

# How to Help Children with Eating Disorders

## “Caring for Children’s Mental Health Parent Education Series

Education Bureau 2022

### What are Eating Disorders (EDs)?

EDs (including Anorexia Nervosa (AN) and Bulimia Nervosa (BN)) refer to a variety of illnesses associated with abnormal eating attitudes and behaviours. People with eating disorders may eat very much or very little food, and are usually over-concerned with their weight, body shape and food.

People with AN have distorted images of their body and an intense fear of becoming fat that leads to excessive dieting and severe weight loss. People with BN have frequent episodes of binge eating followed by some inappropriate compensatory behaviours (such as self-induced vomiting and misuse of laxatives) to avoid weight gain.

EDs may happen at any time to anyone, but more common in women than in men. Common symptoms of EDs include:

### Emotional Aspect

- Low self-image
- Emotional disturbance (e.g., anxiety, depression, shame)

### Physiological Aspect

- Sudden weight gain or loss, or fluctuations in a short term
- Feel tired, weak, and cold due to slowing metabolism
- Feel full, dry hair or skin
- Find it difficult to concentrate

### Cognitive Aspect

- Preoccupation with weight or body shape
- Feel unable to control behaviours around food

### Behavioural Aspect

- Constant dieting (e.g., skipping meals, fasting, replacing meals with drinks)
- Binge eating
- Exercise excessively, often talk about food
- Lose interest in social activities or hobbies
- Lack of learning motivation (e.g., lack of energy to complete homework or decline in academic performance)

Without proper treatment, EDs can lead to a wide range of complications, irreversible damages to the body, and even death.

### Role of Parents

**If I suspect that my child has EDs, I should...**

- Seek psychiatric consultation and assessment for my child as early as possible, so that appropriate treatment and support training can be arranged for him/her
- Initiate contact with the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO), class teacher, the School Guidance Team or school social workers for arrangement of appropriate support services

### **After my child has been assessed as having EDs, I should...**

- Cooperate with healthcare professionals in undertaking the suggested treatment plan to make sure that my child receives the treatments he/she needs and takes medication as prescribed (if applicable)
- Take the initiative to provide the school with the information about my child's special educational needs as early as possible, including passing his/her psychiatric report to the school for arrangement of appropriate support services
- Maintain communication with the School Guidance Team or school social workers, SENCO, Student Support Team, class teacher and subject teachers to understand my child's learning and adjustment condition; and jointly discuss appropriate support strategies if necessary

### **The following strategies may be considered when supporting your child:**

#### **Daily Life**

- Understand EDs accurately and learn more about the disorders can allow you to support your child better
- Help your child establish a routine of regular breakfast, lunch and dinner time
- Be a role model with healthy attitude towards food and eating, exercise and weight, and practice a healthy lifestyle, e.g., do not go on a diet or skip meals, eat a balanced diet, and exercise regularly to maintain physical and mental health
- Show an acceptance of different body shapes. Refrain from making inappropriate comments on your child's weight, body shape, appearance or specific body parts
- Teach your child how to deal with negative peer pressure (e.g., say "no" to teasing related to body weight or shape or seek help from trusted friends or adults)
- Engage in social activities with your child that do not focus on weight or appearance

#### **Communication Skills and Emotion Management**

- Listen patiently and empathetically to your child's perceptions on weight and body image
- EDs are treatable, and recovery is possible. Do not criticise or blame your child for his/her behaviour
- Help your child express negative emotions in a healthy way. Encourage your child to relieve stress by means such as taking a walk, listening to music, having quiet time alone, deep breathing or doing progressive muscle relaxation exercises instead of eating

#### **Building Positive Values**

- Help your child understand their self-worth. Emphasize his/her strengths and own positive traits, such as kindness and consideration, rather than his/her appearance
- Assist your child to critically examine the messages they receive from the media and peers about dieting, ideal appearance or "perfect body"

#### **Support Measures and Strategies**

In general, schools may provide the following support according to the needs of individual students:

