



# Self-Injury - a short guide for Schools and Teachers Including how to write a self-injury policy



**Adapted from the LifeSIGNS Self-Injury Awareness Booklet 2007 by Mary Hillery ©2008**

References from original publication:

HAWTON, K. RODHAM, K. & EVANS, E. (2006) - *By Their Own Young Hand: Deliberate Self Harm and Suicidal Ideas in Adolescents*; Jessica Kingsley Publishers

ROBBINS, M. & BAXTER, M. (2004) - *Policies – a guide for school governors and headteachers*; Adamson Publishing

WALSH, B. (2006) – *Treating Self-Injury*; Guilford Press

# Self-Injury in Schools

Self-injury is increasingly becoming a recognised problem in schools, and all teachers and non-teaching staff (in primary as well as secondary schools) need a general understanding of self-injury, signs to look out for, and what to do if they become aware that a pupil is self-injuring.

*“Self-injury in middle and high school students should not be minimized or dismissed as “attention seeking” or “just a fad”. When people take the radical step of harming their bodies, they should be taken seriously and the sources of their stress addressed.” (Walsh, 2006, p.38)*

## Signs that someone is self-injuring:

- People who self-injure often go to great lengths to conceal their injuries so it can be hard to know if a person does self-injure:
- People who self-injure can seem withdrawn or depressed.
- You may notice cuts or bruises that are always accompanied by excuses that don't seem to fit.
- Many people who self-injure will cut their arms and so they may wear long sleeves, even when it is very hot.
- Within school pupils who self-injure may look for excuses not to have to wear shorts or short sleeves and therefore may avoid activities like PE or swimming.



Particularly where younger children are concerned it is important to keep a close eye on especially vulnerable pupils such as those with a history of abuse.

## How should a school deal with self-injury?

There should be a designated member of staff (this is particularly important in secondary schools) to deal with self-injury. This might be the same person as the designated Child-Protection member of staff, or it might be someone else. If possible, it might be useful to have a male and a female staff-member.

Usually, anything said to a teacher can be confidential, but the law says that information should be shared with "AN APPROPRIATE PERSON" in some situations - this is the DUTY OF CARE and applies to everyone up to 18 years of age in schools.

Hopefully your school will have a policy to deal specifically with self-injury or with similar situations. Policies will depend on the individual school, but every school should aim to have a written protocol of how to deal with self-injury. Walsh discusses a protocol for dealing with self-injury within a school, and he suggests that “the advantage of having a written protocol is that staff know how to respond to self-injury systematically and strategically.” (Walsh; 2006, 245). This will include how and when a child's parents are informed, and which teachers are informed. It might be the case that the head of year is made aware of any self-injury. It is important to remember that the teachers who have to deal with self-injury will need help of some sort themselves to deal with their feelings and frustrations.

Students must be aware of the policies, and know what to expect if they disclose their self-injury to a teacher. Hawton states “Confidentiality is a key concern for young people, and they need to know that it



may not be possible for their support member of staff to offer complete confidentiality” (Hawton; 2006, 210).

The approach which a school takes towards self-injury will depend very much upon the school and how it wants to address the issue. It might be that rules are put in place such as having to wear long sleeves when there are recent cuts rather than others being able to see bandages. There might be a “no injuring at school rule”, although it must be noted that someone should never be punished for self-injuring. It might be an idea for pupils to have an “exit pass” (with parental permission) so that pupils can leave the room during a lesson if things get too much for them, and they can then talk to a school nurse/counsellor or nominated teacher. It would

certainly be useful for many people if a long-sleeved PE uniform was available.

School can be a difficult time as it is, and it appears that increasingly there is unnecessary pressure being put on young people to get good exam grades, and for many children there is the added issue of bullying. There doesn't seem much time any more for children to do things that keep them emotionally healthy. At the end of the day we must remember that someone's happiness is more important than any academic qualification.

### Things for schools and teachers to remember

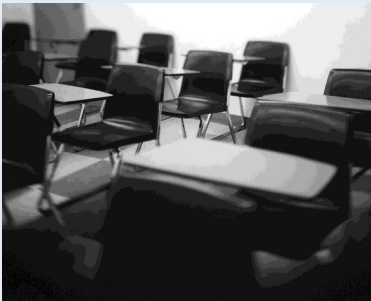
- Anyone from any walk of life or any age can self-injure, including very young children
- Self-injury affects people from all family backgrounds, religions, cultures and demographic groups
- Self-injury affects both males and females
- People who self-injure can often keep the problem to themselves for a very long time which means opening up to anyone about it can be difficult
- You can't just tell someone who self-injures to stop - it is not that easy

### General advice for teachers:

- Listen to the student and try not to show them if you are angry, frustrated or upset. “Staff should learn that the best way to respond to common self-injury is with a ‘low-key, dispassionate demeanor’ and ‘respectful curiosity’ “ (Walsh, 2006, p.245)
- Learn about the difference between self-injury and suicide.
- If someone tells you they self-injure it means they trust you and are willing to share this very personal problem.
- Some people will just want to be heard and empathised with. Try not to push them by asking questions that may overwhelm them.
- Some people may want to get further help with their self-injury and in this case you may be able to help in a number of ways. For instance, by putting them in touch with organisations that may be able to help further such as Connexions or Childline.
- If they want to talk to their parents about their self-injury it may be helpful if you offer to act as a mediator.

