

**Children who have experienced trauma, abuse and neglect in their early lives**

**Self-Injury: why it happens and how to handle them**

Children who have experienced trauma, abuse and neglect in their early lives sometimes show self-injurious behaviour.

**What might you see?**

- A child cutting, burning, punching or pinching themselves
- A child swallowing items or poisoning themselves
- A child picking or scratching their skin
- A child pulling out their hair
- A child denying themselves food or warmth

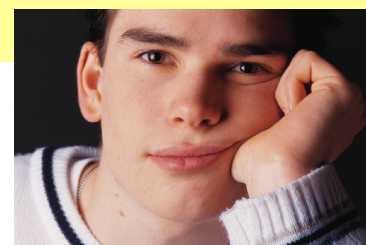


**How it can feel for you?**

- Frightening and worrying
- Confusing - 'why do they do this to themselves?'
- Frustrating - 'nothing seems to stop it?'
- Distressing that your care is not enough to prevent this from happening
- Out of control

**Why do some children harm themselves?**

- Research shows that self injury occurs in response to experiences involving loss, neglect and trauma
- Self-injury can represent a way of young people expressing extreme distress about their situation
- Self-injury can help release emotional tension for young people
- Young people can self-injure in order to 'feel something' when they are emotionally 'numb'
- Self-injury is often a way of coping and can give young people a sense of control
- Self-injury can replicate experiences that young people have had - a form of re-enactment that is familiar to them
- When young people feel that they are bad in some way, self-injury can be used as a form of self punishment
- Self-injury can occur as a way of affecting others - a cry for help
- A young person might self-injure in order to receive nurturing from others, something that they did not receive as a young child e.g. someone bandaging the wound
- Self-injury can provide an adrenaline rush, a 'high', that young people can crave
- Self-injury can become a habit that is hard to break
- Young people might self injure due to imitating others who do the same



A number of these reasons may apply to the child for whom you are caring or there could be other reasons more specific to them not mentioned here.

## Helping Young People who Self-Injure

### What doesn't help

- Ignoring the behaviour because you think the person is just attention seeking - this can reinforce feelings of being worthless and make the young person feel that no one understands
- Punishing or criticising the behaviour - this increases feelings of being controlled and being 'bad'
- Blaming the young person for upsetting you e.g. 'how can you do this, it upsets everyone else as well you know'



### What does help

- Building a good relationship with the young person, showing concern and empathy for underlying feelings without overreacting  
'you must have been in a lot of pain to need to hurt yourself like that'
- Provide opportunities to talk but don't mind silence
- Balancing need for supervision with support and acceptance
- Helping young people feel they have a sense of control
- Working with the young person to understand what self-injury means to them
- Providing help and support without the expectation that the self-injury will stop
- Highlight the risks of mixing self-injury with alcohol or drug use
- Ensuring the young person has had a tetanus jab
- Encouraging the person to come to you to help clean wounds or decide if medical attention is necessary
- If they want to shout and swear let them, this may take the place of self-injury as a way of expressing strong negative feelings
- Sensitively suggesting additional help if you think this is appropriate  
'I'm worried about you and wondered what you would think about us talking to a professional together about this'



By learning to talk about their feelings, a young person can translate their experiences into words rather than acting them out through harming themselves

