

Strategies for Educators – The Link between Healthy Living and Eating Disorders

Part of the Ministry of Education's educational mandate is to explore how to share with students how to live healthy. At the forefront of many discussions are how to motivate students with activity, how do we reduce obesity in our schools, and reduce teasing around body image? What we often forget is how do kids really see body image, what does it mean to them? And is it possible to see it a different way?

What and how teachers share information around body shape and size with their students is an important factor on how students will explore this topic. Encouraging healthy living and not promote dangerous weight control methods and normalizing eating disorder behaviours is **critical** to educating them on maintaining health and well-being. Teachers have an important role to play in knowing how to appropriately intervene when a student is in need of specialized services. In contrast to offering information on eating disorders and details about illness, it is suggested educators follow a health promotion model by offering students information on how to be resilient and healthy in today's challenging world.

The following is a guide for teachers on how they can help lessen students' struggles with eating disorders without exposing them to potentially harmful information.

Research:

To gain a good understanding of this topic and how best to share information with your students it is important to have an understanding of the different types of programs that are out there. You will need to determine their purpose, their impact and their desired outcomes before using them in your classroom.

Outside – In programs: Most programs are skilled-based programs that focus on teaching skills to students in hopes to improve their attitudes and behaviours on various topics.

Inside – Out programs: These programs focus on the root cause by drawing out the resilience and common sense that students have on various topics. This type of program is the foundation to all skill-based programs.

Questions to Ponder:

- Do I live a healthy lifestyle? What does that mean?
- What are my beliefs about body shapes and sizes, media messages, respecting differences, and healthy living? Do I hold biases?
- What could students pick up from me on how to live in wellness – body, mind and spirit?
- What do I need to share with my students to encourage healthy living?
- Am I in a calm state of mind when sharing this information with my students?

Awareness and Prevention are Multilayered:

Researchers in the eating disorders and disordered eating prevention field, asserts prevention and awareness programs need to not only educate **students** but also the **teachers, school administrators, parents, families, community agencies** and **government policy makers**.

It is important to recognize changing unhealthy attitudes, beliefs and behaviours begins with healthy role models and the creation of healthy environments for the changes to grow.

In a school setting, for example, this means not only offering a prevention strategy in the classroom but also making sure students are safe to walk down the halls in the school without being ridiculed, making sure there are pictures on the school walls that represent all the different shapes, sizes and weights people come in, making sure parents receive information on how to support a healthy body image in their children, etcetera.

Topics to support the Healthy Living outcomes

Challenging Media Norms:

- Explore with students how to look at ads more critically.
- Discuss with students how photos of models depicted in the media are manipulated using computers, lighting and makeup to remove all traces of imperfection.
- Explore how thoughts of how we look have been associated with the quickest route to having a boyfriend or being popular.
- The majority of commercials in magazines and on TV stress the importance of looks and link beauty and the purchase of consumer products with happiness, love, popularity and acceptance. Bring to their attention that what the media does not say is how unrealistic the thin ideal is for most people.
- Explore the marketing tactics big business uses in their advertising. Explore why and how advertising is persuasive.
- Ask them “where do they think media messages come from?” Answer: “Someone’s thoughts”

Respecting Differences:

- Studies show that as young as 4 years old, children describe fat people as “mean”, “stupid” and “ugly”, and thin people as “good”, “smart” and “beautiful”. Breaking down such destructive stereotypes means learning to respect body size differences.
- Encourage your school to develop policies against size and sexual discrimination, harassment, teasing, and name-calling. Research indicates sexual harassment, teasing and name calling can be a precipitating factor in the development of an eating disorder.
- Be a role model by taking people seriously for what they say, feel and do rather than for how they look. Reinforce this in the classroom by including role models who are respected for more than their appearance.
- Have a discussion with your students about what “respecting differences” means to them. Explore the words separately and then together. You will be amazed by what you hear.

Role Modeling Healthy Living:

- Role modeling healthy living to a student means accepting of one’s own body shape and size. Recognize how your own thoughts about your body and those of others can be picked up by students in your class. Share with your students how to take care of and nurture oneself through a variety of foods, rather than about dieting to get rid of fat. Emphasize the value of moderate physical activity for good health and fun rather than as a way to work off excess calories.
- Educate yourself on the dangers of dieting. Avoid talking about dieting and other extreme weight loss practices yourself, because children are great imitators. Dieting can be one of the first steps to someone developing a more serious eating disorder.
- Never tease a child (or anyone) or comment on what he is eating. If you are concerned about a student’s eating, privately, talk to the school counsellor and the parents. The more a child feels pressured to slim down or knows your focus on their weight, the more she/he may overeat or not eat in response to feelings of being unloved and unaccepted.
- Teachers need to discover how their own beliefs and judgments around body shapes and sizes can impact their classroom. By role modeling a healthy lifestyle and calm state of mind, teachers will access this same wellness in others. How are you role modeling this message to your students?

