An education campaign about positive body image for elementary schools in B.C.

Positive body image and your school: what you can do

Dear Principal and Teachers,

In response to requests for developmentally appropriate materials for children in elementary schools The Eating Disorder Resource Centre of British Columbia has created a positive body image awareness campaign.

The Eating Disorder Resource Centre of British Columbia is a Provincial Health Services Authority agency offering information, referrals and a resource library to anyone in need of information regarding eating disorders and related issues.

The goals of this campaign include the following: first, to develop a poster related to positive body image that can be displayed in elementary schools; second, to raise awareness in the areas of positive body image and the impact of size discrimination; third, to create materials that offer both helpful guidelines and direction to further resources for school administrators, teachers and parents.

The Eating Disorder Resource Centre of B.C.
The Poster

The poster created for this awareness campaign focuses on positive body image and the acceptance of other people regardless of their weight, shape and size rather than specific information about eating disorders.

In Western culture the issues of eating disorders and related topics such as obesity and body image are often at the forefront of discussion. Many concerned and proactive teachers, in response to their students’ challenges, concerns and interests, develop or organize information regarding eating disorders for the classroom. This is a natural response to a major concern in the lives of children and youth today. However, it is argued teaching students specific information about eating disorders is not as effective as other prevention strategies and actually increases the number of people who struggle by unintentionally promoting dangerous weight control methods, glamorizing eating disorders and normalizing eating disorder behaviours.

Teachers have an important role to play in helping students maintain health and well-being and in appropriately intervening when a student is in need of specialized services. In contrast to offering information on eating disorders and details about illness, it is suggested educators follow a health promotion model by offering students information on how to be resilient and healthy in today’s challenging world. This can include focusing on topics such as positive body image, self-esteem, and media literacy.

Why a focus on size discrimination?

You will notice this awareness poster is encouraging children to befriend each other, regardless of weight, shape and size differences. Our decision to focus on acceptance and inclusion of all children is based on three specific areas.

First, children who are excluded from activities by their peers are more likely to withdraw from classroom activities and suffer academically (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006).
Second, research indicates the most common place children experience bias is at school (Neumark-Sztainer & Eisenberg, 2005).

Furthermore, research indicates negative attitudes towards obesity, reported among both schoolteachers and children can promote size discrimination toward larger children and body dissatisfaction in children who view their body shape, weight and size as undesirable (Hague & White, 2005).

Finally, research into the impact of weight bias in children's lives indicates many negative effects on larger children (Latner & Schwartz, 2005). For example, larger children have a more difficult time making friends, are often on the receiving end of harsher forms of victimization (i.e., repeated ganging up on and tormenting), experience more relational victimization (exclusionary and hurtful treatment occurring in the context of purported friendships) and are more likely to suffer from low self-esteem than their average weight classmates. Thin children are not exempt from harassment either. The Ministry of Education's report *The Voice on Harassment*, (2001) reveals that children in grades eight to twelve who are identified as “too thin” are also harassed because of their body size. Regardless of weight, shape or size all children deserve to be respected for their unique selves. Together, parents, teachers, school administrators, health care agencies and government institutions can fight back against a culture that excessively promotes an unhealthy and, at times, harmful body ideal to its children.

Materials

The materials created for this awareness campaign include the *Friends Come in All Shapes and Sizes* poster and information related to the theme that people come in all shapes and sizes. It is our intention to raise awareness regarding the importance of using a health promotion model while offering strategies and information about helpful resources for school staff.

The following are three simple steps principals and teachers can take when working toward a positive and inclusive environment for their school.

Creating a size-friendly school atmosphere – three steps for Principals

1. Include a no tolerance policy for weight, shape and size teasing in your school’s anti-bullying/harassment strategy.

2. Organize staff development opportunities that encourage teachers to examine their attitudes toward physical appearance and their own body image. Furthermore, if your teachers are expected to present information on complex topics related to issues of
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eating pathology, body image, and other prevention efforts, it is important they have received the proper training to do it.

