

Supporting children and young people experiencing disordered eating

Early intervention is important and can help change and improve eating behaviours, reducing the impact of disordered eating and reversing the adverse effects.

Educators play an important role

Adolescence is a high-risk time for the development of disordered eating and the school environment is where problematic behaviours may first be noticed.

However, disordered eating can emerge in childhood and also in adulthood in people of all genders.

As an educator, you may be concerned about a child or young person. Or you may be alerted by a worried friend, peer or family member.

It's not your role to manage disordered eating—this is the role of qualified health professionals. However, you can play an important role in identifying children or young people who may be experiencing a problem and supporting help-seeking and/or recovery.

Disordered eating is one of the greatest risk factors in developing an eating disorder, and in particular, dieting. So intervening early is the best preventative measure.

Intervening and addressing disordered eating early can help reduce the impact and duration of these behaviours.

The aim of approaching someone is to help them feel safe so that they can talk openly about their concerns, and to encourage further support. Be prepared that this might not always

happen and that you may need to discuss your concerns multiple times.

Having difficult conversations can be challenging. It's important to look after your own mental health and wellbeing. Remember to reach out for support from your wellbeing or senior staff.

You can find more information on disordered eating in the Be You Fact Sheets - body dissatisfaction and understanding disordered eating.

Steps you can take

If you are concerned about a child or young person, ensure you follow your school's policy for mental health interventions and are aware of who to inform. At your school this might be your head of wellbeing, school counsellor, cultural liaison officer, senior staff or guidance officer.

You may choose to raise your concerns with them and/or seek guidance specifically relating to how to support students developing or experiencing disordered eating from a reputable organisation like the Butterfly Foundation to help feel confident about next steps.

Once you have raised your concerns with your wellbeing team, they may consider involving the family (depending on the age of the child or

young person, their family circumstances and the degree of concern).

School staff are encouraged to follow their learning community's processes and guidelines around engaging families for mental health/medical concerns of a student.

Be You Resources

Learn more about what to do [Before recommending additional support](#).

Learn more about [Recommending additional support](#).

Learn more about [Communication skills for educators](#).

Have referral and help-seeking information on hand

A good place for the young person and their family to start is a visit to a GP, who will conduct an initial assessment and refer to appropriate professionals as needed.

It's important that children, young people, and their families know they have the support of their learning community.

Check if there is anything you can do for the child or young person immediately, then let them know that you are there for them and intend to follow up with them. Continue to engage them following the initial conversation. It's important they understand you will continue to support them.

Things to do

Firstly, prepare and ensure it's the right place and time and you are the best person to have this conversation.

Follow your learning community's processes and guidelines and:

- Be empathetic, compassionate and non-judgemental.
- Stay calm and accept what the child or young person (or family member) says, even when it may be difficult hearing their response or comments. – prepare yourself for potential abuse disclosures. Ensure you support yourself and seek help when required.

- Discuss your concerns in an open and honest way, using "I" statements such as "I am worried..."
- Focus on emotional and behavioural signs, rather than weight, eating and exercise.
- Reassure the person that your concerns are coming from a place of care.
- Allow and encourage the child or young person to talk about other issues, challenges or things that are troubling them (for example, "How are things for you at the moment?", "How have you been feeling lately?" "Is there something on your mind that you would like to talk about?")
- Decide on next steps, involving the child or young person as much as possible in decision-making.
- Support recovery by making appropriate accommodations to the students learning, sport and other activities that prioritise recovery while maintaining connection to their learning environment.

Things to avoid

- Being critical, blaming and shaming the person or dismissing what they say.
- Giving simple solutions or advice.
- Using fear tactics to motivate change or recovery.
- Telling the child or young person that you think they have an eating disorder or attempt to provide them with a diagnosis.
- Using statements, comments or compliments about how they look, such as "you look skinny" or "you look healthy" or attempt to reassure a child or young person about their weight or size.
- Commenting on the child or young person's size, weight, shape or appearance. This applies to all children and young people.
- Sharing any of your own lived experiences around body image, disordered eating or eating disorders.

- Making promises that can't be kept as an educator and adhering to the child safety standards and principles.
- Approaching the child or young person when food is present (such as during, or leading up to, mealtimes) or in front of their peers and avoid commenting on what they are or aren't eating.

It's important that learning communities have relevant internal policies, procedures and guidelines to support students with mental health issues, including disordered eating behaviours.

Be You Professional Learning

Learn about noticing and supporting children and young people who might be showing signs of mental health issues in the [Early Support](#) domain.

External links

Butterfly – [National Hotline](#)

National Eating Disorder Association (US) – [Educator Toolkit](#)

[Disordered eating versus eating disorders](#)

Butterfly Foundation - [Supporting eating disorder recovery in students](#)

National Eating Disorder Collaboration – [Eating Disorders in Schools: Prevention, Early Identification and Response](#).

Bibliography

Visit [Supporting children and young people experiencing disordered eating](#) for a list of references for this Fact Sheet.

