

Supporting Children with their Eating Behaviours



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This booklet has been designed to be a helpful reference if you think that your child's eating behaviours have changed. It briefly outlines some of the behaviours you may notice and how you can support your child. For information purposes different eating disorders have been briefly outlined.

It is important to remember that you know your child best, and should therefore trust your judgment and act accordingly on any concerns you have.

Why have my child's eating behaviours changed?

Bereavement can cause a major sense of chaos in children's lives; resultantly they may try to regain a sense of control by altering their eating behaviours.

Children often use food as a way of communicating that they are worried or anxious as they may not yet have the language to articulate these feelings.

Your child may make restrict their calorie intake or alternatively seek comfort from food.

It is important to look out for the following behaviours which may be an indication that your child is struggling with food:

- *Loss of appetite*
- *Reoccurring episodes of overeating*
- *Extreme weight fluctuations*
- *Hyper-focus on calories, body image or weight*
- *Avoidance of social situations or activities that involve food*

Anorexia Nervosa is an eating disorder where young people have a distorted body image. This leads to restricted eating, exercising excessively and engaging in other behaviours that prevents them from gaining weight.

Bulimia nervosa results in the young person eating (and often consuming large quantities of food) and then purging to prevent them from gaining weight.



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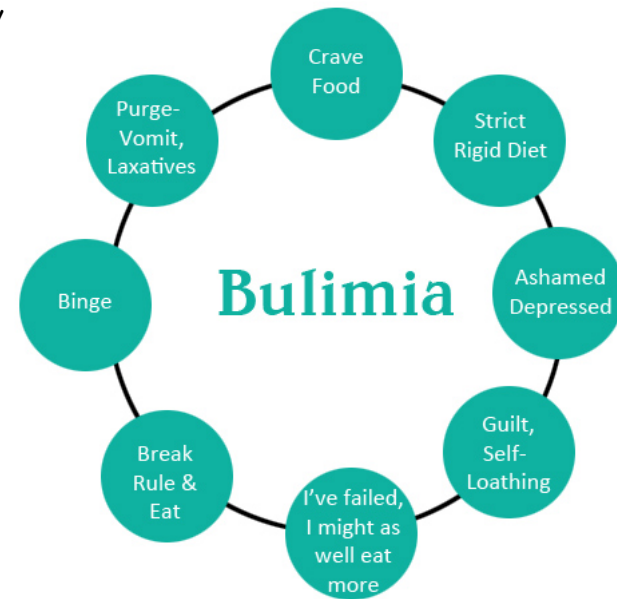
The following descriptions are of certain eating problems commonly seen, but not exclusive to, children under the age of 11:

Food refusal

This is more commonly seen in preschool children; children are likely to eat their favourite foods but may refuse to eat in certain environments (such as at school).

Restrictive eating

Children displaying restrictive eating patterns will eat regularly but may have smaller portions than other people of the same age would. It is common for other members of their family to have the same pattern of food intake.



What can I do to help my child?

If your child is displaying unusual eating behaviours ask yourself:

- Are they growing normally?
- Are they consuming enough calories so that they are not hungry?
- Do they seem happy and health in themselves?

If you can say yes to each of these questions then monitor your child but do not be alarmed. Children will commonly go through phases with food and these often pass with time.

If you are concerned then contact your child's GP; your child doesn't have to go with you if they do not want to. However if your child is over 18 they will need to ask for the help themselves. If they are not willing to do this, you may wish to seek support for yourself as this may help you to further support your child.

If your child is under 18, your GP may decide your family would benefit from being referred to specialist Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Your child may be offered talking therapy. You and other family members may also be offered support to help understand and support them.

- You could try to engage in an activity that you both enjoy together, such as taking a dog for a walk, watching a movie or creating some artwork as this can help to temporarily distract the young person and help you to further develop your emotional bond together.
- NHS England suggest trying to use sentences beginning with 'I' as opposed to you when discussing your concerns with your child.

Cruse Bereavement Care

Supports people after the death of someone close; they offer a wide range of support services.
Contact: 0844 477 9400 or visit www.cruse.org.uk

Outlook SouthWest

Provide information, practical support and guidance to adults who are bereaved. They aim to contact you within 72 hours of referral.
Contact: 01208 871 905

Counselling for Social Change

This charity offers Person-Centered counselling sessions run by relevantly qualified volunteers. The service do charge a nominal fee to cover their costs.
Contact: 01736 364 722

Where can I get further support for my child and myself?

