

45th ASSEMBLY, 2005

CHILD AND ADOLESCENT SELF-DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOR

Judaism clearly teaches that no one has complete ownership of his or her own body. God gives a person his or her body for safekeeping.
(Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Chovel u'Mazik 5:1)

Issue

The increased prevalence of self-destructive behavior in its varied and multiple manifestations among children and adolescents.

Background

Women of Reform Judaism has long addressed problems concerning children and teenagers, and issues related to mental health, in its own resolutions and statements and in its collaboration with Union for Reform Judaism Department of Jewish Family Concerns. Resources available through the Department of Jewish Family Concerns on which or with which WRJ has worked, include *Litapayach Tikvah: To Nourish Hope* on eating disorders and *When Living Hurts* on youth suicide.

The Department of Jewish Family Concerns has received reports from our camp directors, counselors, youth leaders, and temple staff members that self-destructive behaviors such as “cutting” and self-injury are on the increase. These serious problems will be a major focus of a new large-scale program, “K’dushat HaGuf: The Holiness of the Body”. The department has begun to collect resources and texts that will be used to approach this subject from a Jewish perspective in our congregations, camps, and programs for children and adolescents.

Adolescence, one of the most stressful periods in life, is both turbulent and exciting. For some of our youth, the challenges they face can lead to feelings of hopelessness and isolation. Some youngsters do not have the coping skills to face sometimes difficult physiological and psychological issues. When this hopelessness becomes dangerous, recognizing the warning signs is crucial. A child or adolescent may consider that self-injurious behavior is one way to deal with life. The most common manifestation of self-injury is cutting and slashing, but teenagers also hurt themselves in a variety of other ways. Often, these children and adolescents may also be engaging in additional forms of self-destructive behavior, including shoplifting, substance abuse, eating disorders, sexual promiscuity, and unprotected sex with its potential for unplanned pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), HIV, and AIDS. Self-destructive behaviors affect Jewish teenagers just as much as they affect the rest of the population. It is important to develop skilled methods of intervention. For our young people, for their parents and families, and for our Jewish communities, understanding these problems and development of strategies to provide education, support, and guidance are necessary.

Resolution

In order to address the serious problem of increased self-destructive behavior and its consequences among our children and adolescents, Women of Reform Judaism resolves to:

1. Collaborate with the Department of Jewish Family Concerns of the Union for Reform Judaism to develop resources and programmatic responses for camps, youth groups, and congregations, to assure that such materials are used to help families struggling with self-destructive behaviors, and
2. Encourage the Union for Reform Judaism to provide age-appropriate sexuality education in our religious schools based on Jewish values, ethics and beliefs to help our children and adolescents cope and as a means of protecting them against date/acquaintance rape, STDs, HIV, AIDS and unintended pregnancies.

Moreover, WRJ urges its affiliates to:

1. Alert its congregational staff, including clergy, school directors and teachers, and youth group leaders, to the crisis of pervasive self-destructive behavior in its many forms, including cutting and slashing, and to assure that they can recognize any overt signs of such behaviors;
2. Use sisterhood programs and newsletters to alert members and other adult congregants to the existence, extent, and ramifications of the problem;
3. Work with temple youth group adult leaders to assure that our children and adolescents are offered safe and confidential settings for their open and frank discussions;
4. Work with local school districts and healthcare professionals to bring about an awareness of this critical issue; and
5. Help identify and disseminate the names of appropriate local resources, individuals, and agencies, qualified and equipped to work with children and adolescents, parents, guardians, and families on the issue of self-destructive behavior.