Developing Self-worth Unrelated to Looks:

- Emphasize inner beauty by reinforcing the idea that beauty is determined by character traits, not looks. Talk to your students about what kind of people they are, their strengths and weaknesses. Let them know that their appearance is only one aspect of who they are.
- Allow younger students to experience their bodies as wonderful creations through activities such as dancing, dressing up, face painting, swimming or playing in the park.
- Encourage your students to explore activities such as athletics, music, drama, writing, story telling, volunteering, etc. The development of a special talent, unrelated to her/ his looks, will help to improve a child's self-worth, self-esteem, experience, competence and community involvement.

“Healthy” Eating Messages:

- Avoid categorizing foods as good and bad or healthy and unhealthy. Negative focus on food messages contributes to fear of food and earmarking food as either “good” or “bad” is seldom an effective strategy. Forbidding food categorized as “bad” may increase a child's desire for that food and may also foster feelings of guilt when these foods are eaten. Research indicates children who have no access to (“junk/bad”) food tend to overeat these foods when given the chance and eat when not hungry. Even fat, despite its negative press, has nutritional value. All foods in moderation contribute to a balanced diet.
- When discussing food and eating with your students stress the importance of natural hunger and satiation signals. It is important students know how to listen to their bodies' signals about when they are hungry and when they are satisfied. Help your students distinguish between physical hunger and emotional hunger.

Understanding Obesity:

- The causes of obesity are more complicated than excessive calorie consumption and lack of exercise. It is important to understand the genetic or biological factors that influence weight and shape as well as the contributing factors of culture, poverty, and the medical conditions and medications that influence weight gain. Negative attitudes toward obesity and obese people are often unconsciously held. Subsequently, the individual who is overweight is often blamed for her/his condition without considering factors other than eating too much and exercising too little. Despite the reasons why someone is overweight or obese there is no excuse for prejudice. All students, irrespective of weight, shape or size, deserve a teacher's respect and guidance.
- For prevention efforts to be successful, a teacher must be aware of negative attitudes, beliefs and/or behaviours about fatness in our culture and about overweight and obese people she/he may be inadvertently teaching students.
- Prevention programs include all shapes and sizes and encourage students to look beyond someone's body shape to see the character of the person. Singling out children because of their body shape or choices of food that they may not have a choice in, cause children to think negatively about themselves.

Your Students Want to Research the Topic for an Assignment:

Have students approach disordered eating information in the classroom from a health promotion model. This means asking your students to talk about how to be resilient to pressures, identified as important by the student, in the challenging world they are growing up in. Have them explore topics such as what does it mean to have a healthy body image? How do you know your living in, well-being? What creates healthy relationships?

Your Students Want Eating Disorders Information:

It is not uncommon to hold deeply seated beliefs about health, nutrition and exercise requirements that are based on information gathered from television or from the latest fad diet book. With so many mixed messages about healthy bodies and signs of unhealthy behaviours, it is important to have a dialogue with youth about health, well-being and illnesses that can be created because of misguided information.

If your students are asking for disordered eating information, it is important to be curious of their interest. Is offering a lecture to the entire class on the specifics of disordered eating going to solve the issue or problem the students are facing? If an individual is looking for specific information, it would be appropriate to offer them the resources that are recommended in your community and to take the time to follow-up with them.

It is important that the information offered to students is based on accurate, evidence based information gathered from accredited service providers who have expertise in the field of disordered eating.

What you can do

- Use or develop lesson plans that encourages students to explore their own thoughts on body size and shape. Does it change? What beliefs do you hold on too around body image?
- Have your library order books and other resources you can use with your students that focus on social responsibility and healthy living.
- Be conscious of the types of posters and materials your students are exposed to in the school.
- Be sure to select materials that reflect the spectrum of different shapes, sizes and weight humans naturally develop into.
- Encourage your school not to use or consult weight tables or calorie counters in classroom activities. For example, weight charts like the Body Mass Index are unable to meaningfully predict a person's health. Just because a person falls within the "healthy or normal" weight range on the chart does not mean she/he is in a positive mental health state. Also, a person considered to be fat will score higher than average on this chart but, it does not mean this person is unhealthy or needs to lose weight. Some people are healthier at a heavier rather than an average weight. Just like some people are taller and some people are shorter than the average person, there are going to be people who are fatter and people who are thinner than the so called "average" person.
- The use of calorie charts as a method for managing weight is counterproductive. Calorie charts teach people to use external cues instead of internal cues when eating. The number of calories an individual need on any given day depends on many factors and is unique to that person. Using a calorie counter disconnects a person from her/his natural or biological hunger signals and can lead to over and under eating. Instead, help students develop skills for recognizing and attending to internal hunger signals.
- Be open to exploring your own beliefs about body shape, size, diets and the value of fat in our diets.
- Create a healthy lifestyle that not only includes physical activity and nutrition but also mental well-being.
- Learn how you can foster healthy and realistic attitudes about body weight, shape, growth, food and nutrition in your students.
- Take steps to create a positive environment where the focus shifts from weight to wellness with a positive emphasis on maximizing health.
- Remember it is common for children to face teasing, rejection and discrimination on a daily basis. As part of social responsibility it would be helpful to discuss the acceptance of people regardless of size.
- Creating a dialogue in the classroom on how media uses body shape and sizes to send a message will provide students the opportunity to share their thoughts on the media's perceived impact.

