

## **Helping your child return to school**

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This handout answers some common questions parents have about their child's return to school after being in the hospital.

Being at school involves studying and physical activities such as gym class and sports. As your child is recovering from a serious and complicated illness, schoolwork and activity need to be carefully matched to his or her physical, mental and emotional health. Until your child has learned how to cope better with the stresses of daily life, over-involvement in activities could lead to a setback.

For these reasons, your child's return to school will take some planning. Start by talking with your child. Your child's teachers and the members of the Eating Disorders Team can also help your child make a smooth transition back to school.

### **Should my child return to school right after leaving the hospital?**

Most children benefit from returning to school right away. This gives them a chance to practice eating in a normal environment, with the fun and distraction of friends and schoolwork.

Delaying your child's return to school and peer relationships may not be helpful. If you keep your child out of school, he or she may become anxious, concerned about what people are thinking and worried about being able to "catch up".

Think about your child's needs and ask how he or she feels about going back to school. Make plans together for when he or she will return to school.

## **Should I discuss my child's eating disorder with the teacher?**

This is your decision, but we recommend that you talk with your child first. Discuss how you will share this information and with whom. Children can become upset with their parents for disclosing this information without their permission. This can make them feel awkward, embarrassed and worried that people will no longer like them.

Think about why you would share this information. Teachers don't usually need to know the details of your child's illness. They may already be aware of the problem or brought it to your attention. Their skills are best used to help your child overcome challenges with schoolwork and learn to become less focused on getting things perfect.

Talk to your child's teachers about having your child complete only the tasks and assignments that are absolutely necessary. Focus on the major projects, not all the day-to-day work that was missed. This can help your child make a better transition back to school.

**Teachers do not have the authority to insist that your child eats or to supervise his or her meals.** It is not the teacher's job to become involved in or try to sort out worries about eating.

## **What should we say when others ask what is or was wrong?**

While many young people are comfortable talking about the fact that they have an eating disorder, others are not. It is extremely important that your child's wishes come first. Talk with your child about with whom you will share personal information and how to best do this.

Your child's therapist can help. He or she can give you ideas and help you practice what to say to concerned friends.

## **My child used to spend too much time on homework, what can I do to help?**

Before your child came to the hospital, you may have been concerned about the amount of assigned homework or how much homework your child thought was necessary. The volume of homework may have felt like a burden to you and your teen.

Many teens with eating disorders have high academic standards for themselves and tend to go beyond what is required of them. Because they are good students, they are often asked to take on additional responsibilities. Teens with poor self-image may only value themselves in terms of academic achievements. They may constantly strive for perfection to satisfy a need for approval from others. Children with low weight can also have difficulty concentrating. They can be harshly critical of their own ability to think and achieve.

When your child returns to school, the amount and content of schoolwork should be carefully matched to your child's physical and mental health. Teachers and parents need to understand that it may be necessary to temporarily relax or lower academic demands or goals, until your child has regained a normal weight.

It is reasonable for you to set limits on how much schoolwork is being done every day. Meet with your child's teacher to discuss the minimum requirements, given your child's medical condition. Determine the time, amount and content of schoolwork that is manageable, without putting unnecessary pressure or anxiety on your child. It is important that parents, teachers and the health care team agree on this.

Your child may be anxious about the future. It will help to talk about this and provide reassurance. Your child needs to know that it is OK to take a break and that he or she will be accepted and loved, regardless of grades or awards.

## Should my child take part in gym class or sports?

Talk with your child's doctor about how much physical activity your child should have. There are physical, mental and emotional aspects to consider.

### Questions to consider about physical activity

- Has over-exercise been part of your child's eating disorder?
- Does your child do compulsive activity when alone, such as crunches or jumping jacks?
- Would your child like to do less of an activity? Or could the level of activity be decreased, such as "recreational" instead of "rep" sports?
- Has your child continued to gain the required amount of weight since leaving the hospital, without activity?
- Is your child willing to accept that he or she will likely need more nutrition to compensate for the activity and allow for proper growth?
- Will your child be able to attend family meals?
- Is your child already over-scheduled?
- Does your child have a balance of physical and non-physical hobbies and interests?
- Does your child use other ways of controlling anxiety?
- Is your child self-conscious in gym class or does your child compare his or her body to other teens in the class?
- Is the gym the best place to exercise or is there a more social activity he or she could be involved in?
- Did your child actually enjoy the activity or did he or she feel compelled to do it? (because others said he or she was good at it or they have invested time and money in his or her development)
- Do your child's limitations need to be discussed with the coach?
- Is the sport conducive to recovery?

If your child is not ready for gym, he or she should not have to "sit out" and watch their peers take part. Talk with the teacher to see if there is another activity to keep him or her occupied during this time.

## **What happens when I am not there to supervise my child's lunch and snacks?**

There are different ways to manage this, depending on how far along your child is in the recovery process.

- Some children are successful without supervision. They find eating at school easier because their peers are a helpful distraction.
- Some children do require supervision. **We strongly advise against having a friend or sibling supervise your child's meals.** This means that a parent must pick up the child from school and have lunch with him or her. Supervising meals at school is difficult for most parents and disruptive for teens. Most teens would like to spend lunch with their friends and do not want attention drawn to their illness at school.

You and your child will decide what works best for both of you.

Having your child's weight checked regularly at the clinic will tell you whether you are on track or whether more involvement is needed during the school day.

## **What if there is no time to eat in my child's schedule?**

A full high school schedule can make teens feel they don't have time for a morning snack. However, to recover from an eating disorder, teens must get enough nutrition throughout the day.

Plan meals and snacks at convenient times during the day, and when a parent is available to supervise. Choose small snacks that provide a lot of energy and are convenient to carry and store at school. Some teens choose to pour Ensure<sup>®</sup> into a travel mug or sports bottle and keep it at their locker or carry it with them in their knapsack. No one knows what is in the container, which helps teens feel more comfortable. Another choice is to have a larger family meal instead of a morning snack. This reduces the need to eat at school.

When your child's nutrition has improved, a morning snack may no longer be needed.

## **What if my child is embarrassed by having a large lunch?**

Some teens feel embarrassed that their lunch looks much larger than others' in the cafeteria. Here are some suggestions for helping your child:

- Help your child think of food as “medicine” at this point in his or her recovery.
- Remind your teen that this amount of nutrition is needed to meet his or her current health needs.
- If your child is required to gain weight, remind him or her that she or he will not have to eat this way forever. It is necessary until your child's health has recovered and he or she is maintaining weight.
- Choose energy-rich foods that your child is comfortable eating when with his or her peers.
- Encourage your teen to sit with at least one friend who he or she feels is supportive and with whom he or she can relax.
- Talk with your child's therapist so that he or she can help your teen develop coping statements to challenge her anxious thoughts.
- Remind your child that he or she only sees a “snapshot” of what other teens are actually eating. Your teen does not see what they are eating throughout the day and in the evening.
- It is not helpful to compare. All people have different energy requirements and you are eating what your body needs.

**If you have more questions or would like help with your child's return to school, speak with your child's therapist, doctor or the hospital schoolteacher.**