

# Helping teens develop a positive *Relationship with Eating*

Watch the  
accompanying  
video [here](#)



The language and behaviours we use around food can help our teenagers to develop a positive relationship with eating and their bodies. This tip sheet aims to help you support your teen to be BodyKind through supporting healthy attitudes and behaviours towards food and eating.

There are so many confusing and often alarming messages around eating and health, it can be hard to know what to do as a parent, particularly when confronted by our teen's changing body and need for independence.

During adolescence, bodies do amazing things. As a result, your teenager's eating habits and interests are likely to change too.

They may feel hungrier and eat more, consume higher energy foods and spend more time eating outside the home and with friends. They may also eat less and make changes to their eating habits. It can be a challenging time for parents to have less 'control' over what and how they are eating.



It is *necessary* and natural for all teens to gain body fat and muscle tissue as their bodies *mature*.

Typically, females double their body weight between 9 - 18 years and in boys, a doubling occurs Between 10- 20 years.

*Weight and height spurts don't typically occur at the same time.*



**Trust the *process* and know that your teen's body is doing what it *needs* to do!**

## Tips for Parents/Caregivers to DO

- Talk about food in a positive way with curiosity, appreciation, and gratitude.
- Keep language morally neutral and avoid shaming foods or food groups. ALL foods can be part of healthy eating and have a purpose (i.e. nutrition, fuel, pleasure).
- Encourage your teen to listen to and follow their hunger and fullness cues. Teens may not eat the same amount each day or eat at designated mealtimes. Snacking and grazing is fine. Work as best you can to their appetite patterns.
- Understand that teens will increasingly make their own food choices. They may skip meals or eat different foods while out. Try to be non-judgemental and allow them to balance their appetite and nutrition at home.
- Encourage food curiosity. Try and enjoy new foods in front of your teen and encourage them to expand their food horizons too.
- Encourage positive food and eating related skills. Get them involved in food preparation, planning, shopping and cooking.
- Provide a wide range of foods at home - the best you can afford; foods that provide tasty nourishment with minimal preparation time. Your role is to get food into their reach, not into their mouths.
- Aim to eat a meal together as often as you can. This can support healthy eating behaviours and offers an opportunity for connection.

## Restrictive Eating and Dieting

Restrictive eating and dieting is strongly discouraged for teenagers (and children). It is harmful to their physical development and mental health, and is a significant risk factor for eating disorders.

If your teen is restricting what they eat, be curious and aim to have an open discussion. Is it for weight control? Doing what you do? Are their friends dieting? Is it to gain control or to cope with tough emotions, other worries or pressures?

If you have ongoing concerns seek professional guidance from a GP, accredited practising dietitian or psychologist.

*Concerned about someone?*

Butterfly's free and confidential National Helpline can support you.

Phone Email Webchat  
1800 33 4673 (1800 EDHOPE)  
[www.butterflynationalhelpline.org.au](http://www.butterflynationalhelpline.org.au)

## Helping teens develop a positive *relationship with eating* cont.

As a parent/caregiver, your language, attitudes, values and behaviours towards food and eating have been influenced by many factors; the people in your life, your culture, religious beliefs and practices, as well as exposure to the intense messaging around diet and health.

You cannot be expected to get it right all the time. We encourage you to learn and unlearn when it comes to health, weight, body size and eating. Do your best!

### Things for Parents/Caregivers to AVOID

- Labelling foods as 'good/bad', 'healthy/unhealthy', 'clean/toxic/junk. Talk about foods by their name and sensory properties (i.e. bread is 'bread', rather than a 'carb').
- Using body shape and/or weight to motivate your teen to eat differently or to encourage weight loss. Research shows that this can have an adverse effect on health behaviours while increasing body shame, body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem.
- Engaging in restrictive or extreme dieting or eating practices in front of your family. (Religious practices or diagnosed health conditions are an exception).
- Suggesting that food, or certain foods, need to be compensated or earned, e.g., 'I'll need to work off this piece of cake', 'I've not eaten much today so I can eat this.'
- Using food to soothe emotions or as rewards or punishment. This does not include enjoying foods as a celebration or special occasions.
- Promoting the message that a person's body shape, size or weight is determined by the food they eat. Body size and weight is affected by many other factors.
- Food shaming choices your teen makes –avoid connecting food choices to body weight.
- Singling out children of higher weight in your home. Support all family members to improve their nutrition, for their health rather than for their weight, shape or size.

### Frequently Asked Questions

For some tips and guidance on how to manage tricky and challenging scenarios around eating, please visit the [FAQs](#) page.

Topics covered include; veganism/vegetarianism, responding to low appetite, picky eating, how to manage teens avoiding eating at school or around friends and peers, managing teens who have a preference for high energy foods and why it's important to respond to weight gain and higher weight in a health focused, weight neutral way.



### Other Resources

[Australian Dietary Guidelines](#)

[Nutrition Australia – Fact sheets for Adolescents](#)

Health Not Weight and  
Non-Diet Dieticians  
[@fionawiller](#)  
[@thetmoderationmovement](#)  
[@themindfuldietician](#)

### Concerned about a teen?

Despite best parenting efforts serious body image issues and eating disorders can develop.

Changes in eating behaviours and habits are often one of the first things noticed by parents/care-givers, but there are a range of other warning signs to look out for.

For more information see the video and tips sheet '[What to do if you are concerned](#)'.



**If you are concerned about your teen's eating behaviours and their physical and mental development. Trust your instincts and seek support early.**

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