



For Social Care Professionals in
Children's Services Early Help
and Children's Social Care

PORTUS
Understanding
Self-harm

Self-harm and Suicide Prevention

Guidance for Children's Services Early Help and Children's Social Care



Understanding Self-Harm and Suicide – Kingston, Richmond & Wandsworth
visit: www.richmond.gov.uk/portus

Guidance on Self-harm and Suicide Prevention for Children's Services Early Help and Children's Social Care

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Context

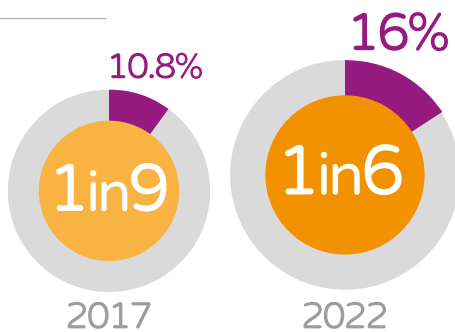
Everyone's mental health is as important as their physical health. Experiencing poor mental health is common.

National surveys show that at any one time 1 in 5 adults experience anxiety, depression, or a mixture of both.

Children and young people can also experience a range of common emotional and mental health problems (and this can start from a very young age).

Surveys and research show that children and young peoples' mental health has worsened over recent years. In 2022, one in six (16.0%) children aged 5 to 16 years were identified as having a probable mental disorder, increasing from one in nine (10.8%) in 2017. The increase was seen in both boys and girls.

Children aged 5 to 16 years identified as having a probable mental disorder.



One in four children and young people with mental health difficulties have harmed themselves as a way of coping with their feelings of distress.

Self-harm is more likely in children and young people who experience emotional and mental health problems.

But it is important to know that children and young people can recover from mental health distress with the help of family, friends, and supportive adults.

It is also important to avoid labelling or medicalising children and young people as this can be counterproductive.

Growing up is difficult

Young people are telling us that they feel intense pressure due to exams, friendships, identity and worries about what the future holds. Over time this can affect their emotional and mental health.



Children and young people in your care may experience difficulties with their mental health.

As a social care professional, you will be supporting children and young people with a range of needs. It is likely that they will be encountering situations that are stressful and that will impact on their resilience, mental health and well-being. Some may be harming themselves as a response to the challenges they are facing. Self-harm and suicide should be explored routinely as part of social care interventions.

Key Principles and Ways of Working.

Everyone can play a part in helping children and young people at risk.

This resource sets out key principles and ways of working but does not prescribe how to act in individual situations. It is not intended to override individual organisational or professional guidelines where they exist. It can however be used as a reference point for discussions about approaches to working with self-harm and suicidal thoughts and behaviours, or to highlight training needs.



With the right help and support children and young people can recover from their psychological distress.

Top 10 Tips

01 Be aware, many cases of self-harm and suicidal thoughts are hidden

Some young people experiencing intense psychological distress may keep their thoughts and feelings very private.

Self-harm and suicidal feelings can be hidden therefore it is important to explore these issues with all children and young people who are in touch with early help and social care teams.

02 Consider the following risk factors

- Girls and young women are more likely to harm themselves than boys and young men
- Boys and young men are more likely to die by suicide
- Suicide rates increase in older adolescence
- Experiencing low income and poverty
- Experiencing gender dysphoria, or identifying as LGBTQ+
- Experience of bereavement
- Family history of mental illness, substance misuse or suicide
- Experience of mental illness, substance misuse, low self-esteem or hopelessness
- Experience of past or current physical or sexual abuse
- Neurodivergence / SEN

03 Recognise different types of self-harm

- Self-poisoning – excess intake of own or others over the counter or prescription medication, drinking harmful chemicals
- Self-injury – hitting, cutting, burning, pulling hair, scratching, squeezing, punching walls, swallowing objects other than food and drink
- Risk taking behaviours – drug and alcohol use, risky sexual behaviour, absconding
- Some self-harm in boys can manifest differently eg: getting into fights, deliberate injury in sports

The Addictive Model of Self-Harming Behavior*

Familiarise yourself with the self-harm cycle.



