



# Creating a School Self-Injury Policy

## LifeSIGNS

Self-injury in school aged children and young people is a very real issue that all schools, colleges and universities need to take seriously.

At times, self-injury does exist in every secondary school\*, college and university in the UK, and thankfully many head teachers are ready to create a self-injury policy within their school. As with bullying policies, all schools should now have a self-injury policy.



Every establishment is different and the policy you create will be unique to your school in order that it may best serve your staff, pupils and parents. This guidance document will help you consider what factors you wish to implement and assist you in making informed choices.

If you have any questions not covered by this document, please do not hesitate to contact [info@lifesigns.org.uk](mailto:info@lifesigns.org.uk) and we will be happy to assist you further. We would be very interested to hear when you have successfully implemented a self-injury policy within your establishment and any feedback you have regarding this document.

LifeSIGNS VO also offers real-life [training](#) to anyone working with people who self-injure, please contact us if you feel this would benefit your key personnel.

\*Although this document is aimed at secondary schools and beyond, self-injury does exist within primary schools and this guidance can be adapted to cater for younger children.

## What is self-injury?

Self-injury is a coping mechanism. An individual harms their physical self to deal with emotional pain, or to break feelings of numbness by arousing sensation.

Self-injury is any deliberate, non-suicidal behaviour that inflicts physical harm on your body and is aimed at relieving emotional distress. Physical pain is often easier to deal with than emotional pain, because it causes 'real' feelings. Injuries can prove to an individual that their emotional pain is real and valid. Self-injurious behaviour may calm or awaken a person. Yet self-injury only provides temporary relief, it does not deal with the underlying issues. Self-injury can become a natural response to the stresses of day-to-day life and can escalate in frequency and severity.

Self-injury can include but is not limited to, cutting, burning, banging and bruising, non-suicidal overdosing and even deliberate bone-breaking.

Self-injury is often habitual, chronic and repetitive; self-injury tends to affect people for months and years.

People who self-injure usually make a great effort to hide their injuries and scars, and are often uncomfortable about discussing their emotional inner or physical outer pain. It can be difficult for young people to seek help from the NHS or from those in positions of authority, perhaps due to the stigma associated with seeking help for mental health issues. Self-injury is usually private and personal, and it is often hidden from family and friends. People who do show their scars may do so as a reaction to the incredible secrecy, and one should not assume that they are 'inflicting' their scars on others to seek attention, although attention may well be needed.

Self-harm is a wider definition, that includes eating disorders, self-injury and drug / alcohol misuse.

## What self-injury is not

Like any behaviour, self-injury *may* be used to attract attention, but this is not usually the focus of chronic, repetitive self-injury. If self-injury is being used in order to gain attention, one must look to find the reasons as to why someone is in such dire need of attention. It could be there is a problem at home, or issues of bullying, and they feel that no one is listening or hearing them.

Self-injury is not about seeking attention, a way of fitting in or a response to music, films or the emo or gothic culture. Prejudices and perceptions may lead people to believe they 'know' that self-injury is linked to a certain demographic or background, but each person is unique and will have found self-injury by their own route, and rely on it at times of stress due to the **release** and **relief** it offers them.

## The purpose of our self-injury policy

As part of your school's core mission and values, and continued dedication to the health and happiness of its pupils, this policy provides a clear set of protocols you may wish to adopt for dealing with any issues that may arise surrounding the syndrome of self-injury, including:

- Recognising the warning signs that a pupil may be self-injuring;
- Broaching the subject of self-injury to a pupil you suspect of deliberately hurting themselves;
- How to react positively if a pupil comes to you wishing to discuss their self-injury;
- Short-term plan of action for the care and management of the pupil, to include assessing the pupil's unique and individual needs;
- Long-term plan of action for the continued support, assistance and monitoring of the pupil;
- How best to assist in building the confidence, self-esteem and emotional wellbeing of the pupil;
- Practical and emotional support for staff members who are dealing with a self-injuring pupil;
- Provision of clear and standard guidelines for all staff in contact with the pupil;
- Implementation of a harm minimisation strategy to prevent the spreading of self-injury within the school;
- Training and education surrounding the issue of self-injury for all staff;
- Education and awareness campaigns for pupils.

## Risk factors associated with self-injury

Self-injury is a coping mechanism and it is important to recognise and respond to the underlying reasons behind a person's self-injury. Risk factors include, but are not limited to:

- Low self-esteem;
- Perfectionism;
- Mental health issues such as depression and anxiety;
- The onset of a more complicated mental illness such as schizophrenia, bi-polar disorder or a personality disorder;
- Problems at home or school;
- Physical, emotional or sexual abuse;

It is important to recognise that none of these risk factors may appear to be present. Sometimes it is the outwardly happy, high-achieving person with a stable background who is suffering internally and hurting themselves in order to cope.

