

## Eating Disorder Prevention for Schools

**School personnel, including teachers, coaches, aides, nurses, and counselors, are an important line of defense when it comes to recognizing eating disorder behaviors in students.** With children and teens spending over six hours a day in class and additional time in before- and after-school activities, school personnel may be the first to notice changes in students that could be indicative of an eating disorder. Recognizing these changes, such as skipping lunch or fluctuations in weight, and then knowing how to effectively address these changes are the keys to successfully helping students recover from these illnesses.

The following information is designed to help all school personnel better understand how to identify students who may be at risk for developing an eating disorder or who are already affected by one, and then how to appropriately respond to and support these students.

**KNOW THE STATS:** Did you know that children as young as 5- and 6-years old report wanting to be thinner and fear being “fat”? By 5th grade, nearly half of all kids are “sometimes” or “very often” on diets, and the majority of them live with parents who are also dieting. By the time puberty strikes, over half of adolescent girls and one-third of adolescent boys engage in unhealthy behaviors, like self-induced vomiting and restricting calories, to control their weight. The majority of eating disorders develop between 14-19 years of age; approximately 10-20% of these disorders affect teenage boys. Without proper treatment, most eating disorders will continue into a person’s adult years, affecting over 10 million individuals in the United States at any given time. Most alarming, anorexia nervosa is the deadliest of all mental illnesses, with a mortality rate that is twelve times higher than any other mental illness.

**KNOW WHAT TO LOOK FOR:** Eating disorders affect children, teens, and adults from all walks of life. In fact, most eating disorders are not noticeable to the naked eye. Many people affected by eating disorders maintain a fairly normal-looking weight, thus making it seem like there is no problem. As a result, it is crucial to know of other observable signs of an eating disorder so that swift action can be taken before the disorder becomes too entrenched and dangerous. The warning signs include, but are not limited to:

- Consistent fluctuations in weight
- Significantly underweight or overweight, not accounted for by medical complications
- Swollen glands around the cheek and jaw bone due to self-induced vomiting
- Scar tissue on the tops of fingers due to acid from self-induced vomiting
- Tooth enamel damage and discoloration due to acid from self-induced vomiting
- Persistent cough due to esophageal damage from self-induced vomiting
- Dry and brittle hair, nails, and skin
- Lanugo (fine baby hair) around the scalp
- Wearing clothes that are too big and baggy
- Extremities and limbs that are colder than might be expected based on room temperature
- Sudden changes in diet, such as cutting out meat, carbohydrates, sugar, or white flour

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School personnel interacting with kids on a daily basis may also watch for other signs that a child may be at risk for developing an eating disorder:

- Identify trends among peer groups who skip meals, talk negatively about their own and others' bodies, spend lengthy amounts of time in the bathroom after meals, and/or follow restrictive food rules.
- Listen for students who are being targeted and teased because of their weight or body size/shape.
- Students who are high-achieving, perfectionistic, and people-pleasing may be more at risk for using their bodies to gain a sense of control in their lives.

**PROVIDE ACCURATE INFORMATION:** In working with children and teens, it is important to provide educational information that may aid in the prevention of eating disorders. Too often, eating disorders develop, in part, out of misinformation about how the body works and uses food. The following steps may help students develop and maintain a healthy relationship with food and their bodies:

- Promote variety, balance, and moderation by offering diverse meal choices and appropriate portion sizes.
- Avoid labeling foods as “good” and “bad;” teach kids to appreciate both the nutritional and pleasurable qualities of all foods.
- Avoid situations that single out students based on their body size, weight, or shape, such as group weigh-ins for sporting activities or BMI reporting.
- Teach students about the dangers of eating disorders using informal discussions and formal lessons.
- Screen all outside presenters to ensure their message to students promotes balanced eating and respect for one's body; avoid presentations that may encourage dieting or emphasize physical appearances.

**PROVIDE SUPPORT & RESOURCES:** If you suspect that one of your students may be affected by an eating disorder, it is important to respond in a way that is supportive, caring, and judgment-free. During your discussion with the student, try to follow these guidelines:

- Do not be afraid to share your concerns with the student; the conversation may save his/her life. Despite their likely denial and defensiveness, trust that your willingness to confront them is secretly comforting.
- All too often, people affected by eating disorders fear that others will think less of them once their eating disorder is exposed, so creating a warm, safe environment in which they can talk about their struggles with you is imperative to dispelling the secrecy surrounding their disorder.
- Continue to probe and ask questions; it is very unlikely that the student will offer up details on his/her own.
- With the student's knowledge, share your concerns with his/her parents or legal guardian.
- At the end of the discussion, thank your student for being brave enough to share this very personal information with you.

**CONSULTATION & EDUCATION:** The treatment specialists at *A New Beginning* are here to support you in your efforts to detect and address eating disorders among your student body. Towards this goal, *A New Beginning* offers a *free community education* service to help educate and support school personnel in this most-important area. If interested, our clinical therapists will meet with you and/or your staff to provide helpful information regarding the detection, treatment, and resources available to help students with eating disorders. Additionally, our team of highly skilled clinicians is ready to serve your students and their families with compassion, skill, and commitment. We welcome the opportunity to consult with prospective clients who may be interested in pursuing treatment, and together we will create an individualized treatment plan that will set them on the path of recovery. At *A New Beginning*, we wholeheartedly believe that full recovery is possible!