Functions of self-harm

- Relief - release of unbearable, overwhelming feelings and tension
- Regulating affect (self-soothing)
- Punishment – on oneself and others (anger)
- To increase a sense of control
- To communicate feelings
- To feel real (vs. feeling numb)
- As a distraction – controlling racing / difficult thoughts
- To let people see they're struggling so they can get help

*Source: PMC (nih.gov)

04 Understand Why and Consider the Underlying Issues

- Self-harm can help people cope effectively with distress in the short term. But it often plays out in a habitual need to continue the behaviour.
- People self-harm for many reasons, and someone who self-harms repeatedly may not always do so for the same reason each time, or by the same method.
- It is important to spend time exploring and addressing these underlying problems and the function that the self-harm fulfils. Only then can effective support be provided to help recovery.

05 Use the Continuum of Harm

Self-harming behaviour exist on a spectrum from minimal and occasional harm to more persistent and serious health harming behaviours. In the same way suicidal behaviour can span minimal and infrequent thoughts to more persistent and intrusive thoughts with a clearly formulated plan to die.

The pathway provides a helpful model to understand the different **Categories of Need** and a **Risks and Strengths Assessment** to help to identify where a child or young person might be on the continuum of harm.

06 Ask about suicide

Always ask about suicide: 'have you had thoughts of ending your life?' There is no evidence that asking increases risk. Conversely, talking about suicide may well reduce the risk of suicide and help to reduce the stigma associated with suicidal feelings. Always remember to document thoroughly.

Have you had thoughts of ending your life?

How are you feeling today?



The Continuum of Harm



07 Co-ordinate and integrate support

An integrated and coordinated approach to support is more likely to encourage the best conditions for recovery.

- To co-ordinate the best support, discuss with the child and family about other sources of support e.g., school, GP, specialist services
- Most schools and colleges have in-house psychological support, and many have Mental Health Support Teams available for their pupils.
- In the first instance ask the school to put you in contact with the Designated Safeguarding Lead or Mental Health Lead
- Refer to the list of resources and sources of help listed in this document

08 Identify the best placed person to co-ordinate assessment and ongoing support

- Does the child or young person need urgent psychiatric or medical assessment? If so, contact the **SWL St. Georges Crisis Line** ▶ or refer to the local accident and emergency department..
- Refer to the **Categories of Need** ▶ and **Pathway** ▶ to help with this decision
- For children and young people in the 'Getting Help' category the school may be best placed to co-ordinate the help and support
- For children and young people in the 'Getting More Help' or 'Getting Risk Support' have a conversation with the Clinical Services team or equivalent to discuss whether the school can support or whether there is a need for a CAMHS Social Care referral
- Whether support sits with the school or CAMHS, ensure that a designated lead worker and support plan is in place to support the child with a risk and strengths assessment, ongoing care and support including safety planning

09 Make sure there is someone responsible for creating a safety plan

Creating a safety plan can help to reduce the risk of harm. The safety plan should be personalised and co-created with the child or young person and their family. The child or young person should keep a copy of the safety plan

- **Self-harm safety plan** ▶
- **Suicide safety plan** ▶

10 Be Open: Listen, Believe, Support

You may be the first person that they have spoken to, and it is important to establish a non-judgemental and trusting relationship. Often, individuals may feel ashamed, embarrassed, confused, or powerless. Take time to listen, to believe in what they are telling you and to support them through their journey.



Having the Conversation about Suicide

Talking to a child or young person about suicidal thoughts is not easy but having the conversation is important.