3. Scrutinize images in your school. Do you have posters in the hallways or classrooms that promote stereotypical representations of “ideal” beauty? What about the reading materials in your library? Make a point of displaying materials with children of all different body shapes, weights and sizes.

Creating a size-friendly classroom atmosphere – three steps for Teachers

1. Role model positive body image to your students.

2. When you discuss bullying in your classroom include teasing individuals for their body weight, shape or size.

3. Read books and offer resources to your students that promote size acceptance.

The following is a more in-depth guide for teachers on how they can help lessen students’ struggles with negative body image and potentially developing eating disorders without exposing them to potentially harmful information.

Challenge cultural norms

• MEDIA LITERACY IS KEY! Teach students how to look at ads more critically. The majority of commercials in magazines and on TV stress the importance of looks and link beauty and the purchase of consumer products with happiness, love, popularity and acceptance. What the media does not say is how unrealistic the thin ideal is for most people.

• Teach your students how photos of models depicted in the media are manipulated using computers, lighting and makeup to remove all traces of imperfection. Discourage the idea that being skinny is the quickest route to having a boyfriend or being popular. Also, teach your students how big business directs advertising and why and how advertising is persuasive.

What you can do:

What to avoid:

Glamorization and Normalization of eating disorders. This may happen, for example, when an individual who has recovered offers a class presentation about her/his experience, or movie stars or other rich and famous individuals are used as examples of people struggling with eating disorders or when students are asked to cut out pictures of “ideal” looking people for a collage of images. These types of activities are counterproductive because they can inadvertently glamorize the problem, and teens see it as a “cool” thing to do, and/or these activities can normalize the problem causing children to believe that disordered eating practices such as starvation and vomiting are common and, therefore, are normal and socially acceptable behaviours.

Build respect for different sizes, shapes and weights

• Don’t allow students to criticize other students’ shape, weight or size. Spoken or unspoken criticisms are absorbed by children who may end up feeling inadequate or unacceptable as a result. It is unacceptable for students to make racist comments to each other and negative comments regarding shape, weight and size should be treated the same way.

• Expose your students to images that depict the whole range of weights, shapes and sizes people come in. Read your students stories where the hero or heroine offer alternative role models to our current stereotypical ideals. Stories that allow children to create their own mental picture of characters rather than having them imposed by images of the “thin beautiful woman” or “tall, muscular man”.

• Fight “weightism.” Studies show that as young as 4 years old, children describe fat people as “mean,” “stupid” and “ugly,” and thin people as “good,” “smart” and “beautiful.” Breaking down such destructive stereotypes means learning to respect body size differences. Help students understand that “fat” is both a descriptive term, like having freckles or blue eyes, and a relative term, like being tall or short.

• Encourage your school to develop policies against size and sexual discrimination, harassment, teasing, and name-calling. Research indicates sexual harassment, teasing and name calling can be a precipitating factor in the development of an eating disorder.

• Work to eliminate public weigh-ins and fat measurements for children and adults. This includes weigh-ins for athletes, dancers, etc.
• Be a role model by taking people seriously for what they say, feel and do rather than for how they look. Reinforce this in the classroom by including role models who are respected for more than their appearance.

What you can do:

Use or develop lesson plans in the areas of self-esteem, critical thinking, self-assertion and communication skills instead of eating disorder information.

Have your library order books and other resources you can use with your students. Contact the Eating Disorder Resource Centre for a book list.

Be conscious of the types of posters and materials your students are exposed to. Be sure to select materials that reflect the spectrum of different shapes, sizes and weights humans naturally develop into.

What to avoid:

If you can, do not use or consult weight tables or calorie counters in your classroom activities. If you do use these materials, educate your students on how to critically analyze their usefulness and be sensitive to those students who may feel uncomfortable being involved in these types of activities.

For example, weight charts like the Body Mass Index are unable to meaningfully predict a person’s health. Just because a person falls within the “healthy or normal” weight range on the chart does not mean she/he is healthy. Also, a fat person will score higher than average on this chart but, it does not mean this person is unhealthy or needs to lose weight. Some people are healthier at a heavier rather than an average weight. Just like some people are taller and some people are shorter than the average person, there are going to be people who are fatter and people who are thinner than the average person.

