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Self-harm in Children and Young People Guidance

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*Street Kids Direct is a registered UK charity with the
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OUR COMMITMENT

Street Kids Direct acknowledges the need to provide a safe and caring environment for children, young people and vulnerable adults. Street Kids Direct is firmly committed to the welfare and wellbeing of all children, young people and vulnerable adults who use its facilities and services and to protecting them from all types of harm.

Purpose of this guidance:

The overall aim of this guidance is to ensure that all staff and volunteers have an understanding regarding self-harm involving children, young persons and vulnerable adults, how to respond to it and how to obtain help. Street Kids Direct recognises that their staff and volunteers are likely to encounter children or young people who self-harm at some point. Self-harm is a distressing thing to encounter and many who work or volunteer in children's services feel ill-equipped to deal with it.

The key objectives of this guidance is:

- To understand some of the reasons children and young people self-harm
- To ensure staff and volunteers know what signs to look out for
- To equip staff and volunteers with a baseline risk assessment tool to respond to disclosures of self-harm
- To provide continuing support for children and young people who self-harm

Legal Framework:

This document has been produced on the basis of guidance that seeks to protect children in England. Reference has been drawn from the local Suffolk Safeguarding in Children Board quick practitioner guide.

We believe that:

- Children and young people should never experience any kind of harm including self-harm
- Street Kids Direct has a responsibility to promote the welfare of all children and young people, to keep them safe and to practise in a way that protects them

We recognise that:

- The welfare of children is paramount in all work we do and in all decisions we take
- All children, regardless of age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex, or sexual orientation have an equal right to protection from all types of harm or abuse

- That some children are additionally vulnerable because of the impact of previous experiences, their level of dependency, communication needs or other issues
- Working in partnership with children, young people, their parents, carers and other agencies is essential in promoting young people's welfare

We will seek to keep children and young people safe by:

- Valuing, listening to and respecting them
- Adopting child protection and safeguarding best practice through our policies, procedures and code of conduct for staff and volunteers
- Providing effective management for staff and volunteers through supervision, support, training and quality assurance measures so all staff and volunteers know about and follow our policies, procedures and behaviour codes confidently and competently
- Recording, storing and using information professionally and securely in line with data protection legislation and guidance
- Sharing information about safeguarding and good practice with children and their families through group work, mentoring and one to one discussions
- Making sure children, young people and their families know where to go for help if they have a concern
- Using our safeguarding and child protection procedures to share concerns and relevant information with agencies who need to know, and involving children, young people, parents, families and carers appropriately
- Ensuring that we provide a safe physical environment for our children, young people, staff and volunteers
- Building a culture where staff and volunteers, children, young people and their families, treat each other with respect and are comfortable about sharing concerns

What is Self-Harm?

The straightforward definition is 'Self-harm happens when someone hurts or harms themselves'. They may or may not intend to end their lives and it may be a reaction to a life event or part of the way in which they are coping with distress.

NICE defines self-harm as 'self-poisoning or self-injury, irrespective of the apparent purpose of the act'. These definitions can encompass a wide range of behaviours most commonly cutting, burning and ingestion of poison. Any behaviour harmful to yourself and knowingly entered into may be self-harm however. This can include such acts as potentially harmful sexual activity and remaining in an abusive relationship.

Why do children and young people self-harm?

Often a young person cannot explain why they have self-harmed and find it hard to put into words through their thoughts and feelings. Self-harm is a way of expressing deep distress and shouldn't be thought of as just attention seeking behaviour.

Self-harm can be a way of coping with painful emotions such as rage, sadness, grief, loneliness, fear of self-hatred. There is rarely one experience or single event that would cause a young person to self-harm in this way but research has shown that experiences most closely linked to this action are:

- Relationship problems – often the loss of a loved one or valued relationship
- Low self-esteem/worth
- Bullying – face to face or via social networks
- Mental health problems such as depression
- Family issues such as poverty, criminality or family illness
- Disrupted upbringing such as being in care, separation or divorce
- Child abuse
- To help them sleep or ‘take away the pain’
- Experimentation

Myths

Even among health care professionals there can be myths and negative attitudes surrounding self-harm and assumptions made about why a young person may self-harm.

It is a myth that self-harm is:

- Manipulative
- Attention seeking
- For pleasure
- A group activity
- A failed suicide attempt

Common methods of self-harm include:

- Cutting
- Burning
- Self-poisoning

What to look out for

Not knowing how to broach the subject is often what prevents individuals from probing. Yet concern for their well-being is often what young people who self-harm needs the most. Some signs to look out for include:

- Heightened signs of depression or anxiety – including low self-esteem or blaming themselves for things
- Unusual patterns of requesting/taking medication
- Wearing long sleeved clothing in hot weather or reluctance to partake in activities that might display their cutting behaviour
- Unexplained bruises, cuts, burns or bite marks on their body
- Outbursts of anger or risk-taking behaviours
- Blood stains on clothing or finding tissues with blood
- Becoming withdrawn from friends, family or trusted adults

Noticing their self-harm will not make them self-harm more.