- Self-injury is not the only way for people to deal with emotional distress. Try to encourage the young person to seek alternative and more constructive coping mechanisms. However, do not expect them to be able to stop self-injuring.
- The way a child's self-injury is dealt with should reflect the age of that child. If a child is over 16 (and in medical terms an adult), then the situation might be very different.
- If your school has a nurse or counsellor you may be able to put the young person in touch with them as a first step to getting medical help. Consider having leaflets available for children about various issues including self-injury, and information about where to get help.

You might like to organise an assembly yourself with self-injury as the topic, using our information (this could even coincide with self-injury awareness day on March 1st every year). Please get in contact if you need any help or ideas.



It is hoped that self-injury awareness will be raised more in education. This could even become a mandatory part of PSHE (Personal Social and Health Education) in the "Developing a Healthy, Safer Lifestyle" section. Hawton et al discuss possible prevention plans for self-harm and suicide and about mental health awareness programmes in general. These include class-based and whole-school approaches, and can involve problem solving skills and raising self-esteem. Hawton et al provide guidelines for school staff (Hawton et al; 2006, 202-217), however it must be noted that this are predominantly focused upon suicidal behaviour.

When schools deny that self-injury exists and state that it does not affect their pupils, things become even more difficult for those who hurt themselves to get the help they need.

### **Creating a Self-Injury Policy:**

If your school does not have a self-injury policy, then you need to think seriously about creating one! As every school is different this is not a model policy. However, using information from various sources there are some guidelines on the following two pages.

## Self-Injury Policy for School

**Status:** Good Practice/additional policy

**Purpose:** In keeping with the school's values, vision and aims, this policy aims to address the issue of self-injury:

- How to deal with pupils who self-injure and how to offer support in the short and long-term
- To provide support depending upon the individual needs of the pupil.
- To help all pupils improve their self-esteem and emotional literacy
- How to support staff members who come into contact with people who self-injure
- How to prevent self-injury from spreading within the school
- To have clear guidelines for staff – who needs to be informed, when do parents and outside agencies need contacting?
- Education about self-injury for pupils and staff

**What is self-injury?** Self-injury as any deliberate, non-suicidal behaviour that inflicts physical harm on someone's own body and is aimed at relieving emotional distress. It can include cutting, scratching, burning, banging and bruising, overdosing (without suicidal intent) and deliberate bone-breaking/spraining.

**Risk factors associated with self-injury:**

- Mental health disorders including depression and eating disorders
- Drug/alcohol abuse, and other risk-taking behaviour
- Recent trauma e.g. death of relative, parental divorce
- Negative thought patterns, and low self-esteem
- Bullying
- Abuse – sexual, physical and emotional
- Sudden changes in behaviour and academic performance

**Suicide:**

While self-injury and suicide are separate, those who self-injure are in emotional distress, and those who end their lives are also in emotional distress. It is vital that all emotional distress is taken seriously to minimise the chances of self-injury, and suicide. All talk of suicide and warning signs must be taken extremely seriously.

**Who/what was consulted?** This can include information such as this document and the key people who are usually consulted during policy creation e.g. staff, pupils, parents, the Local Authority.

**Relationship to other policies:** e.g. link to Child Protection, SEN, social and health education, health and safety, and behaviour policies

**Roles and responsibilities of headteacher, other staff, and governors:**

**The head teacher will:**

- Appoint a designated teacher to be responsible for self-injury matters, and liaise with them. This might be the same person as the child protection teacher
- Ensure that the designated teacher receives appropriate training about self-injury
- Ensure that self-injury policy is followed by all members of staff

**The governing body will:**

- Decide whether self-injury education should be in the school curriculum, and how it should be addressed
- Ensure that education about self-injury neither promotes or stigmatises
- Look at provisions for people who self-injure, such as long-sleeved uniforms and PE kits, and time out of lessons when under intense stress

**All staff and teachers are expected to:**

- Listen to pupils in emotional distress calmly and in a non-judgemental way.
- Report self-injury to the designated staff member(s) for self-injury. Be clear of the timescale in which this is expected.
- Not make promises (e.g. assuring confidentiality) which can't be kept. Reassure pupils that in order to seek health and happiness people need to know about their problems so that they can help.
- Guide pupils towards seeking health and happiness
- Promoting problem-solving techniques and non-harmful ways to deal with emotional distress
- Enable pupils to find places for help and support
- Provide accurate information about self-injury
- Widen their own knowledge about self-injury and mental health disorders
- Be aware of health and safety issues such as first-aid and clearing up if a self-injury incident take place at school
- Be aware of their legal responsibilities – when they can help, and when they cannot

**The designated staff member(s) will:**

- Keep records of self-injury incidents and concerns
- Liaise with local services about help available for people who self-injure
- Keep up-to-date with information about self-injury
- Liaise with head teacher
- Contact parent(s) at the appropriate time(s). Involve the pupil in this process. Inform the parent (s) about appropriate help and support for their child which is available. Monitor the pupil's progress following an incident
- Know when people other than parents (e.g. social workers, educational psychologists) need to be informed
- Know when to seek help to deal with their own feelings and distress.

**Pupils will be expected to:**

- Not display open wounds/injuries. These must be dressed appropriately
- Talk to the appropriate staff member if they are in emotional distress
- Alert a teacher if they suspect a fellow pupil of being suicidal or at serious risk of harm to themselves, and know when confidentiality must be broken

**Parents will be encouraged to:**

- Endorse the school's approach to self-injury education and pastoral care
- Work in partnership with the school

**Arrangements for monitoring and evaluation:** How to measure its success. This can include feedback from parents and pupils as to how a self-injury incident/case has been dealt with.

**Date established by governing body:****Date for full implementation:**

**Date for Review** - policies should be reviewed every 3 years