The use of calorie charts as a method for managing weight is counterproductive. Calorie charts teach people to use external cues instead of internal cues when eating. The number of calories an individual needs on any given day depends on many factors and is unique to that person. Using a calorie counter disconnects a person from her/his natural or biological hunger signals and can lead to over and under eating. Instead, help students develop skills for recognizing and attending to internal hunger signals.

Also, some students will be uncomfortable using weight scales, charts and calorie counters. Students who have struggled with an eating disorder, who are larger than other students, who have experienced a physical trauma, etc. may not want to take part in activities that ask them to focus on their body, food and weight. Give students options for alternative activities.
Role model self-acceptance

- Role modeling healthy behaviour to students means watching what you say and how you behave in front of them. Never criticize your own, your students or other people's weight, shape or size. Instead, talk about how to take care of and nurture one's self through a variety of wholesome foods rather than about dieting to get rid of fat. Emphasize the value of moderate physical activity for good health and fun rather than as a way to work off excess calories.

- Educate yourself on the dangers of dieting. Avoid talking about dieting and other extreme weight loss practices yourself because children are great imitators. Dieting can be one of the first steps to someone developing a more serious eating disorder. Children should never be put on a diet because it can cause physiological, psychological and emotional developmental delays.

- Never tease a child (or anyone) or comment on what she/he is eating. If you are concerned about a student's eating, privately talk to the school counsellor and the parents. The more a child feels pressured to slim down, the more she/he may overeat in response to feelings of being unloved and unaccepted.

What you can do:

Be open to exploring ways on how to improve your self-esteem and body image.

Learn how you can foster healthy and realistic attitudes about weight, shape, growth, food and nutrition in your students.

Developing self-worth unrelated to looks

- Emphasize inner beauty by reinforcing the idea that beauty is determined by character traits, not looks. Talk to your students about what kind of people they are, their strengths and weaknesses. Let them know that their appearance is only one aspect of who they are.

- Allow younger students to experience their bodies as wonderful creations through activities such as dancing, dressing up, face painting, swimming or playing in the park.

- Encourage your students to explore activities such as athletics, music, drama, writing, story telling, volunteering, etc. The development of a special talent, unrelated to her/his looks, will help to improve a child's self-worth, self-esteem, experience, competence and community involvement.
“Healthy” eating messages

- Avoid categorizing foods as good and bad or healthy and unhealthy. Negative focus on food messages contributes to fear of food and earmarking food as either “good” or “bad” is seldom an effective strategy. Forbidding food categorized as “bad” may increase a child’s desire for that food and may also foster feelings of guilt when these foods are eaten. Research indicates children who have no access to (“junk/bad”) food tend to over-eat these foods when given the chance and eat when not hungry. Even fat, despite its negative press, has nutritional value. All foods in moderation contribute to a balanced diet.

- When discussing food and eating with your students stress the importance of natural hunger and satiation signals. It is important students know how to listen to their bodies’ signals about when they are hungry and when they are satisfied. Help your students distinguish between physical hunger and emotional hunger.

What you can do:
Take steps to create a positive environment where the focus shifts from weight to wellness with a positive emphasis on maximizing health.
Visit: The Healthy Weight Network at www.healthyweightnetwork.com
Books: Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family & How to Get Your Kid to Eat... But Not Too Much by Ellyn Satter.

What to avoid:
Talking to students about eating disorders should be avoided. This may introduce young people to the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours that precede eating problems. For example, avoid talking about diets and dieting. Dieting is a form of disordered eating and should be avoided. Alternatively, give students positive information on what balanced eating is and how balanced eating facilitates growth, mood stability, concentration, etc.

Don’t give suggestive information about weight control techniques like vomiting, laxative abuse, diet pills and smoking. Giving detailed information such as this teaches kids how to be sick, not how to be resilient.

