

# THE PARENT LETTER



About Our Kids:  
A Letter for Parents by the  
NYU Child Study Center

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## **PREVENTING EATING DISORDERS**

Eating disorders (Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa, and Binge Eating Disorder) affect many people; up to 5-10 million girls and young women and up to one million boys and young men in the United States. Disordered eating, which does not meet criteria for one of these disorders, nonetheless causes much distress and dysfunction, is much more common, and by some accounts may affect up to half of college age women. Concerns about food and body dissatisfaction are popping up earlier, sometimes as young as age 5.

### **What can parents do to help their children develop a healthy attitude toward their bodies, as well as healthy eating habits?**

Recent research designed to reduce obesity in children focused on what appear to be the two most important factors, healthier eating habits and increasing activity. A related finding was that the children who participated were much less likely to develop eating disorders than children who did not receive the intervention. Parents can help their children to eat healthier by:

- Cutting back on soda and juice (juice has a lot of sugar and calories with little nutritional benefit) and switching to skim milk.
- Eating breakfast.
- Eating together as a family.
- Encouraging kids to eat slowly and stop when they are satisfied.
- Shopping smart, by sticking to the periphery of the grocery store to buy fruits, vegetables, lean protein sources and whole grain baked goods.
- Having plenty of healthy snacks available.
- Making fast food only an occasional treat.
- Drinking 8-11 eight oz. glasses of water daily.
- Staying away from diets. They do not work in the long run and send the wrong message to kids.

Kids also need encouragement to get active:

- Aim for 30-60 minutes of moderate physical activity on a daily basis.
- Encourage walking, biking, swimming, skating, ball sports, and other fun activities.
- Reduce children's total screen time (TV, computer and video games) to less than two hours daily.

It is best for us to become comfortable with our own bodies so that we can most effectively help the next generation. Remember, children learn from the things we say and do. If you are always on a diet, will only eat lean proteins and no carbohydrates or comment frequently on your own weight and size, you will not be sending the appropriate messages to your children. A few tips include:

- Stop talking negatively about your body.
- Stop dieting.
- Weigh yourself only once per week on Friday morning.
- Accept compliments about your appearance graciously.
- Find positive aspects of your body and appearance.
- Make a commitment to exercise for the joy of it (not to burn calories).
- Point out and label unrealistic body types in ads.

Schools can help to foster positive body image and diminish risk for eating disorders by:

- Developing a health class curriculum focused on healthy eating and increased activity, about size and shape diversity, body image concerns, and why diets do not work. It is not helpful to describe eating disorders to school populations because research shows teens use this as a "how to" for eating disorders.

- Helping students understand advertising ploys that promote body image dissatisfaction.
- Establishing programs that help students to develop positive qualities unrelated to appearance (honesty, kindness, creativity).
- Not allowing school activities that promote weight loss or emphasize appearance.

### **What can parents say to a teenager when she says she “feels fat?”**

Remind her that “fat” is not a feeling and is often code for feeling angry, sad, worried or stressed. Reassure her that many teens want to be thin and do not dismiss her desire to lose weight. Use it as an opportunity to discuss feelings about body image and to emphasize a realistic image as well as healthy eating. Do not fall into the trap that ALL foods have to be “healthy” (e.g. under a certain number of fat grams, no trans fat, whole grain, etc). It is OK to have treats and best to eat in moderation.

### **When to seek professional help**

If a parent notices signs of an eating disorder, it is best to get professional help. Start with a visit to the pediatrician who can check for any medical causes for weight loss or any medical complications of the eating disorder. Eating disorders are very serious (and sometimes life threatening) conditions, but with treatment, most children will improve significantly. Treatment involves meeting with a psychiatrist to diagnose your child, prescribe any necessary medications, and monitor the overall treatment plan. A therapist will help the child to handle feelings and relationships, and a nutritionist will help to normalize eating behaviors.

### **Useful Resources**

- [“I’m Like So Fat!” Helping Your Teen Make Healthy Choices about Eating and Exercise in a Weight-Obsessed World.](#) By Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, Ph.D.
- [When Your Child Has an Eating Disorder: A Step-by-Step Workbook for Parents and Other Caregivers.](#) By Abigail H. Natenshon.
- [www.something-fishy.org](http://www.something-fishy.org)
- [www.mirror-mirror.org](http://www.mirror-mirror.org)

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### **ABOUT THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER**

The NYU Child Study Center is dedicated to the research, prevention and treatment of child and adolescent mental health problems. The Center offers evaluation and treatment for children and teenagers with anxiety, depression, learning or attention difficulties, neuropsychiatric problems, and trauma and stress related symptoms.

We offer a limited number of clinical studies at no cost for specific disorders and age groups. To see if your child would be appropriate for one of these studies, please call (212) 263-8916.

The NYU Child Study Center also offers workshops and lectures for parents, educators and mental health professionals on a variety of mental health and parenting topics. The Family Education Series consists of 13 informative workshops focused on child behavioral and attentional difficulties. To learn more or to request a speaker, please call (212) 263-8861.

For further information, guidelines and practical suggestions on child mental health and parenting issues, please visit the NYU Child Study Center’s website, [AboutOurKids.org](http://AboutOurKids.org).

**AboutOurKids.org**  
THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER ONLINE

**Changing the Face of Child Mental Health**  
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