

School Setting: Young People and Dieting



Studies show that body dissatisfaction and engaging in dieting are the two biggest risk factors that increase a young person's chance of developing an eating disorder.

Regardless of whether a young person goes on to develop an eating disorder body dissatisfaction and dieting can have significant impact on their mental and physical health.

What are the risks of dieting for a young person?

When a person physically and psychologically deprives themselves of food there are a number of negative consequences:

1. **Dehydration** - dieting can cause weight loss but it has been shown that a lot of this weight will be loss of water thus causing dehydration. Dehydration can also cause headaches, fatigue and dizziness and can impair learning performance.
2. **Fluctuations in blood sugar levels** - in the short term this can cause shaking, anxiety, dizziness and other symptoms.
3. **Muscle breakdown** - during periods of rapid weight loss, the body will begin to break down protein cells in your muscles for energy, thus causing muscle break down. This can mean that basic exercise and movement become increasingly difficult for those engaging in extreme dieting.
4. **Malnutrition** - when your body isn't getting the nutrients it needs from food, it begins breaking down fat and other parts of the body for energy. This can cause bad breath, nausea, and in extreme cases heart and liver failure.
5. **Cognitive impairment** - depriving the body of nutrients also effects the brain in both the short and long term. In the short term, the brain becomes more susceptible to stress and anxiety increasing the likelihood of developing depression. In the long term, dieting can cause impairments in visual-spatial memory and decreased brain growth.
6. **Irritability and mood changes** - a lack of nutrition can have significant impacts on the child's mood. A child that would normally be a pleasure to teach/be around could suddenly be irritable or experience highly changeable emotions.
7. **Decline in school performance** - with lack of nutrition can also come a decrease in motivation and cognitive function that can affect school performance.
8. **Binge eating and associated guilt and shame** - rigid and strict rules about food are unrealistic and set the person up to fail. Eventually diet rules are broken and this can result in overeating, binge eating, guilt and shame.



Young people who diet excessively have decreased mental and physical health outcomes, decreased social participation, decreased concentration and attention and overall struggle to have a well-rounded and healthy life.

Normal Eating

Normal eating is the healthy alternative to dieting. Normal eating, sometimes called “natural eating” is different for everyone. Everyone has their own intuitive sense of what feels right for them.

“Normal eating is going to the table hungry and eating until you are satisfied. It is being able to choose food you like and eat it and truly get enough of it - not just stop eating because you think you should. Normal eating is being able to give some thought to your food selection so you get nutritious food, but not being so wary and restrictive that you miss out on enjoyable food. Normal eating is giving yourself permission to eat sometimes because you are happy, sad or bored, or just because it feels good. Normal eating is mostly three meals a day, or four or five, or it can be choosing to munch along the way. It is leaving some cookies on the plate because you know you can have some again tomorrow, or it is eating more now because they taste so wonderful. Normal eating is overeating at times, feeling stuffed and uncomfortable. And it can be undereating at times and wishing you had more. Normal eating is trusting your body to make up for your mistakes in eating. Normal eating takes up some of your time and attention, but keeps its place as only one important area of your life. In short, normal eating is flexible. It varies in response to your hunger, your schedule, your proximity to food and your feelings.”

By Elly Slater

(in her book “Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family: How to Eat, How to Raise Good Eaters, How to Cook”)



Every single person has a way of eating that feels relaxed and intuitive for them. There is no standardised or one size fits all rule for what normal eating looks like. It's like finding that position that feels most comfy to fall asleep in at night – it's different and unique to us all

If you are concerned that student may require support with their eating or weight irrespective of the presence of eating disorder symptoms than it is best to encourage they discuss this with their General Practitioner (GP) who can medically assess and monitor their physical health and facilitate a referral to a dietitian or psychologist if needed.

For general information about healthy eating for young people (and for adults) head to the Australia Government website Eat For Health

https://www.eatforhealth.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/The%20Guidelines/n55f_children_brochure.pdf