

# Young people and food

Parent easy guide 69



Parenting SA

As young people grow up, they strive for independence, and try to work out where they fit in the world and 'test the waters' at home. Choosing friends, clothes, videos and leisure activities are important ways they can 'have a say' in their lives. Choosing what foods they eat and how they eat is another way. They may want to try new ways of eating, such as eating only some types of foods, skipping meals, eating at odd times, or eating less. For most young people this does not cause health problems and will pass. You may still worry about whether their eating is healthy during this time.

For some young people new eating patterns are a sign of troubled feelings, and confused thinking about food, eating and how they think they look. These patterns can persist and become a major problem. It's important to be aware of the thinking behind your child's eating and to take action early if you are worried. Having lots of healthy food in the house and encouraging a healthy attitude towards food as an enjoyable part of life are important ways you can help your young person.

*This PEG uses 'he' and 'she' in turn.  
Change to suit your child's sex.*

## What is happening for my young person?

There may be some things happening in your young person's life that affect what and how they eat.

### Becoming their own person

- > Young people want to feel they are in control of their lives and becoming 'themselves'. They may break away from family practices, do things differently and not want to be told what to do. At the same time they want to be liked by their peers and feel part of the group.
- > They often act as if they 'know it all' and have an answer, usually different from yours, to most things. This can be hard if you still want to have a say about what they eat. They may accept information but not advice from you.

### Having a growth spurt

- > Young people may start eating a lot as they have a growth spurt. The amount both boys and girls eat may amaze you. It's healthy and fairly cheap to 'fill up' on sandwiches, cereals and fruit. They may want to eat at non-meal times too because they 'are starving'. When they have finished growing they may eat less. This is also normal and may not mean they are trying to lose weight.

### Focusing on fitness and looks

- > Those involved in sport or dancing may want to change what they eat to improve their fitness or how they look. This is all right but if they become too worried or cut down on food too much, it may become a problem.
- > Some young people may change what they eat to try to reduce or prevent acne. Peers can be cruel about pimples, so this is quite common. Some foods seem to trigger pimples in some people but there is no 'pimple free' diet. Noting what is eaten about the time pimples appear may give an idea about foods that could be triggers but not eating those foods often does not stop the acne.

### Media messages and body image

- > We can't escape the media (TV, movies, radio, print, internet) with its messages telling young people they will be happy, successful and have a better life if they are slim and beautiful for girls and lean with a 'six-pack' for boys. This makes many young people who are going through the changes of puberty feel, self conscious, 'different' and that they don't measure up. They can be helped to learn how media images are used to market products.



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### Eating away from home

- > Young people like to go out with their friends and it is common for them to eat fast foods. Doing this once or twice a week is fine. Encourage them to choose the healthier fast food options.

### Skipping meals

- > Young people can see other activities or being with friends as more important than having a meal at home. This can be disappointing or annoying if you have prepared a meal and your daughter says she's 'off out' or doesn't want to eat. It is important that your child considers and respects others in the house. Having clear rules can help – for example, say you need to know an hour before meal times that she won't be eating.
- > Young people may also miss meals when there is stress in the family such as a parent's illness. When the stress has passed their eating most often returns to normal.
- > Some young people skip meals to lose weight. Skipping meals does not help weight control. Skipping breakfast is not a good idea. Breakfast helps to 'kick start' your metabolism, has important nutrients and helps people concentrate at school or work in the morning. The key to healthy weight is to combine regular exercise with a healthy, balanced diet.

### What is normal eating?

- > Normal eating is not how much or what you eat, but your attitude towards food and eating. When a young person feels she can eat without feeling guilty, eat when she feels hungry and can stop when full, she has a positive and normal attitude to food.
- > It is also normal to eat different amounts on different days, to eat more of the foods you like and less of what you don't like, and to overeat or restrict intake sometimes.
- > It is also normal for young people to try new ways of eating, such as becoming vegetarian. This is fine, but just eating fruits and vegetables is not enough. Be sure she understands how to replace other foods for animal products before beginning a vegetarian diet. It is especially important for young women to get enough iron, calcium and other nutrients. A dietitian can help with advice.

### What is NOT normal eating?

Eating that is not normal is not so much about what your child does (eg skipping meals, restricting food, overeating) but about the thinking and reasoning behind it, how often it happens, and the feeling that she has to eat this way.

- > What IS, and IS NOT normal eating can look very similar. For example your daughter may run out of the house without breakfast because she slept in and is worried about missing the bus. At school, she feels hungry and grabs a snack and eats a larger lunch than usual without even thinking about it. This is normal eating. Her friend skips breakfast because she feels fat and believes she is being strong and in control. This cheers her up. Later, when she gets hungry she tries hard not to eat but when she can no longer resist she has a snack and feels 'bad' for losing

control and being weak. This is NOT normal eating. For both young people what they do is very similar but they have different thinking behind it.