Understanding the continuum

- Diagnosed eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa are characterized by a distortion in perception of body shape and weight and severe disturbances in eating behaviour. Binge eating disorder is also characterized by
severe disturbances in eating behaviour. For further information regarding eating disorders please see the article, “Children and Adolescents with Eating Disorders: Strategies for Teachers and School Counselors” and the Eating Disorder Resource Centre of B.C. brochure “If You Feel Good on the Inside It Will Shine Through” (Contact the EDRCBC for these materials).

• Diagnosed eating disorders can be life threatening. Medical consequences of eating disorders can include heart failure, gastric rupture, vision deterioration, muscle wasting, bone density loss, electrolyte disturbances and death. It is crucial individuals who are struggling receive the support and treatment they need; however, it is also important to be concerned about and take action against the wide range of disordered eating behaviours and attitudes that straddle normal eating and diagnosed eating disorders. Disordered eating behaviours can include guilt about eating, dieting, compulsive exercising, and skipping meals. Disordered eating and eating disorders are complex expressions of underlying problems with identity and self-concept. These difficulties may stem from traumatic experiences and are influenced by societal ideals of beauty and worth. A person who develops an eating disorder may also be responding to biological factors (genetic susceptibility), family issues (divorce), and her/his psychological make-up (perfectionist). It is important to understand the complex nature of disordered eating while recognizing they are not only about food, vanity or a stage someone will grow out of.

Understanding obesity

• Disordered eating can include individuals struggling with obesity, but not everyone who is obese has disordered eating or an eating disorder. The causes of obesity are more complicated than excessive calorie consumption and lack of exercise. It is important to understand the genetic or biological factors that influence weight and shape as well as the contributing factors of culture, poverty, and the medical conditions and medications that influence weight gain. Safe and effective obesity education, prevention and treatment need to include methods for preventing the related issues of eating disorders, hazardous weight loss, nutrient deficiencies, size discrimination, and body hatred.

• Negative attitudes toward obesity and obese people are often unconsciously held. Consequently, the individual who is overweight or obese is often blamed for her/his condition and factors other than eating too much and exercising too little are not considered. Despite the reasons why someone is overweight or obese, there is no
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excuse for prejudice. All students, irrespective of weight, shape or size, deserve a teacher’s respect and guidance. For prevention efforts to be successful, a teacher must be aware of negative attitudes, beliefs and/or behaviours about fatness in our culture and aware of her/his attitudes about overweight and obese people she/he may be inadvertently teaching the students.

• Obesity prevention programs may result in undesirable outcomes. Singling out fat children for intervention may cause psychological or emotional harm and eating disorders.

What not to do:
For example, if your class is enjoying cookies, do not give everyone in the class a cookie except the “overweight” or “fat” kid. Singling out a child out because of her/his weight, shape or size humiliates her/him and ultimately perpetuates fat phobic myths such as fat people are unhealthy, different and are deserving of prejudice.

Do not suggest a diet.

What you can do:
Remember it is common for fat children to face teasing, rejection and discrimination on a daily basis. Work to accept fat children at any size and support them in building self-esteem and positive body image.

Survey your classroom and school walls. Remove any materials that contain negative stereotypes about fat people.

To learn strategies for working with fat children in schools Visit: www.radiancemagazine.com/kids_project/working.htm “Working with Fat Children in the Schools”

Concerned about a student?

• You may have a student ask you for your help or ask you to give her/him counselling assistance. Disordered eating and obesity are complicated and can result in serious complications. Treatment for individuals diagnosed with an eating disorder requires a team of professionals who include, as a start, a physician, a dietitian and a counsellor. Treatment must be left to qualified health care professionals. It would be inappropriate to attempt to counsel a student or prescribe diets or weight control regimes.

• If you are concerned about a student, discuss your concerns with your school’s counsellor, and devise a plan of action for talking with the student, the student’s parents and for the referral process. Confronting the student with your concerns is not always
recommended. If a student approaches you and asks for your help, listen to her/his concerns without commenting on the student’s appearance or weight and without offering suggestions on how to eat healthy or lose weight in a “healthy” way. Let the student know it is important to seek specialized assistance, and you will help her/him find appropriate services (Contact the EDRCBC for referral information).