### **Helping the Student on School Adjustment**

- When a student feels very nervous and stressful, let him/her rest and relax in a safe and quiet place
- When the student needs to change school uniforms (e.g., for Physical Education class), make sure that the student has enough time to change, and give him/her options to change in the changing room or a place with more privacy
- Assist the student to eat properly, and provide different meal arrangements according to the student's progress and needs (e.g., eating with other students as usual, with student guidance personnel, in a separate room or away from the main dining area but with good friends, etc.)
- Help the student conduct meal supervision and physical health monitoring, basing on the suggestions of healthcare professionals. Parents may let their children bring some snacks to school as recommended so that students may eat at school as required
- Provide group or individual training for the student in need to cultivate a healthy attitude and behaviour towards food and eating, exercise and weight
- Offer flexible school time or class arrangements according to the student's needs to attend medical or counselling services

### **Helping the Student Get Along and Communicate with Teachers and Peers**

- Actively promote healthy eating and lifestyle, and promote a climate at school that is free from criticism on others' appearance
- Create a healthy campus environment with zero tolerance for appearance-targeted bullying
- Ensure that students of different shapes, sizes and appearances are equally valued and respected
- Take the initiative to care for students. If a student skip meals, talk to him/her in a calm and non-critical manner and let them know that teachers are worried about his/her behaviour
- Arrange some helpful peers to provide learning or emotion support for him/her

### **Engaging the Student in Learning Activities**

- Pay attention to the potential impact of EDs on students' cognitive performance
- Teachers may let the student take a break during class time according to the student's needs so that he/she may eat a small amount of food
- If a student feels cold in class, the teacher may approve the student to use a blanket or drink warm water to keep him/herself warm
- Provide homework accommodations according to the student's needs to reduce his/her pressure
- Exempt the student from physical education classes or make other adjustments according to the student's needs and professional suggestions
- If any student needs to attend medical or counselling services during class, the teacher may provide him/her with notes of the lesson
- Provide special examination arrangements according to the student's needs and suggestions from professionals

## **Strengthening Support and Home-School Cooperation**

- Provide intensive support services to students with serious difficulties as needed, such as formulating an Individual Learning Plan, conducting regular reviews and follow-up
- Maintain close collaboration and communication among the school, parents and professionals (such as healthcare professionals, social workers, psychologists, etc.) to learn about the student's eating and weight condition
- If the student's weight and health condition are found to be deteriorating, communication should be made with the medical professionals as soon as possible and seek their timely support and follow-up

## **Useful Websites**

### **Education Bureau**

Homepage of the Education Bureau

<https://www.edb.gov.hk/en/index.html>

“SENSE” Integrated Education and Special Education Information Online Information

<https://sense.edb.gov.hk/en/index.html>

“Mental Health @School” Student Mental Health Information Online

<https://mentalhealth.edb.gov.hk/en/index.html>

Operation Guide on the Whole School Approach to Integrated Education

[https://sense.edb.gov.hk/uploads/page/integrated-education/download-area-and-related-links/ie\\_guide\\_en.pdf](https://sense.edb.gov.hk/uploads/page/integrated-education/download-area-and-related-links/ie_guide_en.pdf)

Teacher's Resource Handbook on Understanding and Supporting Students with Mental Illness

[https://sense.edb.gov.hk/uploads/page/types-of-special-educational-needs/mental-illness/Teacher's\\_Resource\\_Handbook\\_on\\_Understanding\\_and\\_Supporting\\_Students\\_with\\_Mental\\_Illness\\_\(August%202017\).pdf](https://sense.edb.gov.hk/uploads/page/types-of-special-educational-needs/mental-illness/Teacher's_Resource_Handbook_on_Understanding_and_Supporting_Students_with_Mental_Illness_(August%202017).pdf)

### **Department of Health**

Child Assessment Service

<https://www.dhcas.gov.hk/en/>

Student Health Service

<https://www.studenthealth.gov.hk/eindex.html>

### **Social Welfare Department**

<https://www.swd.gov.hk/en/index/>

### **The Hong Kong Council of Social Service**

<https://www.hkcss.org.hk/?lang=en>

## **Telephone Numbers for Enquiry**

### **Education Bureau**

General enquiries about special education

3698 3957

**Hospital Authority**

Hospital Authority Mental Health Direct (24 hours) 2466 7350

**Department of Health**

Child Assessment Service 2246 6659

Student Health Service 2349 4212

**Community Resources and Helplines**

<https://mentalhealth.edb.gov.hk/en/early-identification-at-the-selective-level/helplines-and-community-resources.html>