

WELL-BEING SNAPSHOTS K-7

DETECTING DISORDERED EATING IN CHILDREN



DISORDERED EATING IN CHILDREN 12 & UNDER

early warning signs

- fear of stomach aches
- aversions to tastes/textures
- excess bowel movements

- refraining from eating
- reducing portion sizes
- weight loss

- hiding/hoarding food
- lack of growth
- thinning hair

- worry about body image
- delay of puberty
- constipation/digestion issues
- mood swings



KAREN PETERS, BCC | COPYRIGHT 2021

Conversations around body image and disordered eating have been happening for decades. Recently we've come to understand there is also a genetic component to eating disorders in addition to the environmental contributors of performance pressures, media portrayals of "beauty" and "perfection," and attempts to control or avoid intense emotions, anxiety, or impacts of trauma by internalizing them. Eating disorders impact both boys and girls, and according to the National Initiative on Eating Disorders in Canada, "have the highest overall mortality rate of any mental illness." They also note that "younger Canadians are also increasingly engaging in dieting behaviour which may put them at risk of developing an eating disorder and other health-compromising conditions. In Canada, between 12% and 30% of girls and 9% and 25% of boys aged 10-14 report dieting to lose weight."

These numbers aren't meant to scare you, but rather to encourage you to learn the early warning signs and seek early intervention. Treatment is available and helpful regardless of age or gender. For children ages 12 and under, early signs of struggle associated with being in their body can include both physiological and social/emotional symptoms. Around the onset of puberty and in the years following, kids and youth are particularly vulnerable to problematic beliefs about their changing bodies, a natural emphasis on peer acceptance, and at the same time they are still learning some foundational coping skills for things that might feel out of their control. Parents can be tempted not to "make something of it" for fear of inflating the issue, or

worry they won't know how to address it well or will be met with strong resistance from their child to discuss the concerns.

From a prevention perspective, we can all contribute to a strong sense of self as our kids grow, develop, and discover who they are. We can pour in confidence, teach coping skills, and provide healthy boundaries around what influences them. We can foster a family environment that values talking openly about hard topics, is quick to offer understanding and compassion, and messages clearly that our bodies serve us in many great ways, need fuel to help us live fully in the world, and that our kids are worthy of wellness. Physical and emotional changes are part of adolescent development. Being clear and open about this reality helps kids to understand that we all develop at different rates.

Early intervening requires us to catch the signals our child is giving that might be of concern. The infographic lists some of the key flags in children, and if you are struggling to know how to address these, don't hesitate or put off learning more. Visit some of the resources listed to get you started and reach out to trusted support providers if this feels worrisome for you. Counsellors, family physicians, or pediatricians can help you clarify what might be needed and get you connected with the right local support. ●

Article information sources:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3010958/>
<https://www.psychom.net/>
<https://nied.ca/about-eating-disorders-in-canada/>

RESOURCE LINKS:

[Keltly Mental Health Resource](#)
[Eating Disorder Hope Resource](#)
[A Mighty Girl website](#)
[Parenting in the Trenches podcast](#)
{S3.E3: Kids & Body Image}

Karen Peters

