



School and Classroom 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 your school's 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 in the classroom. 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 any student that lasts for more than a week or two, share your observations with the student's parent and/or guardian and with your school's mental health support team

Strategies To Prevent Eating Disorders

- Create a school and classroom environment of respect with zero tolerance for teasing and bullying
- Talk to students about growth and development and reassure students of the normal diversity of body sizes and shapes that exist among children and adolescents
- Provide media literacy training to help students become critical consumers of media messages about body size, shape, and beauty
- Teach students and their families about good nutrition and healthy eating habits and support this with healthy food choices in school and positive role modeling
- Teach students pro-social skills such as problem solving, decision making, and stress management
- Avoid making comments about students' appearances, either positive or negative
- Develop policies that prohibit student athletes from engaging in harmful weight control or body building measures
- Encourage students to express their emotions in healthy ways, such as talking with a counselor or journaling
- Provide students with diverse role models of all shapes and sizes who are praised for their accomplishments, not their appearance
- Encourage students of all ethnic and cultural groups to exercise and participate in sports and other athletic activities
- Integrate topics related to eating disorders into your health and science curricula. The Office on Women's Health suggests the following parameters:
 - Grades 1-4: focus on good nutrition, positive eating habits, and body acceptance rather than eating disorders
 - Grades 4-6: begin to discuss eating disorders, but avoid providing detailed information about specific behaviors such as vomiting or taking laxatives that are common with eating disorders
 - Middle School: emphasize that eating disorders can be caused by multiple factors (biological, psychological, social)

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 the student and a family member about a professional referral
- Avoid taking on the role of therapist, savior, or food gate-keeper
- Arrange to speak with the student in private and with plenty of time to avoid having to rush
- Begin by telling the student that you care about him or her
- 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 the student; avoid discounting the student's perceptions
- Explain that you believe further support is needed since their health is at risk and notify your school's health and/or mental health team of your concerns
- Decide with the student what will happen next; do not make any promises to keep information secret
- Share your concerns with the student's family; emphasize that only an expert in eating disorders can determine if there is a problem; join with the family in a path of collaborative inquiry
- Help families to understand that treatment is necessary to address eating disorders and that treatment that starts earlier has a higher chance of success

Strategies For Food Refusal/ Other Harmful Food Related Behavior

- Avoid power struggles with the student over food
- Allow the student to eat in a non-public setting, alone if necessary, or ideally with a small group of supportive, safe peers or adults
- Allow the student to have a supply of healthy snacks of his/her choice on hand in the classroom; allow grazing throughout the day
- Provide the student with opportunities for non-threatening, non-overwhelming physical activity throughout the day
- If harmful behavior involves food purging (vomiting after eating), keep the student in class for about an hour after eating to reduce purging
- Monitor student food intake but do not become a food controller or gatekeeper

Strategies For Poor Concentration/Obsessive Thinking About Food And Weight

- Prompt the student throughout the day to use a daily planner to keep track of assignments; provide regular support at the end of each day to assure that the student has all assignments documented and all necessary materials
- Check regularly for work completion to avoid the student getting significantly far behind
- Help student organize projects and break down assignments into manageable parts
- Provide discrete assistance in helping the student to stay focused on the expected task
- Provide the student with an extra set of books to keep at home
- Seat the student in front of the room where s/he can see the board with limited distractions
- Provide some warning when directions are forthcoming and ask the student to repeat the directions back to you to check for attention
- Work with the student to develop a subtle, non-shaming cue you can use to remind them to return to task when they are distracted

Strategies For Perfectionism And Unrealistically High Goals

- Meet together with the student and the parents to discuss academic expectations; be aware that the student and parents may have unrealistically high expectations. It may be your job to make imperfection acceptable
- Point out your own mistakes frequently and couple them with statements such as “everybody makes mistakes” or “here I go again...”
- Meet with the student when new, large assignments are given to work out short term, step by step, realistic goals for project completion

Strategies For Social Withdrawal

- Encourage positive peer interaction by teaming students together in goal oriented tasks
- Enroll the student in a counselor led peer support group that teaches social skills, including problem solving, emotional regulation, and decision making
- Encourage the student to participate in extracurricular activities that build a sense of social affiliation and teamwork, such as some sports, drama, outdoor education, etc.
- Identify “safe” learning/study partners who can help the student throughout the day
- Intervene to help the student to negotiate peer conflict when necessary. Talk through the situation with the student in a way that helps him/her find words to express his/her perspective, understand the peer’s perspective, and engages the student in problem solving