

Supporting positive relationships with eating and physical activity

Many factors influence the decisions children and young people make and behaviours they engage in around food and exercise.

Educators can play an important role

It's important to understand the role body image, in particular body dissatisfaction, can play in a child or young person's eating and exercise behaviours.

Evidence suggests the more dissatisfied a person feels about their weight, shape or size, the more likely they are to engage in harmful eating and exercise behaviours.

Behaviours such as restrictive dieting, binge eating, over-exercising or reduced activity levels, can place a child or young person at risk of developing disordered eating behaviours.

Children and young people are exposed to a high volume of dieting and exercise information through media and social media platforms, as well as from family, friends, educators and coaches.

Weight and appearance-based bullying and teasing can have a lifelong impact on children and young people.

Promoting respectful interactions and encouraging positive and balanced eating and exercise behaviours in all children and young people is key. It is important that health promoting programs take a universal approach that supports all children and young people and

doesn't single them out based on their abilities, weight, shape or size.

Foster healthy attitudes and behaviours

Learning communities can support children and young people by choosing eating and nutrition programs that support a positive body image.

You can find some of the healthy eating and nutrition programs in the [Be You Programs Directory](#). Ideally, programs support positive body image and healthy attitudes by:

- considering the [Australian Government's healthy eating guidelines](#)
- using positive, neutral language when describing foods, referring to them by their name and sensory properties, such as how they taste, smell or feel. Avoid using words such as good or bad.
- discouraging restrictive or fad dieting, and calorie/kilojoule counting
- encouraging physical activity for mental health, enjoyment, wellbeing and fitness (competitive sports)
- ensuring physical activity is not seen as a tool to earn, burn off or compensate for eating particular foods or food groups

- debunking inaccurate and unhelpful health messaging, and appearance ideals
- promoting a balanced and intuitive approach to eating and exercise for fuel, function and enjoyment - encouraging food curiosity and food-related skills
- celebrating diversity in body shapes, size and weight
- having zero tolerance for weight and appearance-based bullying and teasing
- challenging appearance ideals (for example, the thin ideal, the muscular ideal) focusing on health and wellbeing rather than weight or weight loss
- actively and consistently promoting positive attitudes and behaviours towards eating and exercise in the school canteen, across sports programs, in family communications and community activities
- ensuring information and strategies are evidence-based and adopt a whole-school approach – for students, staff and families.

Learning communities should avoid

- labelling foods as 'good' or 'bad', or 'clean' and 'junk'
- shaming foods for example, sugar
- reinforcing weight stigma (that is, being overweight is 'bad')
- using fear, weight or appearance as motivators for change in eating habits or movement (that is, suggesting a student will gain weight if they eat a certain food, or they'll be happier or healthier if they lose weight)
- weighing or measuring students.

Be a positive role model in your learning community

- be aware of your own relationship with eating and physical activity and any internal weight biases that may be held
- avoid talking about or engaging in restrictive and fad diets or extreme exercise challenges

and be mindful of the language used to describe foods, movement and bodies.

- participate in sports or non-competitive physical activity for wellbeing and fun
- celebrate body functionality over appearance
- avoid making comparisons between children's or young people's bodies
- demonstrate that positive lifestyle behaviours - such as nutrition and physical activity are for everyone and ensure the focus is on health and enjoyment, not weight management
- support, encourage and endorse help-seeking for concerns with food, eating, physical activity and body image.

Be You Resources

Learn more about looking after your own [mental health and wellbeing](#).

What can I do if I'm concerned about a child or young person?

If you have concerns about a child or young person's eating and exercise behaviours, or general physical development, speak with your wellbeing or senior staff and follow policies and guidelines. You can also contact [Butterfly Foundation National Helpline](#) for advice and information.

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 Foundation – [National Helpline](#)

Eat for Health – [Australian Dietary Guidelines](#)

Bibliography

Visit [Supporting healthy eating and physical activity](#) for a list of references for this Fact Sheet.

