TEENAGERS AND SELF HARM

What every parent and teacher needs to know

John Ashfield PhD
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Dr John Ashfield PhD

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Contact: Phone 0439 692 975 Email mcrafter@youcanhelp.com.au

Graphic design: Green Pigeon Graphics – Johanna Evans
General editing: Cynthia Collins
INTRODUCTION

Written for parents, teachers and health professionals, this resource is intended to provide crucial up-to-date information for understanding and responding appropriately to teenagers who self-harm.

There are many misconceptions surrounding self-harm which can all too often affect the way concerned parents or professionals respond to teenagers using this behaviour.

It is not uncommon for teenagers to report that they had a ‘bad experience’ when they’ve tried to seek help and came away feeling judged and demeaned, instead of understood and supported, making it less likely that they will seek help again. It is needful that we begin talking openly and frankly about the issue of self-harm; neglecting to do so will only ensure it remains a taboo subject, leaving a growing number of teenagers with few avenues of support and likely to be left to suffer in silence.

Though there is considerable agreement across the emerging literature on self-harm, there is also presently a diversity of opinion about how best it should be defined and about the kind of interventions and therapy most helpful for use with teenagers. More research is needed. However, opening up discussion about self-harm and grasping what is already
known about it, are vitally important first steps in tackling this problem with sensitivity, competence and resolve.

Since teenage self-harm occurs in the context of many other factors, it may be helpful to explore just some of the common yet very difficult challenges facing teenagers, parents and teachers on the journey they all participate in, which is adolescent development and maturation towards adulthood. It is vitally important to understand self-harm in relation to all the emotion, struggle, attainment, failure, joy, grief, hormones and competition of that contested space we call adolescence.

Few of us would want to repeat the teenage phase of our development, yet we are forced to reengage with its elements – albeit as adults, since we are inexorably caught up in the great struggle of becoming which our teenagers face, simply because they cannot do it alone and need us to help them, even though they often fail to realise it.
MAPPING THE

TEENAGER 'TERRITORY'

The Parenting Trap

There are no perfect parents, no perfect families and there are definitely no experts when it comes to dealing with teenagers. If you think otherwise, you’ll inevitably be proved wrong!

Sure, there are neglectful and dysfunctional parents and families that damage their children and teens. However, most parents are just doing the best they know how; they are caring and concerned and very considerate of the needs of their children. Of course, some parents are so concerned with getting parenting right, that they ‘make a rod for their own back’ by being over-protective and overindulging their teenagers (better known as ‘snow plough parenting’), or, alternatively, use command and demand strategies that end in acute conflict, powerlessness and frustration.

We can very easily fall into the trap of trying to parent teenagers long after they no longer accept our parenting and should be allowed to experience responsibility for their own lives and choices. If we press on regardless, in childrearing mode – expecting they’ll listen and respond to being told what to do, we stand the chance of seriously jeopardising the future possibility of a mutually respectful relationship with them.

It’s no easy thing to relinquish rescuing or control, but there comes a point when relinquish it we must, if our teenagers are to begin to grow up into adults and if we are to make room for an amicable future relationship with them as cohabitants of the adult world.

Age can be deceptive

Our current notion of adolescence is unfortunately out of date and out of touch with the physical development, awareness, experience, communication capacity and behaviour of modern teenagers. This can mean that our parenting style and approach can be out of synchrony with the age of our teenager, just as some teaching and behaviour management strategies may also be overdue for age related adjustment and revision.

Many 14 year old teenagers (and sometimes even younger) are sexually active, experimenting with drugs, using alcohol and expecting a degree of autonomy unimaginable a few decades ago. We may not like it, but it is a reality that we
simply have to come to grips with and approach in a constructive way. This doesn’t mean that we have to abandon our values, but it does mean that we may need to reassess what is achievable with our teenagers and what we can reasonably expect of ourselves as parents.

**Gender does matter**

Boys are not girls and girls are not boys. Yes, you might think this is yawningly obvious, but such differences have all too often been minimised or overlooked. We now know that differences in male/female physiology and even brain anatomy, result in significant differences in coping, emotion expressiveness and social behaviour. These need to be taken into consideration both at home and at school.

Science is progressively informing us of new complexities of upheaval occurring in the teenage brain, hormones and body during adolescent development and that there are important differences between boys and girls, not just in learned behaviour, but in how their physiology affects their experience and behaviour.

Both genders have their own unique needs and issues of learning, interpersonal relations and making the transition to adulthood. Add to this other factors like how they are targeted by advertisers trying to influence their patterns of consumption by exploitatively manipulating issues such as body image, self-acceptance, peer recognition and group inclusion and it isn’t hard to understand why they are sometimes unpredictable and impulsive.

Because there are real emotional and behavioural consequences for teenagers – both male and female, resulting from our choice of approach when it comes to the issue of gender, it is important for us to get it right.

**It’s a teenagers’ job to challenge boundaries**

Teenagers are meant to challenge boundaries, because they have to learn how to act with autonomy and independence, in readiness to leave home and fend for themselves.

Parents often find teenage experimentation with language, behaviour and boundaries very difficult. They sometimes want to keep their emerging adolescents as children, or want them to quickly grow up, not realising that this entails a significant and necessary shift from parenting children to coaching beginning adults.

This shift in emphasis isn’t easy for teachers either, who have the pressure of performance expectations in an environment that is socially artificial and