Asking the question

The following steps can help you find out if a child or young person is thinking about suicide:

- **Stay calm.** This is important as the child or young person may be looking at how you react to decide how much they should tell you.
- **Be Clear and direct.** Use the word suicide. Practice asking first if this helps. It may give you more confidence. Look them in the eye and ask, 'are you thinking about suicide?'
- If you are unsure of how to start the conversation, contact the Papyrus helpline HOPELINEUK on 0800 068 4141
- Papyrus' specially trained advisers can talk you through what to say and how to support the child or young person during this conversation.
- Talking with a child or young person about suicide can be very difficult. If you need support following your conversation, Papyrus advisers are on hand to de-brief with you and help you to process what has been said and where to go next.



VISIT PAPYRUS

What if they say yes?

If the child or young person says that they have had, or are currently experiencing, suicidal thoughts the most important thing to do is **Stay calm**.

Acknowledge how difficult it must be for them to talk about these thoughts to you and tell them you are there to listen.

The reasons why people experience thoughts of suicide are complex and differ from person to person. You may never fully understand them and that is OK.

Let the child or young person know that there is support available to help them and that your priority is to keep them safe.

Questions you could ask include:

How are things for you right now?

Can you say what's bothering you?

What might help you?

What would you like to happen next?



Assessing Suicide Risk

If you feel that the child or young person is at risk of suicide, then it is necessary to understand the seriousness and immediacy of the risk. Depression, hopelessness and continuing suicidal thoughts are known to be associated with high risk.

If the child or young person talks about killing themselves always take this seriously as many people who die by suicide have previously told a professional about their intention.

The following warning signs suggest that the risk is high:

- Current self-harm, especially if it poses a risk to the child or young person's health and wellbeing.
- Self-harming behaviour is characterised by using a variety of harming methods
- Thoughts of suicide are frequent and not easily dismissed.
- A specific plan to die by suicide.
- Access to the means to die by suicide (for example, stockpiling tablets).
- Significant drug or alcohol abuse.
- A situation felt to be causing hopelessness, unbearable pain, or distress.
- Previous, especially recent, suicide attempt.
- Evidence of current mental illness.
- Limited protective factors that may prevent them from attempting suicide or harming themselves, for example, being socially isolated, poor relationships with parents/carers etc.
- No support mechanisms when distressed.
- Not accepting help from family and friends

Training

Social care teams are recommended to regularly access training on Mental Health First Aid, self-harm and suicide prevention as well as reading relevant literature including this resource and pathway.



SUPPORTING STAFF

Children's services staff providing support to children and young people who self-harm or are suicidal may experience a range of intense emotions as a result; it is helpful for staff to have an opportunity to talk this through with mental health professionals and line-managers through supervision.

Training and Support Organisations

SUPPORT AND TRAINING FOR YOU

Crisis Tools

The tools to help you support young people in crisis:
<https://crisistools.org.uk/>

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence

NICE guidelines on Self-harm
<https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance>

Mental Health First Aid England

Providing expert guidance and training to support mental health. Mental health training online and face to face

MHFA England

<https://mhfaengland.org/>

MindEd is a free educational resource on children, young people, adults and older people's mental health.

<https://www.minded.org.uk/>

Papyrus, prevention of young suicide.

HopelineUK

<https://www.papyrus-uk.org/papyrus-hopeline247/>

Call: **0800 068 4141** Text: **07860039967**

Email: **pat@papyrus-uk.org**

The PSHE Association

A membership association and charity, we support over 50,000 teachers and schools with resources, training, guidance, and advice.

PSHE Association | Charity and membership body for PSHE education

<https://pshe-association.org.uk/>

YoungMinds

A charity that provides support and advice to children, young people, parents, and carers and those working with children and young people

YoungMinds Website Parent and carer support Resources for professionals

<https://www.youngminds.org.uk/professional/resources/>

Zero Suicide Alliance FREE online training courses

teach you the skills and confidence to have a potentially life-saving conversation with someone you're worried about.

<https://zerosuicidealliance.com/training>

R;pple

R;pple is an interceptive tool designed to present a visual prompt when a person searches for harmful keywords or phrases relating to the topic of self-harm or suicide. These phrases include any words or terminology which have been identified as displaying potentially damaging online content.

