

Self-injurious Behaviors

Self-injurious behaviors occur when a child knowingly and deliberately harms his or her body in order to change the way he or she is feeling. This type of behavior has become increasingly common among children. Self-injurious behaviors can be a sign of an underlying mental health issue, but the physical wounds can also lead to scarring, infections, or other complications. Although all children may hurt themselves accidentally, self-injurious behaviors are not part of normal child development and should be addressed.

The signs and symptoms of self-injurious behavior are different depending on the type of self-injurious behavior. The following is a list of typical signs and symptoms of self-injurious behavior. Your child may be injuring himself or herself if he or she:

- Shows evidence of cutting (shallow cuts on a child's arms, legs, or abdomen)
- Has areas of plucked skin and hair
- Bangs his or her head on walls or other hard surfaces
- Begins to have excessive tattooing or body piercing
- Has visible scratches
- Begins to develop scars
- Has burn marks
- Develops low self-esteem
- Has a history of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, or neglect

Possible mental health diagnoses within this symptom cluster include:

- Anxiety Disorders (p48)
- Autism Spectrum Disorders (Pervasive Developmental Disorders) (p54)
- Depression (p67)
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) (p80)
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (p84)

Other mental health issues usually accompany self-injurious behaviors. If you are concerned that your child may be injuring himself or herself, then you may need to consider other mental health issues as well. Also, some children who hurt themselves may lack certain coping and communication skills and may need help developing these skills.

Child abuse

Most child abuse occurs in the home and can come from parents, siblings, other family members, or frequent visitors. Child abuse can also occur in other locations, such as at school, in churches, or in social or other kinds of activities, and from others involved in a child's life.

Child abuse includes:

- Physical abuse, such as physical injury, beatings, burns, or bites
- Emotional abuse, such as constant criticism, insults, or withholding love
- Sexual abuse, such as rape, genital fondling, or incest
- Neglect, such as failure to provide food, clothing, shelter, medical care, safety, or supervision

There are signs for each of the different types of abuse. If your child shows some of these signs of abuse, it does not necessarily mean he or she is being abused. However, if a sign occurs over and over again or in combination with other signs, then it is possible your child is being abused in some way.

TYPICAL SIGNS OF PHYSICAL ABUSE INCLUDE:

- Being nervous around adults
- Being watchful, as if preparing for something bad to happen
- Having difficulty playing
- Acting aggressive toward other children, adults, or objects
- Having difficulty concentrating at school
- Suddenly underachieving or overachieving at school
- Having difficulty trusting others and making friends
- Arriving at school too early or leaving late

TYPICAL SIGNS OF SEXUAL ABUSE INCLUDE:

- Behaving differently when the abuse starts
- Caring less about appearance or overall health
- Talking in a sexual manner or acting sexually at too early of an age
- Becoming secretive and not talking about life at home
- Not making it to the bathroom in time or having accidents
- Being unable to sleep
- Suddenly finding physical contact frightening
- Attempting to run away from home

TYPICAL SIGNS OF EMOTIONAL ABUSE OR NEGLECT INCLUDE:

- Having difficulty using their imagination when playing
- Having a hard time developing close relationships
- Having difficulty learning to talk
- Being overly friendly with strangers
- Underachieving at school
- Having low self-esteem

If you suspect that a child is being abused, call the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF) at 800-RI CHILD (800-742-4453).

Shaken Baby Syndrome is a form of child abuse that can cause serious health consequences in infants, including death. This syndrome happens when a parent or caregiver shakes an infant, causing damage to the central nervous system. For more information on Shaken Baby Syndrome, visit www.dontshake.com.

RESOURCES

ChildSafe Clinic at Hasbro Children's Hospital
401-444-3996
www.lifespan.org/hch/services/childsafec

Prevent Child Abuse Rhode Island
401-728-7920
www.preventchildabuse-ri.org

Rhode Island Children's Advocacy Center at the Day One: Sexual Assault and Trauma Resource Center
401-421-4100 or 800-494-8100
www.dayoneri.org/whatisac.htm

