

Prevention Tips for Parents

How to Foster Healthy Body Image and Normal Eating in Your Children

Courtesy of Cabrini College's Office of Counseling & Psychological Services and the Renfrew Center

College can be a stressful time for students, and sometimes they use food as a coping mechanism. It is not uncommon for students to gain or to lose weight during their college years. Determining if it is a problem requiring professional help can be tricky. As a concerned parent, you don't want to make a possible problem worse by inadvertently saying the wrong thing. The list below will provide a guideline for you.

Warning signs of a more serious eating disorder:

- Extreme weight loss or weight gain, necessitating new clothing to fit their new shape
- Obsession with or rejection of food
- Binge eating
- Vomiting or purging after meals
- Personality change

If you notice these warning signs, begin by asking, "Are you okay? You seem a little down (or stressed, or anxious, or different)." This might help open a dialogue about the issue. Share your concern about changes in personality and mood, rather than appearance. Suggest a doctor's visit or counseling. If you are more concerned, visit the Renfrew Center's website for a therapist in your area who specializes in the treatment of eating disorders, or call Cabrini's Office of Counseling & Psychological Services at 610-902-8561 for additional advice and resources.

The following tips will help guide you through this difficult time:

DO:

- Examine your own beliefs and behavior related to body image and weight and consider how your children might interpret the messages they get from you.
- Encourage healthy eating and exercise.
- Allow your child to determine when he/she is full.
- Talk about the variety of different body types and the fact that they can all be acceptable and healthy.
- Discuss the danger of dieting, and that studies show people can actually gain more weight by restricting their calorie intake by too much.
- Tell your child you love him/her for what is inside, not because of how he/she looks.

DON'T

- Label foods as "good" or "bad."
- Use food for rewards or punishments.
- Diet or encourage your child to diet.
- Comment on weight or body types: yours, your child's, or anyone else's.
- Allow teasing or making fun of anyone based on physical characteristics including size.

Cabrini College offers free confidential counseling for all students. To schedule an appointment, call 610-902-8561

The Renfrew Center specializes in eating disorder treatment and education.

For more information, visit www.renfrew.org or call 1-800-RENFREW.