Awareness and prevention are multilayered

Researchers investigating eating disorder and disordered eating prevention assert prevention and awareness programs need to not only educate students but also the teachers, school administrators, parents, families, community agencies and government policy makers. It is important to recognize how difficult it is for an individual to change unhealthy attitudes, beliefs and behaviours without healthy role modeling and the creation of healthy environments for the changes to grow.

In a school setting, for example, this means not only offering a prevention strategy in the classroom but also making sure students are safe to walk down the halls in the school without being ridiculed, making sure there are pictures on the schools walls that represent all the different shapes, sizes and weights people come in, making sure parents receive information on how to support a healthy body image in their children, et cetera.

If your students want to research the topic for an assignment

The “First Do No Harm” model is applicable in this situation. Many students want to put up pictures of emaciated women struggling with anorexia nervosa and/or discuss, in detail, the types of behaviours people who struggle engage in. Once again, this may do more harm than good by offering information to students on how to be sick. It is suggested you have students approach disordered eating information in the classroom from a health promotion model. This means asking your students to talk about how to be resilient to pressures, identified as important by the student, in the challenging world they are growing up in. Emphasize protective factors by focusing on healthy body image, self-esteem, healthy relationships, expressing emotions, effective communication, etc.

If your students want eating disorder information

How we feel about our body and the behaviours we engage in are intimately connected. It is not uncommon to hold deeply seated beliefs about health, nutrition and exercise requirements that are based on information gathered from television or from the latest fad diet book. It is important that the information offered to students is based on accurate
information gathered from accredited service providers who have expertise in the field of disordered eating.

If your students are asking for disordered eating information, it is important to question why. Is offering a lecture to the entire class on the specifics of disordered eating going to solve the issue or problem the students are facing? It may be more appropriate to offer specific information to identified individuals rather than giving disordered eating information to the entire class.

RESOURCES


ORGANIZATIONS AND GROUPS

National Eating Disorder Information Centre | www.nedic.ca/knowthefacts/preventionhealth.shtm

Jessie’s Hope Society (Canadian) | www.jessieshope.org

The Eating Disorder Resource Centre of B.C. | Houses a lending library of books, videos, journals and written materials that can be mailed across the province. Telephone: 604-875-2084/1-800-665-1822 or email edrcbc@cw.bc.ca

Mission Nutrition | Lesson plans on nutrition and body image, www.missionnutrition.ca

Health Canada’s Vitality Program | Offers information on facilitating healthy eating and physical exercise, http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/nutrition/weights-poids/vitalit/vitality_approach-approche_vitalite_e.html

The Oregon Resiliency Project | Promoting children’s mental health through social and emotional learning – entire curriculum guides, http://orp.uoregon.edu

Don’t Buy It. | Media literacy for children and teens, www.pbskids.org/dontbuyit

BOOKS FOR KIDS

I Like Me! by Nancy Carlson  |  Shapesville by Mills & Osborn  |  I’m Gonna Like Me by Curtis
BOOKS FOR TEENS

The Creative Journal for Teens: Making Friends with Yourself & The Teens’ Solutions Workbook, Franklin Lakes

The Struggle to be Strong: True Stories by Teens About Overcoming Tough Times, Desetta & Wolin

Made You Look: How Advertising Works and Why You Should Know, Sherry Graydon

Coping with Invisible Tigers: A Stress Management Guide for Teens, E. Hipp

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

Every Body is a Somebody: Promoting Healthy Body Image, Positive Self-Esteem, Healthy Eating and an Active Lifestyle for Female Adolescents. 905-791-7800 ext. 2702 (Omit the chapter on eating disorders)

Healthy Body Image: Teaching Kids to Eat and Love Their Bodies Too! Grades 4, 5, 6, http://www.gurze.com

Body Image Resource Collection Grades 1-12, www.bodyimageworks.com

Eating Disorder Information for Middle School Personnel, www.4women.gov/BodyImage/bodywise/