R;pple Suicide Prevention

ripplesuicideprevention.com

Helpful Resources for Families

The following resources can help families feel more confident about supporting their child:

- **Coping with Self-harm, a guide** for parents and carers
- **Free online course** helps parents discuss self-harm with their children.
- **Free e-training by the Zero Suicide Alliance** (20 minutes)
- **Self-harm: Parents' experiences - Overview** (healthtalk.org)
- NSPCC self-harm **support for families**
- Young Minds Parents **support line and webchat**
- MindEd for Families **website**
- **Calm Harm** is a free app that helps you manage or resist the urge to self-harm
- **7 ways to support children and young people who are worried or anxious** (annafreud.org)
<https://www.annafreud.org/schools-and-colleges/resources/7-ways-to-support-children-and-young-people-who-are-worried/>
- **How to Talk to Your Child about Mental Health** | YoungMinds
<https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/how-to-talk-to-your-child-about-mental-health/>
- **Families Under Pressure** - Maudsley Charity.
<https://maudsleycharity.org/familiesunderpressure/>
- **Combined Minds**
A free app helping parents and carers support young people's mental health
<https://combinedminds.co.uk/>

SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE, AND FAMILIES

South West London and St. Georges Mental Health NHS Trust

24/7 Mental Health Crisis Line
0800 028 8000.

Papyrus, prevention of young suicide.

HopelineUK

<https://www.papyrus-uk.org/papyrus-hopeline247/>

Call: **0800 068 4141**

Text: **07860039967**

Email: pat@papyrus-uk.org

Samaritans

Tel: **116 123 (24/7)**

www.samaritans.org

YoungMinds – Self harm factsheets for young people

Parent Helpline and webchat. You can call us for free on **0808 802 5544** from 9:30am - 4pm, Monday - Friday.

<https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/>

Childline - If you're under 19 you can confidentially call, chat online or email about any problem big or small. Free 1-2-1 counselling available.

Call: **0800 1111**

Kooth. Online well-being community. Free 1-2-1 online counselling.

www.kooth.com

Shout

Text YM to **85258**.

Shout provides free, 24/7 text support for young people across the UK experiencing a mental health crisis.

All texts are answered by trained volunteers, with support from experienced clinical supervisors.

Texts are free from EE, O2, Vodafone, 3, Virgin Mobile, BT Mobile, GiffGaff, Tesco Mobile and Telecom Plus.

Texts can be anonymous, but if the volunteer believes you are at immediate risk of harm, they may share your details with people who can provide support.

Opening times: 24/7

The Mix

Offers support to anyone under 25 about anything that's troubling them.

Email support available via their online contact form.

Free 1-2-1 webchat service available.

Free short-term counselling service available.

Opening times:

3pm - 12am, seven days a week

Call: **0808 808 4994**

The Mix – Essential support for under 25s

<https://www.themix.org.uk/>

Calm Harm

A free app providing support and strategies to help you resist or manage the urge to self-harm.

Can be downloaded from Google Play or App Store.

Home - **Calm Harm App**

<https://calmharm.co.uk/>

Tellmi

A free app for teenagers (11+) providing resources and a fully moderated community where you can share your problems, get support and help other people too.

Can be downloaded from Google Play or App Store.

Tellmi App

<https://www.tellmi.help>

Combined Minds

Supporting young people's mental health

<https://combinedminds.co.uk/>

Be Headstrong

Real Life and Real Faith in the Real World |

Head Strong

<https://www.beheadstrong.uk>

National Self-Harm Network

A supportive and dedicated forum.

<https://www.nshn.co.uk/downloads.html>

Alumina

Free online self-harm support for 11-19's.

<https://www.selfharm.co.uk/#help>

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PORTUS - Understanding Self-Harm and Suicide

A collaboration between The Royal Borough of Kingston,
Richmond & Wandsworth Borough Councils



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