

Helping Children Feel Good About Their Bodies



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Summary: Eating disorders are a serious, common illness, but fortunately there are things that parents can do in order to make their children more resilient against developing an eating disorder.

Eating disorders, now considered the third most common chronic illness among adolescent girls, are serious emotional problems that are manifested through weight and food issues. They can have life-threatening consequences. Behaviors that include dieting, bingeing, self-induced vomiting, using diet pills and laxatives are seen in more than 27% of girls aged 12 to 18 years.

Eating disorders develop in boys and girls for a lot of different reasons. Eating disorders may stem from anxiety or depression, or from feeling a loss of control due to a family situation, trauma, or other stresses. Those who tend to develop eating disorders are often perfectionists. They may also have tendencies towards being obsessive-compulsive. Once started, eating disorders may become self-perpetuating. The dieting, bingeing and purging may help some people cope and feel in control of their lives while at the same time undermining physical health, self-esteem and the sense of competence and control.

What can parents do to help prevent an eating disorder?

We tend to think of eating disorders as a “teenage girl issue”, but it is never too early to lay the groundwork for helping your child recognize that a healthy body is a beautiful body.

- As a parent, or involved adult, you are an important ROLE MODEL when it comes to sensible eating, sensible exercise and self-acceptance. The messages you send about your own body, or other people’s body makes an impact on children and young people around you.
- Let your children know about genetic differences in body types and about prejudice.
- Be conscious of your dreams and goals for your children. Do these overemphasize beauty and body shape?
- Learn about and discuss the dangers of dieting, the value of moderate exercise and the importance of eating a variety of foods in at least three well-balanced meals a day. Don’t label foods as good/safe/no-fat or low fat versus bad/dangerous/fattening.
- Encourage your children to be active and to enjoy what their bodies can do and feel like. Do not limit their calories unless a doctor recommends it for a medical condition.
- Discourage children from weighing themselves. Leave this to the family doctor. Children’s weight is meant to increase...they are growing. Help your child understand the normal changes that happen with puberty, which includes more body fat for girls.

- Help children appreciate and resist the ways in which television, magazines and other media distort the true diversity of body types and imply that a slender body is best.
- Work on family communication. Allow your child to show sadness, anger, and frustration without judgment or punishment. Arrange for special family times and let your children know in ways that they will understand, how much you love them.

What are some of the danger signs parents need to watch?

- A marked increase or decrease in weight that is not related to a medical condition.
- The development of abnormal eating habits such as severe dieting, preference for strange foods, withdrawn or ritualized behavior at mealtime, or secretive bingeing or vomiting.
- An intense preoccupation with weight and body image. Talks about feeling “ugly” or “fat”. Talks negatively about parts of his/her body. Under or over-estimates size of his/her body.
- Weighs him/herself daily.
- Compulsive or excessive exercising. Exercises because he or she “has to” rather than because he/she wants to.
- Self-induced vomiting, periods of fasting, or laxative, diet pill or diuretic abuse.
- Feelings of isolation, depression, or irritability.
- Change in the way they wear their clothes (hide body or overemphasize body)

How can I help if I suspect my child has an eating disorder?

- Contact your family doctor as soon as possible.
- Address the issue with your child, at a time when there is lots of time to talk, and present your concerns in a straightforward way. Give your child time to talk.
- Don’t argue about whether or not there is a problem. Denial is often part of having an eating disorder.
- Suggest books and websites that might help your child understand what he/she is going through.
- Research continues into what causes eating disorders. There are no quick and simple answers. It is clear that genetic, personal, social and cultural factors are all part of the mix. The bottom line for people with eating disorders is that there is help but they will need to face the underlying emotional issues to truly regain control over their lives. Family support during this process is crucial.

About this Document

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Information in this fact sheet may or may not apply to your child. Your health care provider is the best source of information about your child’s health.