

Self-Harm in Youth

About ten years ago, there were pictures on the news one night of kids who "cut" themselves and in turn had scarred wrists and bleeding legs. Looking back now, I find it utterly shocking and yet totally fascinating that kids will cut themselves repeatedly, on purpose.

I never realized that this was something that is common in youth and I never worried about it until now, when my oldest daughter is coming upon the age where this behavior tends to start. There are all kinds of risks associated not with the behavior in and of itself, but associated with it. Think about the infections from unsanitary cutting instruments or the dangers that can occur while under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Recent studies show that a pretty high percentage of all youth are dabbling in this area. As a parent, I felt it was time to do some research and share my findings with you.

Non-suicidal self-harm is the action of cutting, scratching, burning, self-hitting, banging the head against the wall or minor overdosing on alcohol or prescription drugs and it is not limited to males or females, but the majority are girls. A recent study in the Canadian Medical Association Journal found that the average age for non-suicidal self-harm was 15.2 years and that a high percentage of these youth suffered from other mental illnesses such as depression.

Adolescence is a time of transition and insecurity as the body is changing, hormones are raging and relationships are intense. The emotions that lead to this type of behavior and depression start in the preteens and can be prevented by parental support and involvement, positive discipline and by building your child's self-esteem.

Depression is common during the adolescent period, as youths between the ages of 10 and 16 are not children anymore, but are not yet adults. They walk the fine line between dependence and independence and this can cause a lot of internal distress if they do not receive adequate support.

The key to preventing self-harming behavior is to have open lines of communication with your child from an early age and to let them know that if they have a problem or are feeling down to talk to you, a teacher or school counselor about it. If your child is hanging out with a crowd that you are not comfortable with, discuss this with your child. If it becomes a problem and you notice your child lying or exhibiting any of the behaviors above, seek the help of a trained professional immediately. It is when parents look the other way that children can get involved in situations that can have a negative impact on their future.

As a parent, I find the fact that teens self-harm to be very disturbing, but when I have heard teens describe that it helps them feel a release, it somehow makes it easier to understand. Teens have a hard time expressing themselves and this is an immediate way for them to "let it out" in an immediate non-verbal way.

If you suspect that your teen is harming him or herself, a healthier way to get the same release is through art. Make sure that your teen has plenty of paint, canvas, paper and other supplies to express all of the emotions that are a healthy and inevitable part of growing up. Encourage their creativity and never take this avenue of exploration away from them. Art therapy is a highly effective means for treating teen depression and adjustment issues.

If parents can try to understand and support their children, it will make the whole process of parenting and growing up less stressful and more enjoyable. Stay involved from an early age with your children. Remember, even teens that are pushing their parents away want to be supported. They are just torn between the search for their own individual identity and the dynamics of a family.