

BodyKind Tip Sheet

FOR EDUCATORS

Supporting a positive eating experience and responding to problematic eating behaviours observed in school settings.



Please note the information contained within this tip sheet is to inform and guide. It has not been designed for school staff to diagnose or treat eating disorders in students.

If concerned about the immediate health and safety of a child please call 000

A person's relationship with food and eating is influenced by many individual and environmental factors - the strongest being what is taught and role modelled in the home environment. Cultural backgrounds, religious beliefs, socio-economics, and food security also play a role. Foundations for positive eating begin from birth. Establishing a positive relationship with eating is a known protective factor for young people against developing disordered eating, which is a significant risk factor in the development of eating disorders. A positive relationship with eating also ensures that young people have adequate nutrition and fuel to function and develop as well as being better placed to experience the enjoyment of food, at the various ages and stages of their life.

Beyond the home there are many other environmental influences on young people, such as their friends and peers, what they learn in school and in sports and also the conflicting and harsh messages promoted around food, weight, shape and size from the health, wellness and fitness industries all of which strengthen diet culture. It's not surprising that more young people are developing disordered eating and eating disorders at an alarming rate.

What does a positive relationship with food and eating 'look' like?

Given there are so many factors that can influence a person's relationship with eating, there is not a one size fits all approach, but what does a positive relationship with eating 'look' like? An evidence-based framework, [RAVES Model](#), has been established by leading eating disorder recovery Dietician Shane Jeffreys, which highlights the behaviours we would hope to see in someone who has established a positive relationship with food and eating and what is hoped to be achieved in people who have experienced disordered eating and eating disorders.

R

Regular Eating

Over the day to support brain and body function and mood.

A

Adequate Nutrition

To ensure the body has sufficient nutrition and energy requirements.

V

Variety of Foods

A range of foods across the food groups are eaten for nutrition and enjoyment

E

Eating Socially

Feeling comfortable to eat in front of and around others; family, friends and others.

S

Spontaneity and Flexibility

Ease of decision making around food and food options.

It can also 'look' like:

- Viewing food as something to be enjoyed as well as to fuel and provide nutrition for the body
- Being aware of and honouring hunger, fullness and satiety cues when eating
- Not feeling shame or guilt when eating and;
- Not holding beliefs that foods (or certain foods) should be 'earned' or 'worked off'.

The role of schools when it comes to supporting positive relationships with eating and eating practices at school.



Schools play an important role when it comes to supporting positive relationships with eating, but also helping to foster positive eating environments for students, when they are on school grounds.

Curriculum



- Conduct audits of healthy eating and nutrition programs, texts and initiatives as well as assignment and exam questions to ensure language and messaging does not promote weight stigma, suggest or encourage food restriction/dieting, or calorie/kj counting.
- Be mindful of teaching resources which demonise or shame particular food options and/or food groups.
- When supporting food and nutrition literacy ensure students are encouraged to seek information and guidance from reputable and suitably qualified sources (incl. social media).
- Encourage food curiosity and food related skills through cultural events, growing food at school, and opportunities for food planning and prepping.
- Attach function and enjoyment to food and eating rather than to weight and body size (thinness and muscularity).
- When teaching healthy eating or nutrition education/lessons be mindful of your own relationship with eating and any internal weight bias that may be held.
- Consider the above for exercise and physical activity also.

Culture



- Help students to value eating at school as an important activity within their day. Ensure students have time to eat if lunchtime activities have prevented them from eating and provide sufficient eating time at recess and lunch.
- Be mindful of the language used when talking about food. This includes:
 - ✓ Not connecting the eating of certain foods to particular body types
 - ✓ Use morally neutral language (avoid good/bad, healthy/unhealthy).
 - ✓ When talking about food – use their name i.e. pasta v 'carbs', lollies v 'sugar', chicken v 'protein' or describe foods using sensory properties e.g., juicy strawberry.
- Adopt a zero tolerance to food and body shaming. Ensure the culture is safe for all students in all bodies. Include weight and appearance-based bullying in existing policies.
- Encourage awareness activities that help to foster a positive culture for all students by promoting positive body image, eating and physical activity behaviours. Be cautious of any activity that encourages food restriction over a period of time as this can be particularly dangerous for young people experiencing or vulnerable to eating disorders (includes young people in treatment and recovery).

Environments



- Collaborate with students and seek feedback about eating spaces and timing for eating.
- Introduce positive eating guidelines that share positive messages and information about the importance of eating at school and discouraging food shaming. Display these in designated eating spaces and school canteens.
- If making changes to the food being offered at school (canteens etc), communicate what is being added, rather than what is being taken away.
- When talking about the benefits of creating a healthier food environment for all students, talk in terms of function and mood, rather than body size, weight.
- Ensure staff and families are supported with information around Disordered Eating and Eating Disorders so these can be identified and responded to early – early intervention is key.

If in doubt, leave it out or talk it out.

Content that discusses and explores eating (food options, nutrition and the practice of eating) can be challenging and triggering for some students.

Butterfly Foundation offers a range of education services, programs and seminars to support schools, sporting organisations and parents and communities to better understand body image, disordered eating and eating disorders in young people.

www.butterfly.org.au

Identifying and responding to problematic eating behaviours at school.

