



NATP
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION
OF THERAPEUTIC PARENTS



Centre of Excellence in
CHILD TRAUMA

Self-Harming: Two different approaches

Case study 1: Tina

Tina was 14 years old. She came into residential care after a series of foster placements following family breakdown. Sharp objects were removed but Tina ran into shops, grabbed razors and slashed her arms in order to 'feel relief'. She smashed light bulbs to use the glass in them to cut. In both her arms she had gashes running length ways down the front, approximately half an inch deep and one to two inches wide, which she used to put oven cleaner or any other corrosive substance, into. She self-harmed every day in secret and had thousands of cuts and scars on her body including thighs. Despite the intervention of mental health professionals, staff at the home were largely left unsupported. Their reaction to the self-harming was to monitor at a high level, call the ambulance or transport to hospital when necessary, and administer first aid. Tina was able to articulate her feelings to staff and explained that she only 'felt real' when she could cut. She said she felt 'tension building' to an intolerable level and it was only relieved by seeing the blood flow. Finally, staff arranged for her to have both arms put in plaster in order to try to help Tina to help her arms to begin to heal.

What happened?

Case Study 2 Sally

Sally was 15 years old. She had been adopted with her twin sister at the age of two. The adoption had disrupted due to Sally's attachment disorder manifesting as extreme attention seeking behaviours and high levels of aggression. Sally was placed in a solo placement residential unit with two staff on duty. Sally often superficially cut her arms which created a lot of blood. The self-harming was obvious, and she would tell staff when she was intending to cut, or she would steal objects to cut with. Initially, after every incident, staff would administer first aid, accompany to hospital, call ambulances etc. as necessary. A member of staff noticed that Sally's behaviour heightened further when in hospital, so a decision was made that minimum attention would be given. When Sally next self-harmed, staff arranged for her to attend hospital but did not attend hospital with her.

What happened?