carers could write a list of all the things that make them proud of their child and that make them special, and giving it to them. Focus should be on things about their personality rather than things like their academic achievements

These videos/tutorials are useful:

<https://youtu.be/cYsTes4tqLk>

<https://schools.westsussex.gov.uk/Page/24032>

Please also see flyers and information on NSPCC site

