

Eating Disorder Warning Signs In Children

Although no actual test for eating disorders exists, there is much that can be done to discover whether or not a family member has anorexia.

Observation is the first line of defense for any parent. If an adolescent is losing a great deal of weight, or a young child is failing to gain weight at an expected rate, something is probably wrong, especially if she has body image issues or possesses a genuine fear of gaining weight.

Other observable signs along the mental-health line are anxiety, depression, or an inability to concentrate. At the very least, these children should be seen by the family doctor or a primary care provider. If other medical conditions are ruled out, anorexia should be considered. Remember, children as young as six are currently being diagnosed with eating disorders.

It is important to detect changes in diet and eating habits. This extends to breakfast, snacks, and most importantly, dinner. Most parents already know how valuable it is for a family to share dinner together, simply as a bonding or catching-up time with one another. Dinnertime is also an opportunity to watch a child eat. When we say eat, we mean the food needs to actually be consumed. A common anorexia behavior is the ability to not eat, while all the time making others think the opposite. A standard technique is to slip food to the family pet, or hide it in a napkin, to be thrown away later. Often, food is pushed around on the plate, to make it appear as though there is less of it at the end of the meal.

If anorexia is suspected, communication is a good place to start. Talk with the young child or adolescent about general subjects such as school, sports, or friends. These conversations may lead to other topics that may elicit more insight regarding feelings and emotions. Do not expect the child to admit to having an eating disorder, because the truth is, they rarely do. This is not a privacy issue, it is the secrecy and deception that is part of the disease. In some cases, the child may be forthcoming and agree to change her behaviors regarding food, get back on the right track and take better care of her health; but again, probably not.