

Overeating

Things to think about

In trying to understand why a child or young person may be overeating, ask yourself the following:

- Do you know if they have recently experienced bereavement or divorce?
- Do you know if they have experienced any trauma in the past?
- Do you know if they have been bullied at school for being 'fat' or for other things?
- Do they come from a family where there is an unusual emphasis placed on eating and drinking?
- Are they known for trying harder than others to please adults?
- Do they come from a home where there is poor role modelling in relation to food choices?
- From the information available to you, have patterns or changes in patterns of eating and drinking become well-established?
- Are the changed behaviours in relation to eating and drinking happening in certain situations and not others?
- Do you know if they are sometimes eating and drinking normally? If so, with whom and where?
- What, if any, appear to be the adverse effects of their eating behaviour on the people around them?
- What, if any, appear to be the benefits (to them) of their behaviour in terms of the effect on others?

Think about yourself

Because overeating is often viewed in our society as a weakness connected to greed, this can negatively affect our attitudes and responses to a young person who is experiencing this difficulty. Being aware of your own biases and prejudices can help you see the reasons behind the young person's overeating. This will help you to be sympathetic in your response.

What you can do

- Calmly and discretely arrange to speak to the child/young person on their own.
- In a caring and non-judgemental way, share with them what you have observed about their eating and drinking behaviour.

- Explain that you have concerns that what you have observed to be over eating may indicate that they are unhappy or worried.
- Provide an opportunity for the child/young person to talk privately and confidentially to you about any concerns or worries that they may have.
- Encourage the young person to focus on those areas of their life that they consider to be going well and in which they feel they have control.
- Explore routines and habits. Provide suggestions and support for interrupting and eventually breaking habits which have become associated with overeating by introducing something new into their routine.
- If the young person is motivated to change, encourage and support them to gradually reduce the number of times per day in which they have become accustomed to overeating.
- For a younger child find out what non-food rewards would be meaningful to them and set up a system of rewards for interrupting their previous eating routine.
- Accept that there will be times when the child/young person reverts to previous behaviours. Remain calm and provide support rather than punishment when this happens.

When to contact a mental health specialist

- If you are given an indication that the child/young person's change of eating habits has been in response to a serious trauma in their lives, such as sexual abuse, seek advice from your local mental health specialists and/or social work department.

How to contact a mental health specialist

You should get in touch with your local health centre or hospital to obtain a contact number for the appropriate children and young people's mental health specialists.

Remember - you can contact your local mental health specialists for a number of reasons, for example:

- For advice on how to make a referral about a named child.
- For advice about whether or not to make a referral (it is normal practice to seek this advice without naming the child in the first instance).
- For advice about what to do (once again there should be no necessity to name the child).

By not naming the child you are protecting their right to confidentiality. This method of seeking advice also has the advantage that you do not need to get anyone's consent in advance of your contact phone call.