



Self-Harming Behaviors: How You Can Help Your Child

As a parent or trusted caregiver, you want to keep your child safe and protect them from harm. Finding out that your child may be hurting themselves can feel overwhelming, scary, and deeply personal. You may feel a mix of worry, confusion, and self-doubt, even wondering what you missed or what you should do next. With research suggesting that 7-14% of adolescents will engage in self-harm at some point, there is no shame in how you are feeling, and more importantly, you are not alone.

It's okay if you don't have all the answers or can't just "fix" the problem and make it go away. More importantly, you can show up for your child as a supportive and caring adult. Self-harming behaviors are often a sign or a way of communicating that a child is struggling to cope with big feelings, stress, lack of control, or even sometimes past experiences. This is not a direct reflection of your parenting or your relationship with them.

With patience, connection, resources, and support, healing is possible for both you and the child you are caring for.

Understanding Self-Harm

Self-harm (sometimes referred to by professionals as non-suicidal self-injury, or NSSI) means hurting one's own body on purpose. While self-harm can look like it's related to suicide, most children and teens are not trying to end their lives. Often, self-harm is a way for children and teens to try to cope with intense emotions, stress, painful past experiences, or a lack of control. This is especially true when a child doesn't have safe ways to express, manage, or cope with their feelings.

It may be incredibly overwhelming to find out your child is engaging in self-harm. What many parents and caregivers don't realize is that self-harm is more common than they think and can affect children of all genders, backgrounds, and family situations/types.

It's important to know that while self-harm is not the same thing as a suicide attempt, children or teens who self-harm are at a higher risk for suicidal thoughts or behaviors if they do not receive support. It is important to take these signs seriously while responding with care and compassion. This can make a real difference.

Self-harm can look different from child to child. It often happens privately and may follow the same pattern each time. Some forms include:



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- Cutting, scratching, or stabbing at the skin with sharp objects
- Burning the skin with lighters, matches, cigarettes, or other heating objects
- Carving words or symbols into the skin
- Piercing the skin or inserting objects under the skin
- Hitting, punching, biting, or head-banging

Injuries can appear on the arms, legs, chest, or stomach; however, they may also appear in other places.

Common Myths and Misunderstandings

There are many myths and inaccuracies about self-harm. Those myths can make it harder to respond in ways that truly help.

- **Cutting is the only kind of self-harm.** Self-harm can take many forms, not just cutting.
- **Self-harm means a child wants to die.** Most children or teens who self-harm are attempting to manage their emotional pain, not end their lives.
- **My child is just self-harming for attention.** Self-harm is a sign of distress. Even if a child is hoping someone will notice, that doesn't take away from the emotional pain they are experiencing.
- **Only girls self-harm.** Although girls self-harm at a higher rate, children and teens of all genders engage in self-harm; however, the form may look different.
- **If I talk to my child about self-harm, I'm putting the idea into their head.** Talking to your child calmly and honestly about potential self-harm does not cause it. It can actually open the door to your child opening up about what they are experiencing and to gaining the support they need.
- **My child will just grow out of it.** If a child does not get help, self-harm can continue or worsen. The earlier a child can receive support, the better.

Warning Signs and Risk Factors

Many parents and caregivers worry that they'll miss the signs that their child or teen is self-harming. The truth is that if something feels off, that alone is reason enough to pay close attention. Parents and caregivers can watch out for both physical signs and behavioral and emotional signs.

Some physical signs you may notice may include:

- Unexplained scars, often in patterns
- New cuts, bruises, burns, or bite marks
- Your child is wearing long sleeves or pants, even in warm weather
- Many excuses or explanations for accidents

Warning signs aren't only physical. Many show up through changes in behavior and emotions.

Other behavioral and emotional signs may look like:

- Having sharp or harmful objects/items in unusual places and/or close by (e.g., in their nightstand, under their bed, in a pencil pouch, etc.)

- Big emotional swings or impulsive reactions
- Isolating and pulling away from friends or family members
- Changes in sleep, mood, or stable relationships

Please know that seeing these signs does not automatically mean the worst, but it does mean that your child may need some extra support and professional help.

Why Children and Teens Self-Harm

There is no single reason why a young person may engage in self-harm. For many young people, it's often a sign of a deep emotional pain that feels overwhelming or hard to talk about. Sometimes it's a way for children to cope with intense feelings of loneliness, stress, shame, or the feeling that they are misunderstood. Self-harming behaviors most often start between the ages of 12 and 14; however, they can start earlier or later.

