

# Practical Guide for Parents & Teachers dealing with Presentations of Deliberate Self Harm in Young People

*Self Harm Awareness Conference 2019*

*Pieta House, Ireland*

# Welcome to Pieta House Services

PH is Crisis Intervention service delivering;

**Warmth**, **Compassion** and **Hope**

to our Clients

- Commitment to building Resilience in our Young People and our Communities

What Self Harm Isn't

**...Just Attention  
Seeking**

What Self Harm Is

**...Attention NEEDING**

# Why do Children Self Harm

- Although Self harm may be seen as damaging and destructive, the **reasons** behind hurting oneself are **varied** and **complex**, and **differ** from **child to child**.

# Why do Children Self Harm

- Children self harm because they are unable to **communicate their distress**, and so their **body becomes a canvas** that expresses their **overwhelming feelings**

# Signs someone is Self Harming

- **Unexplained** cuts or bruises
- Keeping themselves **covered**; **avoiding** swimming or changing clothes around others
- Being **withdrawn or isolated** from friends and family
- Low mood, **lack of interest in life** or depression
- **Blaming themselves** for problems or expressing feelings of failure, uselessness, hopelessness or anger.

# Role and Function of DSH



# DSH is a Coping Mechanism

- To **manage** extreme emotional upset
- To **reduce** tension
- To provide a feeling of physical pain to **distract** from emotional pain
- To **express emotions** such as hurt, anger or frustration a form of **escape** an effort to **regain control** over feelings or problems
- An attempt to **punish** themselves or others to elicit care from others
- To **identify** with a peer group
- Self-harm can also be a **suicide attempt**

# Pieta House Under 18 DSH Statistic

**1177** children presented with **self harm** 2018

**658** children presented with **self harm** and **suicidal ideation**

**248** children presented with **self harm, suicidal ideation** and **suicide attempt/s**

**23% increase** in the number of clients U18 & adults presenting with self-harm in 2018 compared to 2017

# How We Treat DSH at PH

## *Compassion, Care & Dignity*

- We **Never** ask **Child to Stop**. DSH is a **Coping Mechanism** & must be replaced with Self-care
- We **never** ask child to show or expose their **wounds** to us – this can cause feelings of shame, guilt & powerlessness
- We help the young person to understand the **meaning and function** of their self harm by **broadening the child's perspective**, helping them move from **Self Harm to Self Care**
- We work with **Parents** to help them Understand how best to help their Child

# Understanding Child Brain Development

# Helping Parents Understand

Children and Adolescent Brains are still growing and developing in many ways making it difficult for adults/Parents to fully understand the why's and why not's of certain behaviour

- The ***Thinking*** part of our brain continues to develop well into our 20's but only begins this process at age ***Seven***.
- This is when we begin to notice other feelings outside of our own and our ***awareness begins to develop***
- As Adolescents we tend to act without thinking based on ***impulse***, the need for ***exploration***, & as part of ***adaptation*** to adult life

# The Teenage Brain



# The Teenage Brain

## More likely to;

- **Act on impulse**
- **Misread/ misinterpret social interactions**
- **Question adults' decisions**
- **Engage in risky behaviour**
- **Less likely to comply with household rules**

## Less likely to;

- **Think before they act**
- **Change dangerous/thrill-seeking behaviours**
- **Comply with household rules**

# The Highly Sensitive Child



# The Highly Sensitive Child / Person

- Sensitive to their environment i.e. sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell
- Creative and artistic/ Emotional lobe of the brain
- Thinks more intensely & Live inside their own heads
- Great friend – give 100% of themselves
- Personalises and internalises
- Don't do directions
- Quirky and feeling outside of groups
- Absorbs family stresses

# The Highly Sensitive Child

Self Harm in Highly Sensitive Children may seem to be a bit of a Paradox!

- Feels everything so intensely you would assume they wouldn't hurt themselves?
- However, their anxiety can reach such a peak that it may be accompanied by a complete lack of physical sensation. Cutting or harming jolts them back.

