

# Eating problems:

Many children go through phases of refusing to eat, being 'faddy or fussy' eaters, or having other eating problems.

This is often quite a normal part of growing up, but when should you worry and how can you support children with more serious eating issues?

Eating disorders are serious mental illnesses. Sometimes, when self-worth is low or things feel emotionally out of control children focus on something they can control and change, such as a dislike of their body; managing it through controlled eating or bingeing.

Eating disorders are rare among younger school children, but they can start to emerge as an issue between the ages of nine and twelve, and often when children transition to secondary school.

Although some associations exist between body image and eating disorders, there is no clear cause and effect. Eating disorders are complex and multifaceted and are often prompted by a combination of genetic, psychological and environmental risk factors.

## Risk factors for eating disorders

These tend to cluster and include:

- A poor sense of self
- Feeling overwhelmed by difficult emotions and circumstances
- Depression
- Body image concerns and dissatisfaction
- Over exposure to popular or distorted media ideals of body image
- Involvement in sports or activities where body image and low weight are important.

## Spotting the signs

Some possible signs of an eating disorder include:

- Social isolation.
- Avoiding eating around others.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Low confidence and self-esteem.
- Baggy clothes or clothing that is skin tight yet in a small size.
- Obsessive and/or rigid behaviour.
- Compulsive exercise.
- Frequent trips to the toilet.
- Perfectionism and setting unreasonably high personal standards.
- Self-harm.
- Changes to weight – either gaining or losing weight, or experiencing fluctuating weight.
- Having a distorted view of themselves as being fat (body dysmorphia).

## Top Tips:

- Be alert to early signs.
- Maybe a child is missing school meals or avoiding eating, or telling people that they have already eaten, or they will eat later, or focussing on body image and describing themselves as fat.
- Talk to them.
- If you are concerned about a child, talk to them. Don't be afraid to ask them if they are worried about themselves or if there is something worrying them.
- Share your concerns.
- Without overwhelming the child, share your concerns about any other changes you've noticed, e.g. depression, anxiety or isolation. If a problem is developing, the sooner they get support the better.

## Find out more about eating disorders:

MindEd is a free educational e-learning resource for professionals on children and young people's mental health. The following sessions aim to help staff better understand how eating disorders affect children:

- [Eating problems](#)
- [Eating disorders in young people](#)
- [Eating disorders: anorexia and bulimia](#)

Resources from Anna Freud.

For more information, please see: [www.annafreud.org](http://www.annafreud.org) – eating problems.