

The Parent's Corner

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DISORDERED EATING/BODY IMAGE

APRIL 2022 | By Katie McDonough, MSW, LCSW

How many of us can look back remember what it was like to worry about appearance and body image as a kid or teen? Chances are, there are parents reading this who may even *still* struggle with these issues. As kids' bodies develop and experience hormonal changes, it is quite common to compare themselves to others or feel insecure. Kids may worry they are too tall, too short, too thin, or overweight. They may pinpoint a particular body part or physical trait they wish they could change. Although we wish we could instill endless amounts of confidence in children, many of these insecurities are normal over these developmental years. But, what happens when they reach a point of concern? What happens when these more mild worries are combined with overwhelming pressure from friends or parents, the media, sports teams, or underlying mental health issues? What happens is that we start to see trends of disordered eating in kids and teens that becomes problematic, and these behaviors can become dangerous quickly if not addressed appropriately by caregivers.

Below are some red flags which may indicate the need to intervene. It is important to note that your child will likely not experience all of these, and some may be more obvious than others.

- **Your child's eating patterns change noticeably.** When many think of "eating disorders" and diet changes, they immediately think of someone greatly limiting or restricting food intake. While this is indeed a key component of certain eating disorders, such as Anorexia Nervosa, diet changes can go in various directions. You may see your child binge eating (eating large amounts of food in a short amount of time), hoarding or hiding food, only eating certain food groups, showing apparent anxiety towards certain foods or food groups, fasting for non-religious reasons, taking a long time to eat, avoiding events with food, and so on.
- **They vocalize negative self-image.** Your child may start verbalizing their comparison to friends, characters on shows they watch, or photographs in the media. They may make self-deprecating comments about their appearance.
- **You notice behavior changes.** Kids and teens developing disordered eating patterns may begin withdrawing socially, become very easily irritated, take frequent trips to the restroom after meals, avoid what used to be favorite restaurants or outfits, become agitated before events where they will be in the public eye, etc. Like dieting habits, behavior changes can be broad as well. At the end of the day, you are the expert on your own child and will likely be able to tell if something feels "off" with their behavior.
- **Obsessive exercising, measuring and weight-taking.** In some cases, maybe your child has made no visible changes to their eating patterns at all. Maybe instead they are now obsessively exercising, making sure they hit a certain number on a treadmill every day, or engaging in vigorous exercise to make up for a large meal. Maybe your teen is seen tracking numbers on the scale or using a tape measure every day, or evaluating in the mirror. Over-exercising oneself will end up burning up necessary calories needed for energy, growth and functioning and can be just as detrimental as eating habits. This can cause a number of side effects, such as injuries, dehydration, and mental health concerns.
- **Your child is not hitting his/her developmental milestones.** A yearly visit to a primary care doctor may show your child is not "on track" developmentally with weight or muscle development. Children typically increase in weight as years progress, so a decrease or even stagnation in weight may be a cause for concern. A lack of essential vitamins and nutrients or consecutive months of a female missing her menstrual cycle may also be a sign.

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Because disordered eating and body image is such an expansive topic, we want parents to remember some general tips when observing childhood behaviors and determining next steps:

- **Males are affected, too.** Child Mind Institute notes that as many as 1/3 of individuals with eating disorders are male. The stereotype is female, and males are often overlooked. Boys may be given different societal messages, but these messages can be just as overwhelming. Growing up believing a boy must have little to no body fat and have six-pack abs like a buff video game character or actor can warp a child's body image through the years. Strict rules for both female AND male sports may cause a boy to go to extremes to make a certain weight class or exceed in their progress.
- **Parents can be driving forces.** Continue to be mindful of discussion of weight around your child or teen. Not only do children pick up on comments made by parents on their own body image, they also ingrain criticisms from parents on their own appearance. Even a comment with an innocent intent, such as "Wow, our whole family needs to go on a diet!" after a meal can exacerbate negative thoughts surrounding body image in your child.
- **Eating disorders and body image may stem from underlying issues.** It is not uncommon for an eating disorder to stem from other mental health concerns, such as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, anxiety disorders, or trauma. When a child or teen feels aspects of his/her life are out of their control, sometimes the ability to make decisions on food intake and expenditure is the only way they feel they can gain control of something.
- **Eating disorders take quick effort and investment from everyone.** Working through these issues with your child will likely take the entire family's effort. This may change your family activities, events, meal traditions and habits for the entire family, which, understandably, can be a sacrifice. It will take the support of both a nutritionist and a psychologist that is well-versed in disordered eating, self-image and any other underlying mental health concerns that may be triggering your child's behaviors. At times, outpatient or residential programs may need to be utilized for those struggling more in their progress in order to monitor and give direct care from professionals. It takes a village to work through this, and the best thing you can do is connect your child to a support system that empowers healthy changes.

As always, your School Partnership Program (SPP) Therapist is in your corner if you need extra support or resources!