

Eating Disorders: What can schools do?

One of the resources that can be accessed through Breatheeducation shows the first signs that might suggest one of your students is developing an eating disorder. This sheet partners well with the signs resource by offering ways that young people can be supported in relation to eating disorders and body positivity.

Education and training

- Train school/college staff to recognise the early signs that may suggest a pupil is struggling with body dissatisfaction or has unhealthy views of body image. This could include a persistently distorted view of their body or early signs of [eating disorders](#).
- Staff should be aware of the language they use when talking about body size, shape and appearance with each other and pupils, to avoid reinforcing negative views of body image or stereotypes.
- Develop effective policies and practices that do not tolerate appearance-related teasing, such as body shaming, and support children and young people who are teased or bullied as a result of their appearance, body size or shape, or ethnicity.
- Negative family attitudes to body image can be passed on to children and young people. It's helpful for schools and colleges to provide information to parents and carers on how they can positively influence their children's feelings about their bodies.

With Young people

- The health and wellbeing curriculum in each UK country covers mental wellbeing alongside information about healthy choices and exercise. Schools should use these lessons to help children and young people think about health rather than appearance, and celebrate their positive attributes that aren't linked to their appearance.
- Reinforce positive body image messaging through making sure that classroom and school/college posters, pictures, books, music, toys and other materials are diverse in terms of body size, shape, height, skin colour, abilities and disabilities, etc.
- Develop children's digital literacy skills by helping them to think critically about how people are portrayed in the media and through social media, and how images can be changed and air-brushed.
- Encourage pupils to explore the pros and cons of [social media](#). For example, it helps them connect with their peers, but it can reinforce attitudes about how they look, and encourage them to seek and earn approval based on their appearance.
- Schools can show children and young people, through physical education, that being active is about having fun - and that exercise and being active can help to relieve stress, improve memory and boost your mood.

- Explore what it feels like to be healthy, rather than what it looks like. Encourage healthy food choices and emphasise the role of food as fuel
- Teach health and nutrition in a way that is mindful that there may be class members who take it literally. E.g. Be careful to share healthy eating messages that are about achieving a healthy balance, rather than inadvertently promoting a ban on sweets, cake, carbohydrates and sugar as there may be some pupils who could be vulnerable to this type of message
- Promote body confidence and body diversity. In class activities/learning about nutrition and body image, acknowledge that they are still growing. Try to avoid unhelpful/dangerous messages about BMI that do not account for diversity, ethnicity etc.
- Promote eating lunch and explain that it is healthy and necessary to eat three meals a day; that we need the food to give us energy. It can be very easy for young people to skip lunch and breakfast. Consider initiatives that promote the fun, social advantages of eating lunch e.g. lunch club.
- Promote body acceptance and positive body image between each other as a staff group, embrace each other's diversity and be careful not to share negative views of yourself with your students.
- Watch out for corridor conversations where pupils that praise weight loss and "will power to restrict/dieting success" as these might be key signs that as a class you need to do some work around nutrition and body image.