### What about dieting?

- > Many people have 'gone on a diet' to lose weight at some time. Dieting is so common, some people see it as a normal part of eating. Dieting is not the best way to lose weight. It usually leads to weight gain in the longer term and can leave you feeling down and unsuccessful. For most young people dieting doesn't last long and they soon return to 'normal' eating. This kind of dieting is not a problem, but it should never be encouraged. It is better to encourage healthy eating and regular physical activity for long term healthy weight.
- > For some vulnerable young people who feel insecure, especially about their looks and body, dieting can be dangerous. They may feel they have failed if it is not successful. It can lead to more serious eating problems and increase their risk of developing an eating disorder.

### When should I be worried?

- > It can be hard to tell the difference between what is normal and what is not normal eating when the actions look the same. It's a problem when what they do continues for a long time, gets worse or affects your child's life. When this happens there is most likely an emotional issue driving the eating pattern. To your child this issue is very real. It could be about losing a friend, being bullied, being overweight, not doing well at school, wanting to be better at sport, feeling that you are critical of her or in some cases a response to abuse.
- > The most common cause is thinking that there is something wrong with her body related to poor body image. Feeling good about her body and who she is, is important for the health of any young person. It is easy for young people to feel they need to lose weight to be successful or popular and be one of the group.

When you know your child well, it is easier to notice changes in the way she eats. If you are concerned, talk with her about what's going on in her life as soon as you can. Help her deal with the feelings behind the eating pattern. Talk to your doctor or a counsellor for help.

### Signs of problems with eating and food

#### Emotional and social changes could be:

- > Not being as happy as usual
- > Not wanting to mix with friends or family
- > Being moody
- > Being less confident
- > Not wanting to do anything
- > Doing poorly at school
- > Sleeping a lot
- > Being angry

#### Other changes could be:

- > Restricting the amount or types of food eaten

- > Limiting fats eaten by always counting kilojoules or the fat content of food
- > Making up rules about how to eat, such as eating food in a certain order, or no food after 6pm
- > Playing with food but not eating it
- > Always saying he has just eaten or will eat later or will grab something when he is out
- > Dieting
- > Binge eating (eating very large amounts of food)
- > Avoiding eating in public
- > Always weighing himself or looking in the mirror
- > Comparing himself to others
- > Asking if he looks fat
- > Saying that he is fat even when his weight is normal or low
- > Exercising to extreme, even if injured or sick
- > Vomiting after meals
- > Using laxatives a lot

## What about eating disorders?

An 'eating disorder' is a clinical diagnosis that may be made when unhealthy thinking about food and eating increases to the point where it affects your child's life. People with an eating disorder become intensely worried about their body and anxious about their weight. They can't see they are worrying about something that is not true and they may do dangerous things to try to lose weight. An eating disorder is a complex psychological condition and only a trained professional such as a doctor or mental health professional can diagnose it. Some of the most well-known are:

- > Anorexia Nervosa – when the young person believes she is fat, even when she is not, and may have lost a lot of weight.
- > Bulimia Nervosa – when the young person eats very large amounts of food because she has been starving herself and then makes herself vomit, takes laxatives or exercises to extreme.
- > Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (EDNOS) – when the young person has very distorted thinking about food and her body but does not have all the aspects of the other eating disorders.
- > Binge eating disorder – when the young person has times when she eats very large amounts of food but does not vomit, purge or exercise to 'work it off'

Eating disorders can have serious physical, emotional and social impacts on your child, you and other family and friends. They can take many years to resolve and may involve time in hospital.

## How do I get help?

It is important to talk to your child and seek help as soon as you notice unhealthy thinking linked to eating or body image. Getting help early may stop it becoming a major health problem.

People who can help include doctors, dietitians, family therapists, social workers, psychologists or psychiatrists. If your child is diagnosed with an eating disorder you will need a team of health professionals to address the emotional problems, the thinking, and the eating patterns. Your doctor can refer you to professionals who can help. It's important to seek support for yourself and other family members as well.

## What parents can do

### Build a healthy relationship with your child

- > Build a strong relationship with your child so that you can discuss things easily.
- > Know what triggers stress for him and talk about it. Let your young person know you support his right to his own choices but you still have some 'house rules' about meal times and healthy eating.

### Build a healthy relationship with food

- > Build a positive attitude to food and healthy eating in your family. Encourage healthy eating as a normal and enjoyable part of life.
- > Let your young person decide what he eats, and the amount he needs.
- > Don't label foods as good or bad or link guilt with eating.