Concerned About a Student?

- You may have a student ask you for your help or ask you to give her/him counselling assistance. Disordered eating and obesity are complicated and can result in serious complications. Treatment for individuals diagnosed with an eating disorder requires a team of professionals that include, as a start, a physician, a dietitian and a counsellor. Treatment must be left to qualified health care professionals. It would be inappropriate to attempt to counsel a student or prescribe diets or weight control regimes.
- A person who develops an eating disorder may also be reacting to factors such as family issues (divorce), and her/his psychological make-up (perfectionist). It is important to understand the complex nature of disordered eating while recognizing they are not only about food nor are they about vanity or a stage someone will grow out of.
- If you are concerned about a student discuss your concerns with your school counsellor and devise a plan of action for talking with the student, the student's parents and for the referral process. Confronting the student with your concerns is not recommended.
- If a student approaches you and asks for your help, listen to her/his concerns without commenting on the student's appearance or weight and without offering suggestions on how to eat healthy or lose weight in a "healthy" way. Let the student know it is important to seek specialized assistance, and you will help her/him find appropriate services (Contact the Kelty Resource Centre for referral information 604-875-2084 or toll free 1800-665-1822).

Eating Disorders Resources for Educators

BACKGROUND INFO: EATING DISORDERS

Ministry of Education (Special Ed.) - Helping Students with Eating Disorders: Resources for Teachers

<http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/specialed/edi/1.htm>

This resource guide is divided into five sections, covering areas of concern identified by experienced educators, including:

- What are Eating Disorders? General background information
- Identifying and Referring At-risk students: strategies for identifying and referring at-risk students
- Teaching Students with Eating Disorders: strategies for supporting students in the classroom
- Opportunities for Proactive Intervention: preventative strategies for classroom teachers
- Appendices and Resources: additional sources of information

National Eating Disorder Information Centre (NEDIC) www.nedic.ca Provides information and resources on eating disorders.

SUPPORT SERVICES

Kelty Resource Centre www.bcmhas.ca/keltyresourcecentre

Provides brochures, DVDs, and resources on Mental Health and Addictions for BC children, youth and families. Support is available over the phone, in person, and by email for anyone who is struggling with an Eating Disorder.

Jessie's Hope Society www.jessieshope.org T: 1-877-288-0877 or 604-466-4877

Offers best practices prevention training and resourced for parents, teens, educators, and mental health professionals who support youth in living strong – body, mind, and spirit. Training available for teachers on creating an environment for healthy living and encouraging wellness.

TOOLKITS & RESOURCES

The National Eating Disorders Association Educator Toolkit

http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/uploads/file/toolkits/NEDA-Toolkit-Educators_09-15-08.pdf

Eating disorder information for a school setting

Family Resource Library (FRL) www.bccchildrens.ca/frl Holds collection of books and DVDs for parents and youth on Eating Disorders and a Body

Image Toolkit for educators. T:604-875-2345 ext. 5102 Toll free: 1-800-331-1533 ext.2 Email: famreslib@cw.bc.ca

NUTRITION, HEALTHY EATING, & BODY IMAGE

Health Canada's Vitality Program www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/nutrition/weights-poids/vitalit/vitality_approach-proche_vitalite_e.html

Offers information on facilitating healthy eating and physical exercise

Mission Nutrition www.missionnutrition.ca Offers Lesson Plans on Nutrition and Body Image

Healthy Buddies <http://www.healthybuddies.ca/index.htm>

A program designed for Elementary School Children encouraging positive attitudes toward physical activity, nutrition, and mental health

Moving and Choosing Project www.movingandchoosing.com/Teachers/teachers.htm

Provides support, information, and resources to teachers who strive to educate students about the benefits of a healthy and active lifestyle

Healthy Body Image: Teaching Kids to Eat and Love Their Bodies Too! Grades 4,5,6

http://www.saskatoonhealthregion.ca/your_health/HP-123NutritionResourcesforGrades4to6.pdf.pdf

Healthy Weight Network www.healthyweightnetwork.com

Provides current information on research on obesity, eating disorders, dieting, and weight loss or gain - including statistics

MEDIA LITERACY

Mayo Clinic - Body Image and the Media

http://mayoresearch.mayo.edu/mayo/research/ndc_education/upload/most_body_image.pdf

Provides information that can be used to teach students to be critical consumers of media and the effect of the media on body image

Media Watch www.mediawatch.com/news.html

Don't Buy It <http://pbskids.org/dontbuyit/teachersguide.html>

Provides information and classroom activities related to media literacy. Intended for children in grades 3-5

Media Awareness Network <http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/teachers/index.cfm>

Provides information for teachers on teaching media awareness

Media Education Foundation www.mediaed.org

Includes comprehensive study guides for teachers to engage students in various issues raised by media