At other times, self-harm is about gaining a sense of control. Life may feel unsafe or unpredictable, and focusing on their own body may feel like the only thing they have control of in that moment. The self-harming behavior may look different from child to child, but what's most important is the root of the pain behind it.

It may feel confusing that something so painful may feel like relief for your child. When a person is injured, the body releases chemicals. This helps us to cope with the physical trauma and pain. That rapid burst of endorphins may feel like an escape from other challenges a child or teen may not know how to handle.

The children we are caring for such as foster, adoptive, or kinship youth are likely carrying extra layers of stress and complexity. Experiences like loss and separation, trauma, and changes in homes and/or caregivers can sometimes make emotions more difficult to manage or make it harder for them to trust others. Children who are dealing with depression, anxiety, trauma, or other challenges may be at higher risk. However, with your support, understanding, and the right help, healing is possible.

How Parents and Caregivers Can Help

When you learn your child is self-harming, it's natural to want to stop the behavior immediately. However, approaches like punishment, threats, or guilt can make the child shut down or become reluctant to open up in the future.

How you respond to a child who is self-harming matters. You don't have to be an expert or know all of the facts to give your child the patience, support, and consistency they need.

Start the Conversation

Don't be afraid to be gently direct with your child when asking about self-harm. Choose a calm

moment, where you are regulated. If your child begins to open up, spend more time listening than speaking, and let them know that, because you care about them, their safety is important. Recognize that this may be difficult for your child to talk about. They may feel uncomfortable, get defensive, or shut down. This doesn't mean you're doing anything wrong.

Stay Calm and Supportive

Children who have experienced trauma may have a stronger reaction to your concern and/or questions. Avoid arguing, lecturing, or demanding answers. Focus on connection first, then you can come back to the conversation later if needed.

Make Your Home Safer

If a child or teen is currently self-harming or having the urge to self-harm, work to take steps to reduce the risk of self-harm. You can do this by securing sharp objects and other potentially dangerous items in a safe place. You can also increase supervision during more stressful or triggering times. This may also include being more involved in managing screen time, since unmanaged screen use can affect sleep, increase exposure to online bullying, and create other safety concerns. Connection and regulation are especially important during these times. You can also work with a professional provider to create a safety plan, so you know what to do if your concerns continue to escalate.

Support Connection and Regulation

Routines, predictability, and moments of connection, both planned and unplanned, are essential to helping children feel safer. Your relationship with your child is a powerful and protective factor. Small moments of care and compassion are important. Work to actively reduce stress wherever possible. This can look like taking some things off of a busy schedule or reducing activities that may feel overstimulating.

Involve Professional Support

If you are worried that your child is self-harming, it's important to loop in professional help. A pediatrician, therapist, counselor, or mental health provider can help fully assess what is happening and guide next steps. This may also look like private, one-on-one time for your child to speak with the professional, especially if they are uncomfortable or unsure about speaking at home. Seeking professional support for both you and your child or teen is advocacy.

What to Do in a Crisis

Just because a child is participating in self-harming behaviors, it doesn't necessarily mean they are suicidal. However, we do know that children and teens who are having trouble quitting self-harm and engage in it for longer do have higher rates of experiencing suicidal thoughts. This is why early intervention is so important. If your child expresses thoughts of wanting to die, becomes seriously injured, or you feel their safety is at immediate risk, seek emergency help by calling 911 or going to the nearest emergency room. You can also call or text 988 to reach the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline for immediate support.

Caring for Yourself

Supporting a child or teen who is self-harming can take a toll on parents and caregivers, too. Be sure to reach out for your own support, whether that's talking to a trusted friend, attending a support group, or reaching out to a professional. Taking care of yourself and your mental wellness is an important part of helping your child.

When a child in your care is hurting themselves or showing signs of self-harm, it can feel overwhelming, but you are not alone and you don't have to have all the answers. Your care, consistency, and willingness to seek support can help create safety and hope, even during difficult moments. The Wisconsin Family Connections Center is here every step of the way.

Resources

Additional Resources

- [Free Self-Harm Hotlines in Wisconsin](#)
- [Supporting a Young Person Struggling with Self-Harm](#)
- [Silent Suffering: Responding to Self-Harm](#)
- [NAMI: Self-Harm](#)
- [Voices of Compassion Podcast: What is Self-Harm?](#)
- [When Children and Teens Self-Harm](#)
- [Mayo Clinic: Self-Injury and Cutting](#)
- [Support for LGBTQ+ Self-Harm Recovery](#)
- [Self-Injury and Recovery Resources](#)