



Home and Family Strategies: Eating Disorders

This Quick Fact Sheet contains strategies designed to address potential symptoms of eating disorders and should be used in consultation and collaboration with mental health and health personnel and as part of a larger intervention approach. These pages contain only a portion of many possible strategies available to address symptoms of eating disorders. Strategies should always be individualized and implemented with careful consideration of the differences of each child and the context of their individual circumstances. Additionally, this information should never be used to formulate a diagnosis. Mental health diagnoses should be made only by a trained mental health professional after a thorough evaluation.

If you notice a significant change in mood or behavior in your child that lasts for more than a week or two, share your observations with your child's pediatrician and/or school's mental health support team.

Strategies To Prevent Eating Disorders

- Create a home and family environment of respect; be weary of teasing/bullying (e.g. among friends/peers/family members) and intervene when necessary
- Talk to your child about growth and development and reassure him or her of the normal diversity of body sizes and shapes that exist among children and adolescents
- Provide media literacy training to help children become critical consumers of media messages about body size, shape, and beauty
- Teach children about good nutrition and healthy eating habits; support this with positive role modeling and healthy food choices both at home and in the community
- Teach your child pro-social skills such as problem solving, decision making, and stress management
- Avoid making any negative comments about your child's appearance or food choices
- Expose your child to diverse role models of all shapes and sizes who are praised for their accomplishments, not their appearances
- Encourage your child to exercise and participate in sports and/or other athletic activities
- Ensure that your child athlete does not engage in harmful weight control or body building measures
- Encourage children to express their emotions in healthy ways, such as talking with a family member or friend or journaling
- Foster positive self-esteem and self-image in your child; ensure child spends time with peers and adult role models who have positive self-esteem and self-image
- Provide your child with opportunities that help him or her feel in control

Strategies For When You First Have Concerns

- Eating disorders are a mental health as well as a physical health problem and are very difficult to diagnose. Having a concern that something may be wrong is enough to initiate a conversation with your child, your child's pediatrician, and/or your child's school team, including a school nurse and mental health professional
- Avoid taking on the role of therapist, savior, or food gate-keeper
- Arrange for a private time to talk and let your child know you are concerned
- Be non-judgmental, compassionate, and non-punitive while providing detail about the specific behaviors you have noticed that are of concern to you
- Focus your comments on health and physical functioning vs. body size or shape
- Listen attentively and actively to your child; avoid discounting your child's perceptions
- Explain that you believe further support is needed since their health is at risk and notify your child's pediatrician and/or your child's school's health and mental health team
- Decide with your child what will happen next; do not make any promises to keep information secret
- Share your concerns with other adult family members; join with the health and/or mental health team in a path of collaborative inquiry
- Help children to understand that treatment is necessary to address eating disorders and that treatment that starts earlier has a higher chance of success
- Remember that only an expert in eating disorders can diagnose and/or provide treatment



Strategies For Food Refusal/ Other Harmful Food Related Behavior

- Avoid power struggles with your child around this issue/food
- Allow your child to eat separately from the family (alone if necessary) or ideally with supportive, safe family members or friends
- Allow your child to have a supply of healthy snacks of his/her choice on hand at family events/during family outings; allow grazing throughout the day/evening
- Provide your child with opportunities for non-threatening, non-overwhelming physical activity throughout the week
- If harmful behavior involves food purging (vomiting after eating), keep your child home for about an hour after eating to reduce purging
- Monitor your child's food intake but resist the urge to become a food controller or gatekeeper

Strategies For Poor Concentration/Obsessive Thinking About Food And Weight

- Prompt your child to use a daily planner to keep track of homework; provide regular support at home each night to ensure child understands assignments and has all necessary materials
- Check regularly for work completion to avoid having your child get significantly far behind
- Help your child organize projects and break down assignments into manageable parts
- Provide discrete assistance in helping your child to stay focused on his or her task at hand
- Provide your child with a self-selected homework space where s/he can feel focused and productive
- Provide some warning when requests/directions are forthcoming and ask your child to repeat them back to you to check for attention
- Work with your child to develop a subtle, non-shaming cue you can use to remind him or her to return to task when s/he is distracted

Strategies For Perfectionism And Unrealistically High Goals

- Point out your own mistakes frequently and couple them with statements such as "everybody makes mistakes" or "here I go again..."
- Support your child when new, large assignments are given; devise short term, step by step, realistic goals for project completion
- Talk with your child about academic expectations; be aware that these may be unrealistically high and try to make and maintain more realistic goals
- Meet with your child's school team to discuss expectations and your child's academic functioning

Strategies For Social Withdrawal

- Encourage positive peer/sibling interaction by teaming children together in goal oriented tasks
- Enroll your child in a counselor led peer support group that teaches social skills, including problem solving, emotional regulation, and decision making
- Encourage your child to participate in extracurricular activities that build a sense of social affiliation and teamwork, such as some sports, drama, outdoor education, etc.
- Identify "safe" family members/friends who can engage your child and model pro-social skills
- Intervene to help your child to negotiate peer and sibling conflict when necessary; talk through the situation with your child in a way that helps him/her find words to express his/her perspective, understand the peer or sibling's perspective, and engages the child in problem solving