

## HOW TO TALK TO YOUR CHILD ABOUT SELF-INJURY: Adapted from The Cornell Research Program on Self-Injury and Recovery

Address the issue **as soon as possible**. Don't presume that your child will simply "outgrow" the behavior and that it will go away on its own. (Though keep in mind this can and does happen for some young people—some do mention "outgrowing" their self-injury. This typically occurs because they learn more adaptive ways of coping).

Try to **use your concern** in a constructive way, by helping your child realize the impact of his/her self-injury on themselves and others. It is most important to **validate your child's feelings**. Remember that this is different from validating the behavior. Parents must first make eye contact and be respectful listeners before offering their opinion

- Speak in calm and comforting tones
- Offer reassurance
- Consider what was helpful to you as an adolescent when experiencing emotional distress
- If your child does not want to talk, **do not pressure** him/her. Self-injury is a very emotional subject and the behavior itself is often an indication that your child has difficulty verbalizing his/her emotions.

### HELPFUL QUESTIONS YOU CAN ASK YOUR CHILD TO UNDERSTAND THEIR SELF-INJURY

Recognize that direct questions may feel invasive and frightening at first—It is most productive to focus first on helping your child to acknowledge the problem and the need for help. Here are some examples of what you might say:

- "How do you feel before you self-injure? How do you feel after you self-injure?"  
Retrace the steps leading up to an incident of self-injury—the events, thoughts, and feelings which led to it.
- "How does self-injury help you feel better?"
- "What is it like for you to talk to me about hurting yourself?"
- "Is there anything that is really stressing you that I can help you with?"
- "Is there anything missing in our relationship, that if it were present, would make a difference?"
- "If you don't wish to talk about this now I understand. I just want you to know that I am here for you when you decide you are ready to talk. Is it okay if I check in with you about this or would you prefer to come to me?"

Most significantly, acknowledge that your child is experiencing stress, and difficult feelings and you want to be helpful and support your child to manage and cope with these challenges. Offer hope for a better tomorrow with help that you will seek for you and your child.