



OVERVIEW OF DISORDERED EATING PREVENTION

How can schools help?



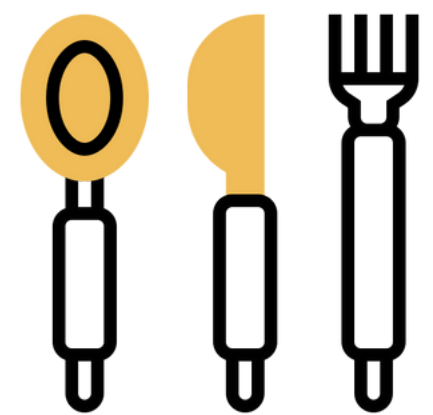
A MESSAGE FROM EATING DISORDERS ONTARIO (EDO):

Until recently disordered eating has not received the same level of attention or recognition as other mental health concerns. In 2021, EDO helped to uncover its prevalence, revealing that approximately 46% of Ontario youth in grades 7-12 endorsed concerns about food, weight, and body image, which are known precursors to disordered eating (OSDUHS, 2022).

WHAT IS DISORDERED EATING?

Disordered eating can be difficult to notice as these behaviours are often normalized in our society. Here are some common "look fors":

- Expressing discontent about one's appearance
- Dieting to lose weight
- Shifts in eating patterns (e.g., cutting food groups)
- Skipping meals
- Skipping social events
- Intense exercise
- Exercising to burn calories and/or muscle tone
- Follows weight loss or diet culture focused social media accounts



WHY IS DISORDERED EATING A CONCERN?

Disordered eating is dangerous, especially for children and youth, who need far more energy than adults to nourish their rapidly growing bodies.

Disordered eating and dieting can lead to:

- Difficulties in concentration
- Mood changes
- Withdrawal from hobbies or regular activities
- Challenges in relationships
- Interruptions in growth
- Impaired bone development



WHY ARE CHILDREN AND YOUTH VULNERABLE TO DISORDERED EATING?

- Images and messages portraying unrealistic appearance ideals are pervasive throughout society. Children and youth can feel pressure to conform to appearance ideals, which sometimes leads them to want to change their appearance, weight, or body shape.
- Social media compounds the pressure to conform to these ideals, as social media exposure is related to increases in appearance-based comparisons.
- Weight-based bullying from peers, family, or other adults can negatively affect a child's confidence and mental well-being.
- When youth consider their appearance as the most important indicator of their worth, many feel the need to change their weight or body shape to conform to societal appearance ideals.
- Children and youth are impressionable, they are always listening, and they want to be accepted by peers and adult role models. The language they hear from the adults around them matters.



How can caring adults help?

PREVENTION STARTS WITH US



- When an adult talks about their own weight, shape, or eating habits, children and youth might internalize what they hear (e.g., "I heard my coach talking about going on a diet. That must mean I should go on a diet"). See [this article](#) on how criticizing our own bodies can damage kids' body image (Conasan, 2018).
- Prevention starts with adults reflecting on their own thoughts about food and body image. Consider the following:
 - Do I often talk about going on or being on a diet?
 - Do I express guilt out loud when I eat certain foods?
 - Do I make comments about others' weight or appearance? Do I standby when I overhear others doing so?
- Many of our normative conversations about food and weight can cause unintentional harm to children and youth. See [this article](#) on how to talk (or not talk) to kids about weight (Holcombe, 2022).

THINGS FOR ADULTS TO MODEL:

- Be intentional about language when talking about food
 - Avoid categorizing foods into "good" and "bad" or "healthy" and "unhealthy"
 - Avoid lessons or activities that include calorie counting
 - Avoid commenting on students' lunches
- Model positive body talk and health-promoting habits in both teaching and conversations students might overhear
- Celebrate body diversity and demonstrate respect for individual differences in body size and shape
- Actively address weight-based bullying and teasing
- Encourage time for nutrition when students have activities, projects, and sports that interfere with meal and snack times.



What can educators do to help?

PROMOTE STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH & WELL-BEING

- Fostering overall student mental health and well-being is key to helping prevent eating and body image-related concerns
- School Mental Health Ontario has developed free everyday mental health classroom resources, designed to support educators (K-12) by offering a repository of high-quality everyday mental health practices that can be easily incorporated into classroom routines. [Everyday Mental Health Classroom Resource.](#)