KOOTH

Offer support to young people in Cornwall through online or one-to-one counselling and mentoring support.
Visit: Kooth.com



Young Minds

Offer advice on common issues affecting young people's emotional health and wellbeing.
Visit:



www.youngminds.org.uk
Parent Helpline: 0808 802 5544



Samaritans

'Offer a listening ear at any time of day or night'.
Contact (free of charge): 116 123, email jo@samaritans.org or visit www.samaritans.org

- You could make an affirmation bracelet with your child using beads and elastic. Each bead could represent a different affirmation. Alternatively you could write or draw affirmations and attach these to a key ring for your child to put somewhere safe (such as on their pencil case or inside their bag).

Examples of affirmations that could be used to make a keyring

I am **kind**

I am a **good friend**

I am a great **listener**

I am **loved**

I am **caring**

I am **brave**

I have a **strong** body

I **like** myself

I am **creative**

I am **good** enough

I am **resilient**

I **care** for myself

I am **helpful**

I am **funny**

I have a **positive** attitude

I **try** my best

I am **beautiful** inside and out

People **care** about me

Selective eating

If a child is a selective eater they may have a very narrow range of foods that they will eat. This can persist for several months or may last years. These children are very unwilling to try new foods and this is only likely to get worse if they feel as though they are being forced to eat foods that they do not believe they like.

Food phobia

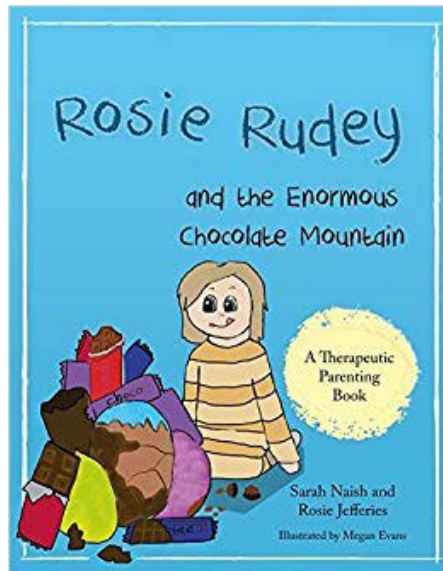
Children who have developed a food phobia are typically very resistant to eat and drink; this causes a great deal of concern.

Food phobias may develop if your child has had a traumatic experience with food in the past (such as choking or vomiting after eating). Children may avoid foods with certain textures and they report that eating and drinking hurts.

Food avoidance emotional disorder (FAED)

Children who have FAED experience a loss of appetite with is often associated with anxiety or depression following a traumatic incident such as a bereavement. This is often accompanied by troubles with sleeping, poor concentration, a general sense of hopelessness and tearfulness. Children with FAED may become very underweight but have a desire to increase their food intake but also feel unable to do so.

- If your child is overeating as a way of finding comfort 'Rosie Rudey and the Enormous Chocolate Mountain: A story about how hunger, overeating and using food for comfort' (book available on Amazon) may be helpful.
- As a short term strategy you may like to offer your child healthy nibbles throughout the day as this can encourage them to eat something. Although this may affect how much of their main meal they eat it will help to keep their blood sugar levels stable throughout the day.



- It may be a good idea to reduce the size of the portion you give to your child at dinner times as this will reduce the likelihood of them feeling overwhelmed.
- Give praise to your child about a range of their achievements, not just when they eat something.
- Offering your child time to talk about how they are feeling can help them to begin to identify the reasons they are struggling with food. Once they have been able to identify the feelings that have led to these behaviours they can begin to think about developing healthier coping mechanisms.

- Talking with your child about their feelings can be incredibly helpful. If your child doesn't want to talk or is difficult to engage then it may be beneficial to ask them to draw how they feel or use Play-Doh as a way of helping them to articulate their thoughts and feelings.

Reassuring them that they are safe and that the feelings they are experiencing are all part of the grieving process can help to reduce the anxiety that they may be feeling.

Be kind to yourself, you are doing your best, don't underestimate how good you are at supporting your child.

Activities that may help your child

- You could get your child to identify five people that they can talk to when they need some help (these people may be at home, in school or at clubs that your child attends). This will help to remind them that they are not alone and that there are people who care about them.
- 'Circle of Control' is a drawing activity that children can work through to visually identify what they do have control over.