# The Highly Sensitive Child

- Use **positive communication** – tell them **what you want** rather than **what you don't want**
- **Bring the child with you (collaboratively)** rather than anger fueled direction
- Use **positive reinforcement**
- Provide **healthy boundaries** – clearly communicating them in a **logical way**
- **Be Empathic**

- **Take a deep breath** – this is tough, but it is **better that you know** about it
- Whether you **walked in on your child self harming** or the **principal / school counsellor informed you**, the stage has been set and you need to plan the next strategy most carefully.
- If you discovered by accident, unless your **superhuman**, you will more than likely immediately express your feelings of ***shock*** and ***disbelief***.
- **HOWEVER** you will need to **wait** until you are **calmer** and **more informed** to be in a position to address the problem

- These are things you may be feeling:  
that your child is just trying to 'get at you'  
or that they are 'weird', 'freaky' or 'strange'

**THEY ARE JUST TRYING TO COPE.**

- **Act Swiftly** – Don't ignore it
- Don't be afraid to be **direct**

- Whatever way you found out you **need to say something** like...

***“Your teacher told me that you have been hurting yourself. I am so concerned for you and I just want you to know that you can talk to me about it – let me help you”***

Or

***“I noticed all those scars on your arms. I think you must be self-harming...I want to help you. If you feel you don’t want to talk to me, I can organize it for you to speak to someone else”***

## If your child doesn't open up...

- **Don't ask** the child **why** they are self – harming – most likely they will go on the defensive

## Instead...

Gently help them to **acknowledge** that they have a problem and **encourage them to accept support** and possible professional help. You can encourage them to talk by **using the phrase 'self-harm'**

**If the child remains resistant and denies that there is a problem or that they self harm ...**

- As parents **you are responsible** for their physical and psychological welfare. You are **not** betraying them by openly admitting that help is required
- No such thing as confidentiality when child is in danger



- If they insist that they don't have a problem tell them you would like it **confirmed by an expert**.
- Give your child a few **options** of where you will bring them.
- Without trying to make them feel guilty or obliged to see someone, ensure that your child is aware that their self harm affects all of you, that their distress is your distress

## Finally...

- Gift of **Listening**
- They do **not want** to hear your **opinion, advice** or **quick fix solutions**
- Let them know that you **understand** that they must be feeling some very difficult emotions and must be very frightened.
- **Do not** demand that they **stop** self harming.  
If this results in a power struggle **EVERYBODY LOSES**

# The Role Of Social Media & Technology

- **“How Deep”** the Snap Chat Craze that affected Children of N.S Age
- **MOMO! “Game”** outlining “challenges” via **WhatsApp/Messenger** - Reportedly causing the suicide of a 12 year old girl in Argentina

# The Role Of Social Media & Technology

- Difficulties facing Parents in monitoring and restricting apps, screen time, and content
- Parents may feel “mean” because other Children - of the same age - have phones or are allowed play/watch content that could be harmful to their Childs psychological & emotional wellbeing
- However, the content of these videos and games can have a negative effect on one Child and not an other.
- We are responsible for monitoring & restricting what our Children see, hear & do so remember to put your Childs safety first and protect them from what they can't understand.

# Teachers

- Educators often face situations that fall well outside of the scope of teaching
- If you suspect your student is self harming, please take a special interest because you absolutely can make a tremendous difference
- The number one thing to remember is that you should not ignore anything suspicious. If your gut instinct tells you that something is going wrong with a particular student, follow up on it.

# Teachers

- Get informed and know the **signs** of Self Harm
- Remain **calm** and **non judgmental** at all times
- Follow your schools **policy** on Self Harm Presentations – if your school does not have a policy consider developing one
- Report the matter to a **designated key member of staff** as soon as you become aware of the problem, and inform the pupil that you are doing this.
- Do not make promises you can't keep regarding such things as **confidentiality**

# Teachers

- Referral to further professional support outside of the school is usually necessary
- Show you care – there is most likely nothing you can do directly. Instead be a consistent and supportive teacher.
- Monitor the reactions of other pupils who know about the self-harm
- Don't blame yourself if you miss the signs of a student cutting in your classroom. There is no way to see everything that happens all of the time

# Finally Remember...

- Anyone from **any walk of life** or any age can self-harm, including **very young children**
- Self harm affects people from all family backgrounds, religions, cultures and demographic groups
- Self harm affects both **males and females**. People who self harm 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 tell someone who self harms to simply '**stop**' – *its not that easy!*
- **You are not alone there is help out there.**



# THANK YOU

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&  
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