



Children's Mental Health Matters!

Facts for Families

Self-Injurious Behavior in Children and Adolescents

Definition

Children who exhibit self-injurious behavior perform deliberate and repetitive acts of injuring their own body as a way to cope with overwhelming feelings and thoughts. Some forms of self-injurious behavior include cutting, carving, scratching, burning, branding, biting, bruising, hitting, and picking and pulling skin and hair. Self-injury is a serious illness that is often accompanied by other mental health problems like depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder or anorexia nervosa.

Why do we care?

- ✎ Children who participate in self-injurious behavior have difficulty talking about their feelings.
- ✎ Children who participate in self-injurious behavior are more likely to engage in risky behavior, such as substance or alcohol abuse.
- ✎ Children who participate in self-injurious behavior usually have additional mental health problems, such as depression or post-traumatic stress disorder.

What can we do about it?

- ✎ **Acknowledge that the behavior exists.** Talk openly and non-judgmentally about the behavior to help reduce the shame and secrecy that often surrounds self-injury.
- ✎ **Be aware that most teenagers engaging in self-injurious behavior are not attempting suicide.**
- ✎ **Be cautious of punishing a child that engages in self-injurious behavior.** Punishing may increase the child's troubled emotions.
- ✎ **Be aware that the child's behavior is only a symptom of a more serious underlying problem.**
- ✎ **Seek professional assistance to treat the child.** Make certain he/she has experience in working with self-injurious behaviors and related disorders.

Resources/Links

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. Facts for Families No. 73. <http://www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/73.htm>

Mental Health America

The country's leading nonprofit dedicated to helping ALL people live mentally healthier lives.

www.mentalhealthamerica.net

Fact Sheet on Self-Injury

<http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/go/information/get-info/self-injury>

S.A.F.E Alternatives (Self-Abuse Finally Ends): <http://www.selfinjury.com>

**Adapted from Resources found on:
www.schoolmentalhealth.org March 2009**