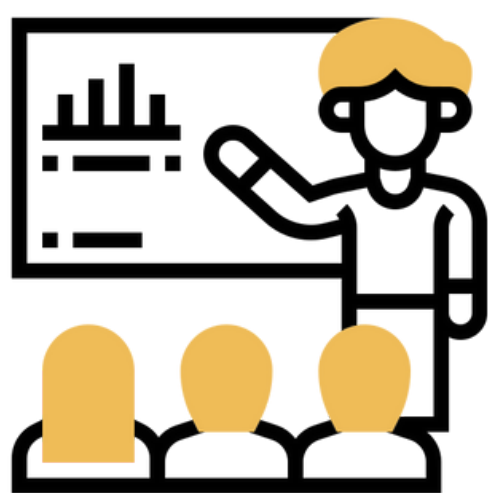


WELCOME THE WHOLE CHILD INTO THE CLASSROOM

- Educators are essential adult influencers who can help create a supportive school environment. By considering the additional stressors faced by students from marginalized groups, and creating an environment that is emotionally supportive, identity affirming, and culturally sensitive, we can reduce barriers to learning and promote a strong sense of community.
- School Mental Health Ontario has a resource for [creating mentally healthy learning environments](#)
- In reflections about equity, diversity, and inclusion, we invite all school staff to consider weight and body shape, and the compounding effect of weight-based stigma with other forms of stigma and discrimination.
- Consider the following reflections when creating classroom materials:
 - Does this lesson account for the experiences of students in underrepresented body shapes and sizes (e.g., large bodies)?
 - Does this lesson make assumptions that oversimplify, stereotype, or dismiss a cultural practice or belief about food or bodies? (e.g., devaluing certain food)
 - How might my personal beliefs about food, weight, and shape differ from my students and their families?
 - Is what I'm teaching accessible and relevant to students of all body shapes and sizes?
 - Does my lesson make assumptions about health, weight, or body size?



TEACH MEDIA LITERACY



- Media literacy aims to help students develop critical thinking skills to navigate social media and analyze media messaging.
- Media literacy empowers youth to be critical consumers of media, and has been shown to improve youth self-esteem.
- The National Eating Disorder Information Centre (NEDIC) offers a free curriculum [Beyond Images/Au-delà de l'image](#), for students in grades 4 through 8, in both English & French. These lesson plans include activities that make a positive difference in combating body-based bullying and negative stereotypes.

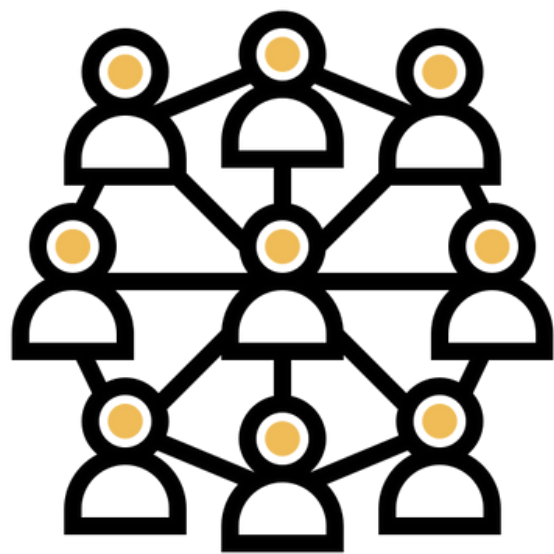
LEARN THE WARNING SIGNS AND KNOW WHEN TO SEEK ADDITIONAL HELP

- As educators, you are not expected to be mental health professionals but your skills help you play a major role in the development of your students. You are the eyes, ears, and hearts supporting students, which puts you in a good position to know when someone may need more help.
- Please see this resource on [what to do if you are concerned about a student's mental health](#), the [Supporting Minds](#) document that outlines early warning signs and resources, or contact the [NEDIC helpline](#).



What can schools do to help?

ECOLOGICAL APPROACH TO PREVENTION



- This multi-pronged approach aims to provide a safe school environment that promotes connectedness, and effective, long-lasting benefits.
- This includes:
 - Promoting school and peer connectedness and a sense of belonging
 - Promoting body diversity and ways to recognize and act on incidences of body-based bullying
 - Inviting school staff to reflect on their own personal attitudes about food, weight and shape and ways to promote a body-positive school culture
 - Classroom practices that teach students to take a stance against weight bias
- A whole community and whole-school approach are optimal to help create a built environment that is supportive of body diversity and health equity
- Additional Prevention Resources:
 - [Universal Prevention \(McVey & Antonini, 2016\)](#).
 - [Training Service Providers in Evidence-Based Prevention Programs \(McVey & Antonini, 2016\)](#).

A NOTE OF CAUTION

- It is important that all school staff are aware that teaching students about eating disorders is not recommended
- For some students, a focus on the topic of eating disorders can intensify their preoccupation with weight and shape and potentially lead them to experiment with unhealthy and dangerous weight control methods
- Similarly, we do not recommend one-time presentations (including guest speakers) speaking directly about eating disorders in schools, as this is not effective in changing/improving the eating attitudes and behaviours of students
- Please see the following [School Mental Health Ontario decision support tool](#) for guidelines for guest speakers, and the corresponding [teacher checklist](#)

