



Hunsbury Park Primary School

A Parent's Guide
To
Self Harm

If you have recently found out or suspect your child may be self-harming, you may be feeling shocked, worried and at a loss on what to do to approach this. Parents who feel their child has become troubled or withdrawn may be worried that they are self-harming as a cry for help. It helps to look at the meaning of self-harm as it can cover a range of things that people do to themselves in a deliberate and harmful way. Although cutting is the most common form of self-harm, other methods include head banging, hair pulling, burning and scalding, biting, scratching, stabbing, breaking bones, swallowing objects, self-poisoning and overdosing.

Why self-harm?

By injuring themselves, children and young people are asserting a form of self-control on their life which they feel is otherwise chaotic and meaningless. Self-harm is a way of coping and of channelling frustration and other strong emotions. Those who self-harm do not go on to take their own lives, it is more a way of letting off steam, a safety valve when things get too much for them. It is difficult to give specific guidance on how to spot self-harming because most children who are deliberately harming themselves are very skilled at hiding the facts. They often have very strong persuasive arguments when asked if they are OK or why they have cuts or burns on their body.

Self-harm myths

There are some misconceptions surrounding the issue of self-harm. One is that people choose to self-harm and they could choose to stop. The urge to self-harm can be very hard to resist and can become addictive. To recover and move forward, it is vital that they gain an understanding of their behaviour and develop coping strategies to help them deal with the situations and emotions that cause them to self-harm. Another myth is that self-harm is a form of attention-seeking. On the contrary, people who self-harm tend to do so in private and try their utmost to conceal their injuries. Neither do they self-harm to look cool or fit in with their peer group. Self-harm is a repeated reaction to emotional pain and distress and this continuous behaviour is an indication of an underlying problem.

What else should I look out for?

Apart from the physical symptoms of self-harm, there are other clues to watch out for if you are concerned about your child. Your child may seem very down and talk about being a failure or feeling unhappy. They may take to wearing many layers of clothes for no obvious reason, never exposing their arms for instance. They may have an unusual number of injuries or accidents and may be very reluctant to discuss them or be treated for these injuries. Eating disorders and disrupted sleep patterns are both seen to be linked to self-harming.

Helping your child manage self-harm

Keep talking and offering reassurance. If you have already built up an open relationship, it may make it easier for you to approach self-harming. If your child doesn't want to talk don't pressurise them and let them know that you're here when they are ready to talk things through. Encourage them to confide in friends or a trusted adult as another option. It may help you to talk things through with someone before you do approach your child.

It is not always easy to spot the signs as your child may be hiding their injuries but look for unexplained cuts and burns, constant wearing of long trousers and sleeves, especially in warm weather, disrupted sleep patterns and other unusual behaviour.

If you see any evidence of cutting or bruising get external help as soon as possible. Suggest you take your child to the doctor and if they refuse, ask whether another relation or family friend could go with them. **If cutting, over dosing or harming is serious and looks like it is a medical emergency or you are worried that it could lead to an emergency, don't hesitate to ring 999.**

Think about what may be triggering the situation. Is something going on at home or school that may be affecting them - a bereavement, divorce or bullying? This may help you know where to go for help.

Encouraging them to express themselves in a different way

You may want to suggest alternative ways to help them deal with difficult emotions. They may find it useful to start a diary and write about how they feel. You can encourage them to call a friend or a helpline to talk to someone independent. Try to get your child involved in a physical hobby such as running, swimming, the gym, football etc. This can help them release tension in a different way.

Focus on increasing their confidence. Try not to always concentrate on the self-harm. Let them know what they are good at and encourage them to get involved in a related activity, such as dance, sport or art. Let them know they need not be ashamed and they are not alone.

Looking after yourself

Parenting is hard work at the best of times and you may need time and space to recharge. If the situation becomes serious you won't be able to help your child unless you are OK. Organise your own support networks so you have people to talk to and share with and include organisations like Family Lives.

If this is an ongoing situation you will need to take one step at a time and realise that there may be setbacks along the way. It is natural for this to be a slow process and may take time for your child to manage or overcome this.

Don't blame yourself. Depression and self-harming thoughts can happen to anyone at any age. The GP or the School may be able to make the necessary referrals you need for professional support. The first step is to make sure you all have some support and someone to talk things through with.