## Warning signs that may be associated with self-injury

As noted above, there may be no warning signs, but some of the things below might indicate that a pupil is suffering internally which may lead to self-injury:

- Drug and / or alcohol misuse or risk taking behaviour;
- Negativity and lack of self-esteem;
- Out of character behaviour;
- Bullying other pupils;
- A sudden change in friends or withdrawal from a group.

*“When I first started self-injuring, it helped me through a difficult time in my life. It was so effective at making me feel better, more powerful in a way, and like I didn’t need anyone else at all to talk to or to talk to me. I could face down that teacher who kept telling me to take my nose stud out. Anytime anyone upset me at school or at home I always had my little secret friend to help me.”*

## Physical signs that self-injury may be occurring

- Obvious cuts, scratches or burns that do not appear of an accidental nature;
- Frequent ‘accidents’ that cause physical injury;
- Regularly bandaged arms and / or wrists;
- Reluctance to take part in physical exercise or other activities that require a change of clothes;
- Wearing long sleeves and trousers even during hot weather.

## Suicide

Although self-injury is non-suicidal behaviour and relied on as an attempt to cope and manage, it must be recognised that the emotional distress that leads to self-injury can also lead to suicidal thoughts and actions.

It is therefore of utmost importance that all incidents of self-injury are taken seriously and that the underlying issues and emotional distress are thoroughly investigated and necessary emotional support given, in order to minimise any greater risk. Any mention of suicidal intent should always be taken seriously and acted upon as a matter of urgency.

*“Cutting became more of a way of punishing myself as well as coping with difficult situations as time went on.”*

## Roles and responsibilities

### Head-teacher

- Appoint one or more designated key staff to be responsible for all incidents relating to self-injury. This could be a teacher and / or a school nurse;
- Ensure that all designated staff receive full and appropriate training surrounding self-injury and are fully confident with the procedures to follow;
- Provide practical and emotional support for key staff dealing with self-injury;
- Ensure that all staff, including teaching assistants, lab technicians and other non-teaching staff are made aware of, and understand, the self-injury policy.

### Governing body

- Provide pupils with open access to information about self-injury and details of who to go to for help and support;
- Decide whether self-injury should be covered in the school curriculum or as an extra-curricular presentation;
- Consider parental consent and whether parents / guardians should be invited to learn more about self-injury for themselves;
- Review special permissions for pupils who self-injure, for example time out of the classroom during emotional distress and permission to wear long sleeves for sports.
- Create a procedural policy in case of self-injury incidents occurring at school. Could it be made clear to pupils that they should go to a key worker at times of emotional distress rather than resorting to self-injury in school, for example;
- Be clear about what behaviour will not be tolerated and ensure all pupils are aware and understand your rules (for example, self-injuring in front of other pupils or threats to self-injure as part of bargaining or manipulation may be deemed unacceptable).

### All Staff and Teachers

- Review all duty of care documents and be aware of communication processes;
- Make it known to pupils that you are available to listen;
- Remain calm and non-judgemental at all times;
- Avoid dismissing a pupil's reasons for distress as invalid;
- Encourage pupils to be open with you and reassure them that they can get the help they need if they are willing to talk;
- Endeavour to enable pupils to feel in control by asking what they would like to happen and what help they feel they need etc.
  
- Do not make promises you can't keep regarding such things as confidentiality.
- Encourage all pupils to seek health and happiness in their lives every day;

- Discuss and promote healthy coping mechanisms and suggest ways in which pupils can be empowered to make positive changes in their lives;
- Provide access to information and resources regarding self-injury and its causes;
- Provide and encourage access to exterior help and support where possible;
- Monitor the reactions of other pupils who know about the self-injury.
- Avoid asking a pupil to show you their scars or describe their self-injury;
- Avoid asking a pupil to stop self-injuring - you may be removing the only coping mechanism they have;
- Report the matter to a designated key member of staff as soon as you become aware of the problem, and inform the pupil that you are doing this.

"When I went to ask my tutor for help at college I was apprehensive because I had had a previous bad experiences at school. However she dealt with the situation well and got me an appointment with the college mental health advisor where I got the help I needed."

