How common is self-harm among young people?

There is relatively little research evidence about the prevalence of self-harm among young people. Hospital records show only part of the picture. The majority of young people who self-harm will either not harm themselves in a way that needs medical treatment or they will deal with it themselves.

It is estimated that between 1 in 12 and 1 in 15 young people self-harm in the UK. Some research suggests that the UK has the highest rate of self-harm in Europe.

Can self-harm among young people be prevented?

There are ways to prevent self-harm among young people. Anti-bullying strategies and whole-school approaches designed to improve the general mental health and well-being of young people appear to have a positive effect, though there is no specific evidence as yet on their impact on self-harm.

Evidence from young people themselves suggests that social isolation – and believing that they are the only one that has self-harmed – can be a key factor in self-harm for some. It is likely that better information for young people about self-harm would increase their understanding and might help reduce or prevent self-harm. Similarly, better awareness and understanding among parents, teachers and others who come into contact with young people is also likely to have a positive impact.

Do we have good responses to young people who self-harm?

There are a wide range of services across the UK for young people who self-harm. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many young people benefit very much from these, but to date there is not a strong evidence base to demonstrate their effectiveness.

There is stronger evidence – mostly direct from young people – that finding ways to distract from, or alternatives to, self-harm can be very important for many young people. Distraction techniques that are reported as being effective for some young people include using a red pen to mark rather than cutting, rubbing with ice, hitting a punch bag or flicking elastic bands on the wrist.