What works?

The response a young person receives when they first disclose self-harm can potentially have a profound influence on whether they go on to seek help. Early intervention is the beginning of the recovery process. Dealing with a young person's disclosure does not require any special skills or extra training. You need to use your core skills and be aware of your own feelings in aiming to treat the young person with respect, unconditional regard and warmth.

Telling them to stop doesn't work!

While Street Kids Direct staff and volunteers cannot change the home and family circumstances of children, it is possible to provide help and support through one to one sessions, mentoring, signposting to additional agencies/services to promote emotional wellbeing and strengthen resilience.

Barriers to seeking help

Children and young people may find it difficult to ask for help because:

- They think the self-harm is a one-off event
- They have nobody to talk to and don't know how to access services
- They are concerned they will lose control and their coping strategy will be taken away from them
- They feel they will be regarded as stupid or attention seeking
- They don't feel their injuries are serious enough to warrant concern or help

Other ways of coping could be discussed and the National Self-Harm Network lists many activities among which are:

- Snapping an elastic band on the wrist
- Thinking about not wanting scars
- Physical activities
- Creative activities
- Social activities
- Comforting activities – soft toy, pillow etc

Risk Assessment Tool

The following is based from FACT (Families and Children's Trust) and aims to provide guidance to staff and volunteers of Street Kids Direct on how to respond to self-harm.

Initial Questions:

- What has been happening?
- Have you got any injury or taken anything that needs attention? – consider seeking medical/emergency action
- Who knows about this?

- Are you planning to self-harm? – consideration to likely or imminent harm
- Have you got the means to do it?
- Have you thought about when you will do it? (timescales)
- Are you at risk of harm from others?
- Is something troubling you? – Family, school, friends, socially etc

Responses:

- Seek immediate medical assistance if injury is serious or life threatening
- If necessary, inform the young person who you will share the information with and when this will happen
- Say who and when the right person will speak to them again to help and support them
- Check what they can do to ensure they keep themselves safe until they are seen again
- Give reassurances – that its ok to talk about self-harm and suicidal thoughts/behaviour

Setting up an agreement with the child or young person:

- Discuss confidentiality
- Discuss child protection if necessary
- Discuss who knows about it and discuss contacting their parents
- Discuss who you will contact

Some further Questions:

- What if any self-harming thoughts and behaviours have you considered or carried out? (Either intentionally or unintentionally – consider likely/imminent harm)
- If so, have you thought about when you would do it?
- How long have you felt like this?
- Are you at risk of harm from others?
- Are you worried about something?
- Ask about the young person's health (use of drugs – prescribed or otherwise/alcohol)
- What other risk-taking behaviour have you been involved in?
- What have you been doing that helps?
- What are you doing that stops the self-harming behaviour from getting worse?
- What can be done by Street Kids Direct to help you with this?
- How are you generally feeling at the moment?
- What needs to happen for you to feel better?

Do

- Take suicide gestures seriously
- Be yourself, listen, be non-judgemental, be patient and think about what you say
- Check associated problems such as bullying, bereavement, relationship difficulties, abuse and sexuality questions
- Check how/when/if parents will be contacted
- Encourage healthy social connection to friends, family and trusted adults

- Implement support and contact with the young person
- Make the appropriate referral if necessary
- Provide opportunities for support or strengthen existing support systems

Don't

- Jump to quick solutions
- Dismiss what the child or young person is saying
- Believe that a young person who has threatened to harm themselves in the past will not carry it out in the future
- Disempower the child or young person
- Ignore or dismiss people who self-harm
- See it as attention seeking
- Assume it is used to manipulate the system or individuals
- Trust appearances

Support

One necessary skill is the ability to signpost to services that provide the support the young person wants. There are also websites and advice networks for those who are responding to a young person that self-harms.

The following may be useful:

- Young Minds. Information for young people about emotional and mental health issues www.youngminds.org.uk
- Big White Wall. Anonymous online early intervention service for people in psychological distress. Big White Wall combines social networking principles with a choice of clinically informed interventions to improve mental wellbeing which can be accessed 24/7. www.bigwhitewall.com
- NSPCC. If you are worried about a child or young person self-harming you can contact the NSPCC on 0808 800 5000 or online www.nspcc.org.uk
- Childline. Provides self-harm coping techniques and advice to those dealing with self-harm. www.childline.org.uk

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