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A blueprint for providing resources to parents of adolescents who self-harm

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Connecting for Life

PROJECT TITLE

A blueprint for providing resources to parents of adolescents who self-harm

KEY MESSAGES

- Parents supporting adolescents who self-harm need information about topics such as sources of help, emotion management, parent-adolescent relationships and treatment options.
- The information needed by parents differs depending on whether the self-harm is recently discovered or is ongoing and longer term.
- Parents prefer online information, provided on a trusted government-sponsored or mental health charity website.
- More targeted/specialised information may be needed for some groups of parents.

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CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

The term self-harm is used to describe an action in which an individual deliberately causes harm to themselves with or without the intention of ending their life. Engaging in self-harm is common in adolescents in Ireland with the My World Survey reporting that 23% of 12–19-year-olds had self-harmed at least once in their life. Research from other countries indicates that fewer than 20% of adolescents who self-harmed had received help from a health service and nearly half had not received help from anyone. Adolescents who self-harm are at increased risk of later suicide attempts.

For the majority of adolescents, parents are an important part of their support system and in many cases parental support is necessary to access mental health services. Parents may also be an essential source of information regarding help-seeking. Therefore, providing parents with information about self-harm is an important way of increasing support for adolescents and of directing them towards appropriate sources of help.

Developing useful information resources requires input from parents with the experience to know what is needed/helpful. Research of this type is relatively uncommon and has usually focused on small groups of parents who are already engaged with mental health services. This has resulted in a clear gap in understanding what information should be provided for parents. The present research project was designed to address this gap in our knowledge. Well-chosen, high quality information from a trusted source could provide valuable support to parents and help them to make appropriate decisions on how to provide support and where to seek help.

AIM/OBJECTIVE(S)

The main aim of this research was to find out what information would support parents of adolescents who self-harm by drawing on the insights of parents who have lived through this experience and on professionals working with adolescents.

Research objectives included:

- To find out what parents want to know about adolescent self-harm.
- To determine professionals' opinions on the most useful information for parents of adolescents who self-harm.
- To find out where parents would like to get information about self-harm (e.g. from a website) and what sources of information they trust (e.g. charitable organization).

METHODOLOGY

We performed an extensive search of journal articles, reports and of websites to discover what research had been completed already and what information was already available for parents about adolescent self-harm.

We recruited 115 parents living in Ireland with experience of supporting an adolescent who had self-harmed to fill in a survey online. Parents rated items of information based on how important they judged them to be (e.g. 'essential' or 'important').

We consulted with 29 professionals all of whom had at least 2 years' experience working with adolescents engaged in self-harm in order to get their views on parents' information needs.

RESULTS / FINDINGS

- Parents distinguished between information needed when they **first discovered that their adolescent was self-harming** and information needed to support them while looking for professional help and during their adolescent's treatment.
- The information identified as necessary on **initial discovery** included: How to **identify signs** of self-harm; What **to say** to the adolescent; How to manage their own **emotional responses**; Where to go for **medical support**; Where to go for **psychological support**; How to support an adolescent **reluctant to seek professional help**.
- The information identified as necessary when providing **ongoing support** to an adolescent who is receiving professional help for self-harm: **Why** adolescents self-harm or attempt suicide; What **parenting strategies** can be most helpful/supportive; What **treatment options** exist (e.g., cognitive behavioural therapy, family therapy,) and what they involve; Managing parents' own **feelings**; Strengthening parent-adolescent **relationships**; **Talking** to other family members about self-harm; What to do if an **adolescent doesn't engage** or connect with the person who is helping them (e.g. a therapist); **Self-care** for parents.
- Parents would like information to be provided on a **mental health charity or government websites, via a helpline, or through leaflets**.
- Parents would prefer to receive information from a **trusted source** such as a **psychologist or psychotherapist, a charity mental health service, or their local G.P.**
- Many parents were also keen to **hear from other parents with similar experiences** to their own.
- Parents and professionals identified that **some groups of parents may have additional specific needs** (e.g. parents whose first language is not English; parents who belong to a minority ethnic or cultural group).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall Recommendations

- Our research findings clearly indicate that parents need easy access to trustworthy information about self-harm. Therefore we recommend that the findings of this research are used to inform the development of websites with evidence-based information to inform and support parents of adolescents who self-harm.
- Parents who took part in our research distinguished between the information needed on first discovery of self-harm and information needed to provide ongoing support. Therefore we recommend that websites for parents should distinguish between the information needs of parents who have just discovered their adolescent is self-harming and information for those who are providing on-going support. Providing targeted information will ensure parents can find what they need and avoid information overload.
- Our findings indicate that websites had the highest rating from parents as sources of information. However parents noted that they wish to get information in other ways too. Therefore we recommend that a variety of media are used to alert parents to sources of information on adolescent self-harm. This might include posters and leaflets that can be posted in schools, GP surgeries and primary care clinics.

Recommendations for policy makers:

- Parents who took part in our research indicated that they placed a high value in information provided by trusted mental health service providers. Therefore we recommend that specialist adolescent mental health service providers and primary care services are supported to develop websites that host information on adolescent self-harm for the adolescents and parents that they serve.

- Our research findings highlighted that some groups of parents might have more specific information needs on self-harm. Therefore we recommend that organisations that work with parents from groups that may have specific additional information needs (e.g. parents whose first language is not English; parents who belong to a minority ethnic or cultural group). Encourage these organisations to liaise with primary care services and adolescent mental health service providers to co-produce information for parents.

Recommendations for services:

- Parents who took part in our research indicated that they placed a high value in information provided by trusted mental health service providers. Therefore we recommend that service providers are supported to provide information for parents who support adolescents who self-harm. This may be done by hosting information on adolescent self-harm on their own websites or ensuring that parents are directed to websites where this information can be found.
- Our research findings detail a wide range of information sought by parents. Therefore, we recommend that services offer training for professionals on the information needs of parents who are supporting adolescents. This training should include information for parents on how best to support the adolescent through treatment and recovery and also the self-care that parents will need to ensure their own well-being.
- Services already providing psycho-education for parents of adolescents who self-harm could use the findings of the present study to ensure that they are addressing all the issues that parents have indicated are important for them.



- Our research findings indicate that our participants were keen to hear from other parents with similar experiences. Therefore we recommend that services consider the potential value of organising peer support groups for parents. Support groups permit parents to share experiences and can prove a source of friendship and hope at a difficult time.

Recommendations for front-line practitioners:

- Parents who took part in our research indicated that they placed a high value in information provided by trusted mental health service providers. In addition, our review of the literature indicated that not all websites provide parents with accurate information or with the information that they need. Therefore we recommend that practitioners provide parents with sources of trustworthy information on self-harm.
- Practitioners should ensure that parents know what to do if there is a medical concern/emergency in relation to a self-harm injury or if they feel their child is at immediate risk.

LINKS / SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

As part of the ongoing work of this project several webinars were arranged for parents who had concerns about adolescent self-harm. The webinars were all recorded and can be viewed here: : <https://www.ucd.ie/psychology/research/researchcentresandlaboratories/youthmentalhealthlaboratory/youthmentalhealthlabstories/>

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