### Provide healthy food

- > Make it clear that you provide a range of mostly healthy foods (every day foods) and foods such as chips, biscuits, lollies or fizzy drinks (sometimes foods) will only be for special occasions. Don't be surprised if he opens the fridge which is full and says 'There's nothing to eat in here'.

### Set a good example

- > The way you eat and look after your own body sends a strong message to your child. Be happy with your own body and don't make comments about your weight or shape.
- > Young people are good at sensing the 'do as I say, not as I do' routine. Show that you really enjoy healthy food yourself.
- > Avoid diets yourself and don't complain about your own body (or others) in front of your young person. Talking about being on a diet is very common, but try to avoid this too.

### Build positive body image and self-esteem

- > Help your young person to view his growth and body changes as a normal and positive part of growing up. Help him to know that all bodies grow and mature at a different pace and accept his shape and size. Show you accept yours and that thankfully we are all different.
- > Help him fight the pressure to have a certain 'look'. Focus and comment on his other qualities, like 'You're a really loyal friend', 'That was very thoughtful of you'; 'You're good at driving safely'.
- > Help him feel good about himself. Give praise for small successes as well as large ones.
- > Let him know you love him just as he is.
- > Never tease him about his looks.

### Encourage physical activity

- > Encourage him to do physical activity for fun and fitness. This will build self-esteem and a positive attitude towards his body.
- > When involved in sport or dance young people may want to eat less or exercise a lot. Arrange for them to talk with a dietitian about healthy ways to do this.

### Never encourage dieting

- > Even if your young person is over his healthy weight he should not go on a diet. Diets are not healthy and rarely achieve long term weight loss. If there is a weight concern, help him to feel loved and good about himself while making small healthy changes to eating and exercise for the long term. Talk with your doctor or dietitian for ideas.

### Respect your young person's opinion

- > Respect that your young person may want to eat differently from the family, (as long as this is reasonable).
- > Try to accept that he may have very strong and different views from yours. Letting eating become a war helps no one and only damages your relationship.

### Share the kitchen

- > Help young people become more responsible and skilled in the kitchen. Expect both sons and daughters to help cook meals. Suggest they plan, shop for and make a meal of their own choice for everyone, even if it's only one meal a week. Many young adults have few cooking skills and little idea about how to shop wisely when they leave home; so they end up eating fast foods.
- > Practice and pass on food safety habits such as washing hands, having clean dishes and cloths, covering and storing foods at the right temperature, and safe handling of different foods.

### Reminders

- > Normal eating is having a positive attitude to food.
- > Choosing what and how they eat is one way young people feel independent. Trying new ways of eating is normal
- > Help your young person have a healthy attitude to food so that it is an enjoyable part of life
- > Help her value herself for things other than looks – poor body image can lead to harmful eating and exercise habits
- > Be aware of the signs of unhealthy thinking about food and eating – take action early as it can become a serious problem
- > Help young people learn cooking skills so they can eat well when they leave home.

### Contacts

Parent Helpline: Tel 1300 364 100

24 hours a day, 7 days a week for advice on child health and parenting

Child and Family Health Centres: Tel 1300 733 606

9am–4:30pm, Monday to Friday to make an appointment at your local Centre

Anxiety, Compulsive, Eating Disorder Association:

Tel (08) 82974011

ACEDA is the peak body for eating disorders and includes the panic and anxiety and obsessive compulsive organisations

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service

Northern CAHMS: Tel (08) 8161 7198

Southern CAMHS: Tel (08) 8204 5412

Kids Helpline: Tel 1800 55 1800

Flinders Medical Centre's Weight Disorder Unit:

Tel (08) 8204 5237

Flinders University Psychology Clinic: Tel (08) 8201 2416

Assessment and treatment of bulimia nervosa

Women's and Children's Hospital Department of

Psychological Medicine Eating Disorder Program:

Tel (08) 8161 7227

Youth Healthline: Tel 1300 13 17 19

9am–5pm weekdays

### Websites

[www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)

For other Parent Easy Guides

[www.cyh.com](http://www.cyh.com)

For parenting and child health information

[www.aceda.org.au/](http://www.aceda.org.au/)

ACEDA for information about body image, weight issues and eating disorders

[www.daa.asn.au/dmsweb/frmfndapdsearch.aspx](http://www.daa.asn.au/dmsweb/frmfndapdsearch.aspx)

Dietitians Association of Australia for the details of a local dietitian

### For more information

**Parent Helpline 1300 364 100**

**Parenting SA**

**Children, Youth and Women's Health Service**

**Telephone (08) 8303 1660**

**Internet: [www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)**

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**Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia**

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