Help! We are observing and hearing reports of students not eating at school. What do we do?

Butterfly's Prevention team is increasingly receiving enquiries from concerned school staff who have observed students displaying and engaging in a range of concerning and problematic behaviours around body image, eating and exercise at school. Unfortunately, amongst the most common concern is students not eating at school. This typically was observed in secondary schools settings, but sadly has also increased in primary schools.

There are many reasons why young people may not eat at school.

Some of the more simple reasons include:

- Students would prefer to play/socialise rather than eat during breaks.
- Insufficient time allocated to eat (or the student eats slowly).
- Students simply don't like the food they have been given.
- The student is not hungry at the times scheduled for recess and lunch.
- Religious reasons.

It is important that if it has been observed or reported to school staff that it is *addressed*.

Other possible reasons:

- Peer influence – friends and peers are not eating at school.
- Lunch box and food shaming by other students i.e. 'that's really unhealthy' 'your lunch stinks.'
- Other mental health problems (stress) and mental illnesses (anxiety and depression).
- Neurodivergent students may experience challenges with eating.
- Embarrassment when eating - sexual innuendoes and gestures when a young person is eating.
- Friendship groups supporting 'health' or 'weight loss' – 'health' clubs, weight loss challenges, dieting clubs. These groups might be justified by young people as positive peer support i.e. 'we're helping each other to be healthy' but it can drive competitive and comparative behaviours around eating and physical activity.
- Copycat behaviour – if a student has been diagnosed with an eating disorder, their friends/peers may adapt some of the behaviours they have observed.
- To lose weight and reduce body size/change body shape.

The role of early intervention?

Regularly skipping meals with the intention to lose weight, reduce body size as well as avoiding eating in social settings is problematic and can place a young person's mental and physical health at risk.

If an eating disorder is developing, identifying and responding early is key. For more information on the role of early intervention and early intervention is key, please see the newly revised resource developed by the National Eating Disorder Collaboration (NEDC) Schools Resource [here](#).

There are many warning signs that may be experienced. These are emotional, physical and behavioural and many of these can't be 'seen' by looking at someone. See [here](#) for more information.

If you have been advised that a **student is experiencing and/or receiving treatment for an eating disorder**, Butterfly has developed guidelines to support schools to understand their role in supporting recovery of the student. See [here](#)

What can school staff do if they are concerned about a student's (or group of students) eating behaviours?

1. BE INFORMED

Eating disorder development is complex and includes a range of emotional, psychological, physical and behavioural warning signs. Diagnosis and treatment is required by a health professional. For further information about warning signs, see [here](#).

2. BE ALERT, AWARE AND CURIOUS

Do not dismiss, or ignore problematic behaviours around eating. Being alert, aware and curious can help you explore what might be happening within the broader peer or friendship group, as well as the individual student.

3. SEEK TO UNDERSTAND THROUGH POSITIVE CONVERSATIONS WITH STUDENT(S)

Approaching students about observed problematic behaviours can be confronting and overwhelming 'What do I say?' 'How will they react or respond?' 'What if it makes things worse?' Doing something is better than doing nothing!

- Avoid singling a student out or talking in front of other students.
- Be non-judgemental and listen empathetically.
- Avoid shaming their behaviours or using scare/fear tactics.
- Be prepared to raise concerns a few times.
- Be honest about how or when parents/guardians will be involved as per your school's policy for interventions involving mental health concerns.
- Remember the student is not their behaviour.

4. INVOLVE PARENTS/CAREGIVERS

- Follow school protocols around involving parents if and when concerned about a student.
- Share your concerns and what has been observed. Noting that parent reactions may be varied.
- Direct parents to sources of support if they are worried about their child's eating – GP, Dietician (non-diet or eating disorder experienced), Butterfly helpline and referral database [here](#).
- Share the free Body Kind Families resources with your family community to help parent's/caregivers understand body image and eating disorders and what to look out for. See [here](#).

Asking positively framed and curious questions

Examples: "It seems like you've been struggling to concentrate in class recently, can you tell me what's going on for you?" "You don't seem your usual energetic self, I'm concerned about you", "I've noticed you're not eating much at lunchtime, is there a particular reason for this?" "I just wanted to check-in with you and see if there is anything going on that might be affecting your appetite."

Positive responses:

If a student says they are eating before and after school, but not during the day

"Ah, ok. How can we help to make sure that you also get some fuel to help you concentrate and perform through the day?"

If a student says they don't like eating at school

"I understand that you don't like eating at school. Can you tell me more about what specifically you don't like?"

"What would make eating at school more enjoyable for you?"

"Is there a particular time of the day you feel most comfortable eating and are you happy with the way you are eating then?"

If a student says they are on a health kick/part of a diet club with other students

"Wanting to be healthier is of course encouraged, but it's really important to remember that every body is different with different needs. How can we help you find a balance that works for you?"

"I understand why you might be taking an interest in healthy eating but I also want to make sure you are not pushing yourself too hard. How are things feeling in the group. Is there pressure to compete?"

If a student says they are being teased/bullied/shamed about their food choices

"I'm sorry that's happened. That behaviour is not ok, we can chat about how you might be able to handle this in the future and I'll discuss with leadership (staff and students) about what we can do to stop this behaviour'.