

Maryland School Mental Health Alliance*

Self-Injurious Behavior in Children and Adolescents Information for Teachers and School Staff

Definition

Students 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 conditions like depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, or anorexia nervosa.

Why do we care?

- Students who exhibit self-injurious behavior have difficulty verbally communicating their feelings with others.
- Students who exhibit self-injurious behavior are more likely to engage in other types of risky behavior, such as substance or alcohol abuse.
- Students who exhibit self-injurious behavior are more likely to isolate themselves from classmates.

What can we do about it?

- **Offer support and reassurance to the student.** It is important not to alienate a self-injuring student but rather to build trust.
- **Students should be under supervision at all times**, until they have been assessed as safe or given over to the care of their parents.
- **Be aware that the student's behavior is usually a symptom of a more serious underlying problem.** Talk to the student about what's going on in his/her life that could be triggering this behavior.
- **Notify the school clinicians about the student's behavior**, and ask them to provide additional information and resources to the students and caregivers.

Key Resources

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. (1999). *Facts for Families No. 73: Self-Injury in Adolescents*. Retrieved January 25, 2006 from <http://www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/73.htm>

Ferentz, Lisa R. (2002). *Understanding Self-Injurious Behavior*. Retrieved January 25, 2006 from http://www.prponline.net/School/SAJ/Articles/understanding_self_injurious_behavior.htm

Royal College of Psychiatrists. (2004). *Mental Health and Growing Up Factsheet No.26: Deliberate self-harm in young people*. Retrieved February 1, 2006 from <http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk>

Helpful Links

- National Association of School Psychologists
<http://www.nasponline.org/resources/principals/Self-Mutilation%20March%2004.pdf>

- National Mental Health Association Fact Sheets: <http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/go/information/get-info/self-injury>
- S.A.F.E Alternatives (Self-Abuse Finally Ends): <http://www.selfinjury.com>

**Developed by the Center for School Mental Health (<http://csmh.umaryland.edu>) in collaboration with the Maryland School Mental Health Alliance.*