Self Harming Behaviours

Why do young children engage in self-injurious behaviours?

Self-harm can be one of the most distressing and difficult behaviours that parents, carers and practitioners may face. The behaviour is any activity in which a child inflicts harm or injury on themselves.

It can take many different forms, including head banging, hand or arm biting, hair pulling, face or head slapping, skin picking, scratching or pinching, forceful head shaking.

The reasons a child engages in self-injurious behaviours can be varied, including feeling that they are not listened to, being told off, having no choice, feeling unwell or overwhelmed.

Most commonly, we see self-injurious behaviour in children with a special educational need as a result of anxiety/fear and feeling unsafe. Typically, these often relate to sensory needs, communication or change and transition.

Strategies

While every situation is different, here are some general guidelines for reducing self-harm.

Environment and resources

- Look for clues to help unpick the behaviour. Make notes on the environment, including who was there, any change in the environment and how the child was feeling. Think about what happened the day before, how have they slept, what sensory input is happening at the time.
- Establish a clear daily routine to increase predictability and thereby reduce anxiety. Make plans for difficult times of the day. Increase structure and provide additional supervision and support to the person during these periods or activities.
- Support the person to use other ways of communicating their wants, needs and physical pain or discomfort, e.g. by using visuals.
- Place a barrier between the person and the object that is causing harm. For head slapping, place a pillow or cushion between the person's head and their hand. For hand or arm biting, provide an alternative object to bite down on. For head banging on a hard surface, place a cushion or pillow between the surface and the person's head. You can get removable padding that is placed temporarily on the floors or walls to minimise injury.

Activities

- Find alternative activities that provide a similar sensory experience and build these into the daily routine. Jumping on a trampoline or swinging on a swing may provide needed stimulation to the vestibular system (that head shaking or slapping may have previously provided). Providing the person with edible or safe objects to chew on that provide different sensory experiences such as carrots, raw pasta or sultanas may reduce the need for hand or arm biting.
- Redirect. Tell the person what they need to do instead, e.g. "David, hands down", Using visuals to support. Redirect to something that prevents the behaviour (e.g. an activity that requires both hands) and provide praise and reinforcement, e.g. "David, that's excellent playing with your train".

Interactions



- Provide frequent encouragement to the person for engaging in appropriate behaviour. This will help the child learn that other, more appropriate behaviours bring positive outcomes. Rewards can take the form of praise and attention, preferred activities, toys, tokens or sometimes small amounts of favourite foods or drinks. Ensure that you clearly name the behaviour that you are rewarding, eg "Jane, that's good waiting!" and ensure that rewards are provided immediately after the behaviour that you wish to encourage eg "You can spend 10 minutes on the computer now".
- Consider your tone of voice to prevent the situation escalating as you may sound confrontational without realising it. Try whispering or singing as music enters a different part of the brain therefore, you may have more success i.e. 'Can Yusef wave his hand, wave his hands, wave his hands' – when the child is waving, they are not focussed on harming themselves/others.
- Intervene early, and respond quickly and consistently to incidents of self-injury. Even if the behaviour serves the function of gaining attention from others, it is never appropriate to ignore severe self-injurious behaviour.
- Limit verbal comments, facial expressions and other displays of emotion, as these may inadvertently reinforce the behaviour. Try to speak calmly and clearly, in a steady tone of voice and have only one voice in the room.
- Reduce demands and avoid saying 'no'. Hearing the word 'no' can hurt deeply for some children, it may make them feel you are saying no to them as a person and that they are not good enough. Try re-phrasing to make their ideas and thoughts valid but still putting boundaries in place i.e 'oh yes, I really want some chocolate too! Let's have it after tea'.
- Become a meltdown partner by being a safe person in the moment. Avoid standing in front of the child as this can appear confrontational.
- Provide light physical guidance. If the person is having difficulty stopping the behaviour, gently guide their hand away from their head, using as little force as possible. Immediately try to redirect attention to another activity and be prepared to provide physical guidance again if the person attempts to re-commence self-harming. This approach must be used with extreme caution as it may escalate the behaviour or cause the person to target others.
- Use the 8 second rule (stay quiet and wait) and then short sentences (5–8 words)
- Give positive direction 'Can Yusef wave his hands, wave his hands?' as when they are waving, they are not harming themselves.

What else?



- Visit the GP or dentist and seek a referral to a specialist if needed. Bring along notes about when the behaviour happens (i.e. what time and in which situations), how often, when it first started and how long it lasts.
- Remove unpleasant sensory input. Provide pain relief for physical discomfort if a medical professional has advised this after seeing the child.
- Be empathetic. It is likely the child is not choosing to behave in this way. When a child cuts their leg or hurts themselves externally, we respond with love and care. We should respond the same way for internal physical distress and help the child feel safe.
- Shame and guilt are emotions which are too heavy for a child to carry so they may develop strategies to help them cope such as laughing or avoiding acknowledgment.

Useful links



Dingley's Promise – online training module (Behaviour that Challenges)

Ordinarily Available Provision, Bristol's Local SEND Offer

Yvonne Newbold: Ninja curious – an antidote to difficult, violent behaviour in children (TED Talk)

Bristol's SEND Local Offer

Workforce Development Network