

Taking a Close Look at your Child's Eating Behaviors

As a parent, you play a critical role in recognizing the early symptoms of an eating disorder. After all, you are the one most familiar with your child's behavior patterns and therefore the first to notice when even gradual changes occur. As fad dieting becomes more prevalent in our society, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between normal and dysfunctional eating behaviors and attitudes. On television, in the movies and on magazine covers, the slim figure is portrayed as the "ideal" body type. The pressure to achieve that ultra-thin ideal can sometimes lead to life-threatening consequences.

The two most common eating disorders are anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. Anorexia nervosa is characterized by the inability to maintain a healthy body weight, excessive fear of gaining weight and a false perception of one's body weight or shape. Bulimia nervosa is a disorder in which recurrent episodes of binge eating are followed by dangerous actions to prevent weight gain, such as self-induced vomiting, frequent laxative use or excessive exercise.¹ According to the National Eating Disorders Association, anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa affect one million men and nearly 10 million women – most of them adolescent girls and young adults.

Identifying someone with an eating disorder takes more than just looking at his or her weight. The following questions are provided to assist you in determining whether it is possible that your child may be struggling with an eating disorder.

Does your child:

- Frequently become preoccupied with exercising and counting calories?
- Wear baggy clothes to hide body shape or to cope with excessive concern about weight and/or body size?
- Engage in strange eating rituals, such as moving food around on a plate, cutting food in a systematic fashion or chewing in methodical ways?
- Express an unwillingness to eat with others around?
- Spend frequent and/or unusual amounts of time in the bathroom during mealtimes or after eating?
- Hide or hoard food in strange places?
- Frequently read books and magazines about dieting and cooking?
- Frequently develop sore throats, swollen glands, bruises or calluses on knuckles, or bloodshot eyes?
- Withdraw socially, especially from events that include food?
- Have friends that raise concerns about your child's behavior around food?

If you can answer "yes" to a number of these questions, your child may be developing an eating disorder and you should consider discussing the situation with your child's physician.

It can be difficult to confront your child when you suspect he or she may be suffering from an eating disorder; however, it is important to discuss your concerns with your child as soon as you identify symptoms. Here are some tips that will assist in guiding your discussion and obtaining your child's agreement to obtain an evaluation by a professional.*

(over)

- Plan a time to talk to your child in an environment not associated with eating and without distractions.
- Share specific details that have led you to be concerned about your child's eating or exercise behaviors. Focus on unusual behaviors rather than weight changes.
- Avoid conflicts or a battle of wills. If your child refuses to acknowledge that there may be a problem, restate your concerns and tell him or her that you are available to be a supportive listener and to set up an appointment with a professional.
- Avoid placing blame, shame or guilt. Do not use accusatory statements or demands; instead, begin statements with, "I am concerned about...."
- Avoid giving simple solutions such as, "If you would just eat, things would be fine." An eating disorder is a result of many factors, and is not something that can simply be "turned off."
- Avoid commenting, observing or giving feedback during mealtimes or when the child is eating.
- Explore your own attitudes, beliefs and prejudices about food, weight and body image. Work on replacing unhealthy attitudes (e.g. linking weight and appearance to success) with healthy ones. Identify changes you can make to your and your family's eating habits.²

It is important to remember that early identification of an eating disorder increases the potential for recovery. If your child is struggling with an eating disorder, it is important to find a health professional he or she can trust to help coordinate and oversee care.

*Adapted with permission for educational purposes from the National Eating Disorders Association, 603 Stewart St., Suite 803, Seattle, WA 98101, www.NationalEatingDisorders.org.

If you would like additional information on how to talk about eating disorders, please reference the following Web sites:

Anorexia Nervosa and Related Eating Disorders, Inc. (ANRED)
<http://www.anred.com>

National Eating Disorders Association
<http://www.NationalEatingDisorders.org>

National Eating Disorders Screening Program (NEDSP)
<http://www.mentalhealthscreening.org/>

National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (ANAD)
<http://www.anad.org>

Reference:

¹American Psychiatric Association: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revision. Washington, D.C., American Psychiatric Association, 2000.

²National Eating Disorders Association: Information for Parents. Available at: <http://www.NationalEatingDisorders.org>