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| Summary Notes  **What to say and do if a child is self-harming** |

## There is no perfect moment

If you wait until the perfect moment to start a conversation with a child about self-harm, you’ll be waiting a long time. Instead, consider how you can create moments of disclosure and embrace the awkward.

* This is a hard conversation – build the relationship first; find a way in
* BUT if you see an injury, always acknowledge it – they want you to
* You may be met with high emotion. Move towards calm. Revisit later
* Moments of high distress are not the moments for BIG conversations

How can you find ways into building a relationship with a child causing concern?

## Be a safe adult

Children who are self-harming need safe adults around them who can help them to find ways forward. It can be difficult being that adult and you must safeguard yourself, especially if you have a strong relationship with the child and deeply care. You don’t have to be a specialist to make a big difference here. Safe, consistent, caring adults can form a safe base from which a child can begin to explore alternative ways of coping.

* Run towards distress
* Remain emotionally and physically present
* Listen, don’t judge
* Be explicit in telling them that you care and that you will work with them
* A safe adult can and should give a child permission to stop harming themselves
* N.B. Parents and carers of children who are self-harming may need a ‘safe adult’ too

What adult does THIS child need in THIS moment

## Listen more, say less

This is their story to tell, give them space to tell it. Trying to hurry things along will usually just slow them down and this may take several conversations. It’s okay to time-limit each one – be honest always about how much time you have, but make a time to talk again or give them other ways to contact you.

* Give them space, embrace the silence and offer reassurance
* It doesn’t all have to be talking - writing, drawing & play are all powerful too
* Walk and talk (or walk and listen!). Get outside – every step you take by their side is building that relationship even if no words are spoken
* Reflect back what they say to confirm understanding and show you are listening
* REALLY listen. Be curious. Ask every question you have – it helps you and them

What holds us back from really listening - what small change can we make?

## talk about injuries and intent

When we talk to a child about how and why they hurt themselves we build bridges with them and improve both their and our understanding. When a child is more able to talk about how and why they hurt themselves then they become more able to make a change. Often this has become a habit and been done many times with no one to hold themselves accountable to, so the behaviour goes unquestioned with only the child’s negative self-narrative to inform their thoughts and actions. Once the alternative narrative of a trusted adult enters the equation too, things can begin to change.

* A way in can be to look at injuries together re first aid / checking for infection
* It can be really hard to see – safeguard yourself
* It’s okay to tell a child that it upsets you – explain that this is because you care and you hope to help them find ways to be kinder to themselves, because they don’t deserve to be hurt (imagine they are being hurt by someone else – what would you say then?)
* Talk about their self-harm rituals and try to understand the why – this can help us work out what need is being met
* Always be curious – encourage their curiosity too. Mark success, be curious about ‘failure’

Can you talk to a child about their injuries and look past them to the   
underlying issues at the same time?

## explore why to share and what

Always aim for informed and enthusiastic consent when it comes to sharing a child’s story. It is their story to share, not yours. There are good reasons why some people should be told, this needs to be explored with the child so they feel some degree of control. At best you’ll work towards a situation where you get a child’s informed and enthusiastic consent; at worse, they’ll have a clear idea of exactly who knows what and you can allay their fears that not everyone will be talking about them.

* Explore why it is to the child’s benefit for other people to know
* Think about a ‘network of trust’ and remind a child that people care and want to support
* Give them space to explain why they don’t want people to know – occasionally you’ll become aware of additional safeguarding issues
* If, for any reason, parents can’t be informed due to safeguarding, find another trusted adult in their life outside school who can provide support
* Decide together exactly what information to share; it doesn’t have to be everything

How can you work with a child on creating a network of trust?

## what not to do

When I interview children about what adults can do to support following a disclosure of self-harm, they tell me that the three responses they do not want are drama, instant questioning about why or being told to stop. It’s hard because your instinctive reaction if you find that a child you care about is hurting themselves may be ‘Oh my goodness! Why are you doing this… please never do it again…’ – we need to override this response if we can and be the adult that the child needs, instead of allowing our feelings to rule our response.

* Try to remain calm – use slow-low-low talking or a resetting deep breath
* The question of why will come later, at first your job is to listen and help them find calm
* When we tell a child to stop they can feel misunderstood and like they’ll let us down
* In these early conversations our job is to build the foundations for the relationship and hard work ahead
* Look after yourself.. it’s distressing. If you can’t carry the baton, pass it on

How can you respond calmly when you’re inwardly screaming?

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