



The Cornell Research Program
on *Self-Injury and Recovery*

Respectful *curiosity*

by Janis Whitlock &
Mandy Purington

The notion of “respectful curiosity”¹ is powerful for parents and others who care for someone who self-injures. Indeed, it is a wonderful parenting technique all around – particularly in times when you feel perplexed about your child’s attitude or behavior. Respectful curiosity is best described as a state of awareness characterized by a genuine curiosity and willingness to know and understand ***in combination with*** attention to assuring that one’s curiosity is satisfied in a kind and respectful way.

Since you cannot know what will feel respectful to someone, even your own child, it is wise to ask permission to ask questions or to preface your questions with a statement, something like, “I want to do everything I can to help you feel supported and respected. I also want to better understand what you feel, think, and experience. Do you mind if I ask a few questions to help me better understand?” Even if one or more of your questions crosses the comfort zone for your child, they are likely to better trust your intention if you have been clear. Also, you being clear and honest models emotional honesty and clarity for them as well. Similarly, it is *really* important to honor your child’s responses and disclosures. If they do not want to share something or anything, you will need to accept this with as much grace and humility as possible – even if it frustrates you or hurts your feelings.

Here are a few examples of respectfully curious questions specific to self-injury:

- “Why do you think self-injury works for you?”
- “How does self-injury make you feel?”
- “How do you feel before you self-injure?”
- “How do you feel after?”
- “What are some reasons you might want to stop self-injuring?”
- “What are some reasons it would be hard to stop self-injuring?”
- “Is there anything stressing you out right now that I can help you with?”
- “Let’s try to understand this slip. You’ve been successful in not self-injuring before – what do you think was different this time?”
- “What has been successful in the past that has helped you fight the urge to injure?”
- “How do you view yourself when you succeed at not injuring?”
- “Is there anything missing in our relationship, that if it were present, would make a difference?”

Recognize that direct questions may feel invasive and frightening at first—particularly when coming from someone known and cared for, like you. It is most productive to focus first on helping your child to express her or his experience and feelings. This, in and of itself, is a step toward stopping. Sharing your own feelings, if they come up as you are listening, can be powerful and good as long as you can be authentic and centered. Take time to *observe*

¹ First coined by Caroline Kettlewell in her book *Skin Games* (2000), St Martin’s Griffin, and then popularized by Barant Walsh (2012) in *Treating Self-Injury: A Practical Guide*, 2nd Edition, Guilford Press.

Respectful *curiosity*

continued
page 2 of 2

what you are feeling and thinking as you hear your child's answers. If you notice that you feel judgmental, angry, or like you want to lash out, it would be better to take space and come back to the conversation when you are calm. If you have feelings that you can respectfully and calmly share, then it is really helpful to use "I" statements:

- I am sorry if I seem uncomfortable with some of this – it is hard for me to know that you hurt.
- I am so glad that we are finally talking about this; I have felt worried about it for awhile but have not known what to say
- I feel sad and sometimes worried that something I have done is making you want to hurt yourself.
- This scares me because I don't know what to do or how to help you.
- I am starting to feel upset and think I need to take a little space. I want to know more, though, and will let you know when I am ready.
- If you don't wish to talk to me 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?"

Lastly, remember to thank your child and yourself for confronting what can be difficult and challenging. Since self-injury is a way of *speaking* strong emotion, actually using words to honestly share feelings can be very powerful and healing.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Whitlock, J. & Purington, M. (2013). *Respectful curiosity*. The Practical Matters series, Cornell Research Program on Self-Injury and Recovery. Cornell University. Ithaca, NY

FOR MORE INFORMATION PLEASE SEE: www.selfinjury.bctr.cornell.edu