Bullying basically involves hurting someone. It is done repeatedly by someone who is stronger or thought to be stronger. This can be done in many ways such as physically through hitting, verbally through name calling and relationally through isolating someone socially. It can take place anywhere including at home, school or online.

Abuse that is carried out via smartphones or social networks is called cyberbullying and is increasingly common. There are no official statistics on how many children are bullied in the UK. But one in three children worldwide report being bullied and experts agree that it affects almost all children in some way. In 2013, ChildLine talked to nearly 45,000 children who had been bullied including 4,500 who had suffered abuse online.

**What is the mental impact?**
The impact of bullying is not just physical. It also affects people emotionally and can harm their mental wellbeing especially when the abuse is repeated over a long time period. The media has highlighted cases of victims who have gone on to harm themselves or even commit suicide as a result of bullying. But not much research has been done to prove there is a direct link between bullying and self-harm. Dieter Wolke is a professor who has been investigating bullying and its harmful impacts. One of his studies which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) looked specifically at children who had been bullied between the ages of seven and ten years old. He and his team wanted to find out if these victims were more likely to self-harm as an older teenager. Bullying was defined in this study as repeated aggression that took place at least once a week, was intended to harm another person and was carried out physically, verbally or relationally. Dr Wolke looked at the experiences of nearly 5,000 (4,810) children born in the South West of England. These young people were part of a birth cohort study which means researchers analysed their lives in detail from the moment they were born. They were part of The Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC) which is also known as Children of the 90s. The children were asked at the ages of eight and ten if they had been bullied and what had been done to them. Then they were asked between the age of 16 and 17 to fill in a questionnaire. This included questions such as “Have you ever hurt yourself on purpose in any way?”

Those who answered “yes” were then asked further questions such as how they had harmed themselves and how often. Dr Wolke and his colleagues discovered there was a direct link between bullying and self-harm. They found that if you are bullied between the ages of seven and ten then you are at high risk of self-harming in your late teens. A total of 792 teenagers admitted to self-harming in the previous year and of these nearly two thirds (66 percent) were victims of bullying as a child. Being bullied also increased the risk of depression which in turn led to self-harm. Dr Wolke, from the Department of Psychology and Division of Mental Health and Wellbeing at the University of Warwick, said: “Self-harm is usually associated with mental illness. But it can be viewed as an expression of a very difficult emotional distress. Our research has shown that bullying might be causing the emotional distress which
might trigger self-harming behaviour.”
This link between victimisation and self-harm has also been highlighted by an earlier study. Dr Helen Fisher from King’s College London’s Institute of Psychiatry led research which analysed more than 1,000 pairs of twins and focused on their risks of self-harming in the six months before their 12th birthday. The findings (supported by the ESRC) demonstrated that bullied children are three times more likely to self-harm. Indeed, they showed that a twin who was a bullying victim was more likely to self-harm than their non-bullied sibling.

What is self harm?
Cutting yourself, burning your skin or swallowing pills are all typical ways of self-harming. This self-destructive behaviour is always a deliberate act and can be difficult for others to understand. Some people self-harm to relieve the emotions they have bottled up inside. Others do it to show their loved ones they are feeling stressed. It is often used as a coping mechanism and the sense of relief it gives can become addictive. Self-harm causes profound suffering to those affected and, in very extreme cases, young people may self-harm in order to commit suicide.

What needs to be done?
The message from these studies according to Dr Wolke is that bullying creates a serious public health issue. In fact, he and his colleagues estimate that one in five (20 per cent) of the self-harm cases identified in their study could have been prevented. This would have been the case if these children had not been bullied in the first place. Dr Wolke said: “Bullying is not a harmless rite of passage or an inevitable part of growing up. It has serious long-term consequences. If you eradicate bullying then you could have a major impact. Everyone talks about health issues such as heart disease and obesity but so little is being done about tackling bullying in a bid to reduce self-harm. And yet it can lead to suicide which is tragic and also has all sorts of economic impacts on society as well as an emotional one on family and loved ones.”

However, parents and teachers are often unaware that children are the victims of bullying. The reason is that a significant minority of bullied children never reveal that they have been subject to such abuse. According to Dr Wolke, the first step is for children to feel able to talk about the fact they have been targeted. GPs and other medical professionals also need to be more aware that bullying is a risk factor for self-harm. Dr Wolke said: “Everyone needs to work together to identify victims of bullying and therefore combat an issue that is to blame for thousands of children not attending school. Health practitioners need to be aware that being bullied can trigger self-harm and also of symptoms affecting children which can be a consequence of bullying such as headaches, backache and stomach ache.”