



Children's Mental Health Matters!

Facts for Families

Eating Disorders in Children and Adolescents

Definition

An *Eating Disorder* is a psychological condition that manifests itself in unhealthy eating habits. There are four diagnoses which are characterized by specific behaviors exhibited by the individual. Two primary behaviors are *Binging*, the consumption of a large amount of food in a short period of time, and *Purging* or self-induced vomiting. Misuse of laxative, diet pills, or water pills are also considered purging.

Bulimia Nervosa is the most common of the four diagnoses. It is characterized by a preoccupation with food and weight, binging and a compensation for binging by purging, excessive exercise or fasting. This pattern is accompanied by shame and secrecy.

Anorexia Nervosa is characterized by a refusal to maintain a normal weight for one's height, body type, age, and activity level; intense fear of becoming "fat" or gaining weight (extreme concern over one's weight); body image misperception; and loss of menstrual periods in females.

Binge Eating Disorder is characterized by binging, feelings of shame and self-hatred associated with binging, but no compensatory behavior such as purging.

Eating Disorders Not Otherwise Specified covers all maladaptive eating behaviors that do not fit into the above diagnoses. Examples include: restricting food intake, meeting some but not all of the requirements for the above diagnoses, chewing food and spitting it out, or binging and purging irregularly.

Why do we care?

- ✎ Of the currently more than 10 million Americans afflicted with eating disorders, 90 percent are children and adolescents.
- ✎ The average age of eating disorders onset has dropped from 13-17 to 9-12.

- ✎ The number of males with eating disorders has doubled during the past decade.







Children with an eating disorder may:

- ✎ Exhibit low-self esteem and a poor body image.
- ✎ Be prone to mood swings, perfectionism and depression.
- ✎ Suffer from many physical problems such as:
 - Excessive weight loss
 - Irregularity or absence of menstruation in females
 - Hair loss
 - Severe digestive system problems
 - Damaged vital organs
 - Tooth and gum problems
 - Swollen salivary glands due to induced vomiting
 - General malnutrition
 - Dehydration
 - Thinning of the bones resulting in osteoporosis or osteopenia
- ✎ Struggle in their relationships with their family and friends.
- ✎ Perform poorly in their academic performance.
- ✎ Jeopardize their overall health, including both physical and psychological health, with their unhealthy eating habits.
- ✎ Achieve less than desired performance in their academic school work.
- ✎ Suffer from other psychiatric disorders such as depression, anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder, and alcohol and drug dependencies.

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Eating Disorders in Children and Adolescents Continued

What can we do about it?

-  **Build children's self-esteem based on their positive traits.** Be as supportive and encouraging as you can in raising children. Also, always try to highlight the positive points of their personalities and praise them for their good behaviors.
-  **Serve as a healthy role model for your children.** Do not diet. The key to developing a healthy life style is to practice moderation both in eating and exercising.
-  **Construct a healthy relationship with food.** Make meal time a fun time by gathering all family members together and enjoying a variety of healthy foods. Never turn meal time into a power struggle between you and your child by rewarding or punishing him/her for his/her behavior with food.
-  **Teach your children to respect differences in body structure and feel good about their appearances.** Parents should avoid labeling their children regarding their weight, and they should steer clear of commenting about other people's weight and appearance as an indicator of their character and personality. Not all people should resemble the thin models and movie stars that are portrayed in the media, so parents need to teach children that everyone is born with a unique body shape which is mostly influenced by heredity.
-  **Watch for warning signs.** If you notice a change in your child's dietary behavior such as anxiety around mealtime, avoidance of social situations involving food, food rituals, visiting the bathroom soon after meals, rapid fluctuation in weight, overeating or hoarding, it is a good idea to seek the advice of a therapist or doctor.
-  **Take care of yourself.** A battle with an eating disorder can be long and difficult, especially for parents. Do not blame yourself. If you begin to feel overwhelmed, it is wise to seek professional help. Remember, you cannot help your child without being healthy yourself.

American Psychiatric Association
Let's Talk Facts about Eating Disorders -
<http://www.healthyminds.org/multimedia/eatingdisorders.pdf>
Common Questions about Eating Disorders
<http://healthyminds.org/expertopinion9.cfm>

Dying to be Thin investigates the causes, complexities, and treatments for the eating disorders anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. PBS also provides a teacher's guide to the film and activities to do in the classroom. This film is accessible at:
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/thin/>

Facts About Eating Disorders and the Search for Solutions - <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/eatingdisorders.cfm>

The Empowered Parents website — useful resource for statistics, articles and treatment/coping strategies for parents of children with eating disorders; includes a site for kids and letters from other parents who have questions about eating disorders.
<http://www.empoweredparents.com/>

KidsHealth for Parents
http://www.kidshealth.org/parent/nutrition_fit/nutrition/eating_disorders.html

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

National Eating Disorders Association
Ten Things Parents Can Do to Prevent Eating Disorders
http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/p.asp?WebPage_ID=286&Profile_ID=41171

Adapted from Resources found on:
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Resources/Links

Academy for Eating Disorders
About eating disorders/diagnoses and more specifically, eating disorder diagnoses - http://www.aedweb.org/http://www.aedweb.org/eating_disorders/diagnoses.cfm

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry
Facts for families with teenagers with eating disorders -
<http://www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/eating.htm>