

FACTSHEET

What can I do to protect my children from developing an eating disorder?

It is important to start by recognising there are always a number of different factors involved in the development of eating disorders. Eating disorders develop when a person is unable to deal with difficult emotions and food becomes the channel for that distress. There are many different reasons why young people feel unable to cope with anxiety and every individual will have a unique experience. When eating disorders develop, it is not because parents have 'done something wrong'.

However there are some simple steps you can take as a family to guard against your child developing an eating disorder and ensure that if problems do develop, you will identify them as early as possible.

Eating together as a family

Eat together as a family, as often as you can. This can be difficult to manage along with the pressures and schedules of our everyday lives. But eating disorders typically develop at a time when teenagers are becoming more independent and this independence often includes their eating habits.

Teenagers may eat with friends more often and snack on their own at times which suit them. It is only by ensuring that you do eat together as a family on a regular basis that you will be able to see what your child is eating and identify any changes and problems.

I'm always dieting – will that influence my daughter?

Eating disorders often start to develop during puberty, which can be a very traumatic for the young person. They will be looking for positive role models in the people around them. If you share family meals with your children, enjoying a wide range of food, you will help them to maintain a positive relationship with food. While many of us watch what we eat to guard against middle-aged weight gain, try not to allow these concerns to dominate mealtimes.

What should we do about faddy eating?

There is a balance to be struck – you want your children to eat well and will tend to cook meals which they like. But if you allow too much choice, it can encourage restrictive and faddy eating.

For example, if you regularly offer a number of main meal options, you may be offering too much choice.

Allowing children to always choose their own meals can encourage restrictive and faddy diets. Try to plan meals that all the family will eat rather than make separate meals for each member, perhaps with a choice of vegetables.

Should we restrict 'bad foods'?

Dietitians always advise, there is no such thing as 'bad food' – the key is how much you eat and how often. You can enjoy 'treats' providing your diet contains a range of healthy foods. Banning certain foods is not helpful – it may result in your child craving the banned food and contribute to them developing an emotional relationship with that food.