

Eating Disorders in Young Children



When you hear about eating disorders, you usually think about teenagers or adults having them. But did you know children have them too? Actually, while most eating disorders can start around the ages of 12 or 13, some kids as young as 5 or 6 can have them, too. This guide will go over the common types of eating disorders in children, warning signs you can watch out for, and ways to help.

Common Eating Disorders in Children

- **Anorexia Nervosa:** This disorder influences how someone views their body and makes them scared of weight gain. Children with Anorexia Nervosa might think they look bigger in the mirror than they actually do which could make them want to stop eating.
- **Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID):** Children with ARFID are really picky about what they eat. They might avoid some foods altogether or eat very little. Sometimes, they might not seem interested in food at all.
- **Pica:** The child eats non-food items. These can be things like dirt, grass, soap, chalk, ice, paper, and more. Sometimes, it can even cause health issues.



Other Eating Disorders in Children

- **Binge Eating Disorder (BED):** Children with BED often eat a huge amount of food really fast until their stomachs feel very full and they're not hungry anymore.
- **Bulimia Nervosa:** Similar to BED, children with this disorder eat a lot of food at once, but then make themselves purge, or vomit, afterward.

Eating Disorder Warning Signs to Look Out For

As a parent, it's important to stay alert if you have a suspicion that your child is suffering from an eating disorder. Here are a few signs to look for:



- **Dramatic weight changes.** Experiences rapid weight loss or gain within a short amount of time.
- **Skipping meals.** They start by saying they're not hungry and skip meals every now and then. But then it becomes a habit, and they skip several meals each week.
- **Tantrums or mood changes.** Not eating enough food causes them to become physically uncomfortable and emotionally upset. This can lead to feeling grumpy, having emotional outbursts, and their mood can change quickly.



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- **Negative body talk.** Talks down about their weight or the way their body is shaped, making them feel low about themselves.
- **Excessive exercise.** Engages in frequent exercises that may be too hard on their body, with the goal of burning calories after eating food.
- **Eating in secret.** Avoids eating with others, but then eats alone. Sometimes, they might eat a lot quickly or make themselves purge afterwards because they feel guilty or embarrassed.

Keep in mind that not all of these signs could point to an eating disorder, but if you notice two or more of these happening in your child frequently, it's time to get help.

Solutions For Children with Eating Disorders



- **Nutritional counseling.** One-on-one nutrition counseling can help you and your child understand their diet, needs, and other factors to maintain healthy eating habits and a healthy weight.
- **Therapy.** Professional therapy sessions can help find the possible causes behind your child's eating disorder. Your child can get help viewing their body more positively, finding coping skills, and developing healthy attitudes towards food and eating.
- **Set a good example.** Avoid using words like “obesity” and “normal weight” when speaking to your child about body shapes. Be mindful of the words you use and stay away from all shaming and negative talk related to physical appearances.
- **Listen to your child.** Sit down with them and have an open discussion about their emotions when it comes to their body, food, and eating. Provide a judgment-free zone, have them feel comfortable, and give them a safe space for having these discussions to see where to help.

If you're concerned your child may be suffering from an eating disorder, please don't hesitate to reach out to a professional. You can contact the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa & Associated Disorders at 888-375-7767 or visit their website at anad.org. You can also reach out to the National Eating Disorders Association at 800-931-2237 or visit their website at nationaleatingdisorders.org.