### Designated key staff member(s)

- Ensure the implementation of standard policy, communicate with each other and report back to the head-teacher at each stage;
- Maintain up-to-date records of pupils experiencing self-injury, incidents of self-injury and all other concerns surrounding the issue;
- Communicate with the head-teacher on a regular basis and keep them informed of all incidents and developments;
- Monitor the help, support and progress of the pupils in your care and maintain communication with them;
- Ensure you are fully confident in your understanding of self-injury and seek additional information and / or training if you feel it necessary;
- Contact other organisations and key services in your area and find out what help and support is available for young people who self-injure;
- Liaise with the head-teacher and pupil to decide if any other members of staff who have contact with the pupil should be made aware of the self-injury and underlying concerns;
- Ensure that all first-aiders are well informed about self-injury;
- Inform the pupil's parents if appropriate and liaise with them as to how best manage the situation;
- Be aware of when it is essential for other professional bodies to be informed, such as social services or educational psychologists;
- Report any mention of suicidal feelings or behaviour as a matter of urgency;
- Take care of your own emotional well-being and seek support as and when necessary.

## Pupils

- Ensure all wounds are cared for properly and bandaged appropriately;
- Do not display fresh or open wounds;
- When talking to teachers or friends about your self-injury, focus on the emotional reasons behind your distress and not on the self-injury itself;
- Avoid talking graphically about your injuries to other pupils or describing the methods you use;
- Never encourage anyone to try self-injury themselves;
- When under emotional distress or feeling the urge to self-injure at school, talk to a teacher or staff member as soon as possible;
- Discuss any additional support you feel you may need while you are going through emotional distress;
- Be aware that the teachers and designated self-injury staff are there to help you. The more you can talk to them the better able they will be to give you the support and help you need;
- Endeavour to seek fun and laughter every day;
- If you are worried that a friend may be self-injuring then do talk to a teacher for support and guidance;
- If you are concerned that a friend may be suicidal, or has mentioned suicide, then alert a teacher straight away.



Emotional difficulties are common in all age groups and among both boys and girls.

Self-injury can affect pupils from any background

## Parents

- Understand and endorse your school's self-injury policy;
- Educate yourself regarding self-injury and discuss the subject with your child;
- If your child is self-injuring, work closely with the school and take an active role in deciding the best course of action for your child;
- Keep the school informed of any incidents outside of school that you feel they should know about;
- Take care of yourself and seek any emotional support you may need in dealing with your child's self-injury.

## This policy was created and implemented with the consultation of:

This could include staff members, parents, pupils, school nurses, counsellors and anybody else usually concerned with the implementation of new policies. Also reference to any publications or other organisations consulted, including:

- LifeSIGNS: [www.lifesigns.org.uk](http://www.lifesigns.org.uk)
- LifeSIGNS: Creating a Self-Injury Policy (Version 2 [Guidance Document])

## Relationship to other policies

Give details of other policies the self-injury policy may be linked to, such as Child Protection, Health & Safety, Social and Health Education, SEN, Behaviour and Anti-Bullying Policies.

## Evaluation and Monitoring

The key to success in implementing any policy is communication and evaluation. If you ask teachers, parents and pupils for feedback as to how each stage of an incident was dealt with you will be able to measure the success of the policy and make suitable changes where appropriate.

**Date established by governing body:**

**Date for full implementation:**

**Date for Review:**

Policies should be reviewed every regularly in line with current policies.

## About LifeSIGNS

LifeSIGNS (Self-Injury Guidance & Network Support) is an online, user-lead voluntary organisation, founded in 2002 to raise awareness about self-injury and provide information and support to people of all ages affected by self-injury. We recognise self-injury is a way of coping with distressing experiences and difficult emotions, and we encourage people to reflect on the issues behind their self-injury, and to develop and explore alternative coping mechanisms.

The LifeSIGNS Voluntary Organisation is managed and lead by people with personal experience of self-injury, and we are non-judgemental, non-directional, and respectful of our members' and visitors' life experiences and perceptions. The LifeSIGNS website is the centre of our vibrant community, and provides access to all of our services, including our newsletter, moderated message board and training - [www.lifesigns.org.uk](http://www.lifesigns.org.uk)



[www.lifesigns.org.uk](http://www.lifesigns.org.uk)

[info@lifesigns.org.uk](mailto:info@lifesigns.org.uk)

*"When I started college I vowed that this would be a new start and that I would let no one about my self-harm. However one of my friends noticed some scars on my wrist and joked 'you don't cut yourself do you?'*

*"At that moment I froze and knew I would have to tell the truth. The reaction of all my friends has been surprising, they are all there for me if I need them and they accept me for who I am, despite not totally understanding why I do the things I do."*

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