

Maryland School Mental Health Alliance*

Self-Injurious Behavior in Children and Adolescents Information for Parents and Caregivers

Definition

Children who participate in self-injurious behavior perform deliberate and repetitive acts of harming 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.

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.

Key Resources

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. *Facts for Families No. 73*. Retrieved January 25, 2006 from <http://www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/73.htm>

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

Helpful Links

- 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.