

Helping your child return to school

This handout will go over some common questions families 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 their physical, mental and emotional health. Until your child has become weight restored and 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 to 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. Delaying your child's return to school and peer relationships may not be helpful. If you keep your child out of school, they 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 they feel about going back to school. Caregivers should make the ultimate decision for when their child 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 information, how much 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 about what others will think of 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.

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 nor the training to supervise their 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 what 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. They 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 child.

Many young people 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. Young people 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 caregivers need to understand that it may be necessary to temporarily relax or lower academic demands or goals, until your child's body and mind have become nourished.

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 they will be accepted and loved, regardless of grades or awards.

Should my child take part in gym class or sports?

There are physical, mental and emotional aspects to consider in allowing your child to return to any level of physical activity including gym class. Talk with your child's doctor about how much physical activity your child should have.

It is not recommended for a young person with an eating disorder, just discharged from the hospital, to participate in any level of physical activity.

Questions to consider about physical activity

- Has over-exercise been part of your child's eating disorder?
- Has your child continued to make progress in weight restoration since leaving the hospital, without activity?
- Is your child willing to accept that they will likely need more nutrition to compensate for the activity and allow for proper growth?
- Is your child already over-scheduled?
- Does your child have other ways of coping with anxiety?
- Did your child actually enjoy the activity or did they feel compelled to do it? (because others said they were good at it or they have invested time and money in their development)

If your child is not ready for gym, they 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 them occupied during this time.

Please consult with your child's outpatient physician before reintroducing any sport or physical activity.

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.

- At the beginning of eating disorder treatment it is recommended to maintain meal supervision while attending school.
- **We strongly advise against having a friend or sibling supervise your child's meals.**
- Families can be creative and resourceful in figuring out meal supervision while attending school. Some families choose:
 - To have a parent, grandparent, caregiver pick them up and bring them home to eat
 - To have their child sit with parent/caregivers in their car in the parking lot to eat
 - To ask a teacher or staff member (if they are willing) to monitor snack/lunch and communicate with parents/guardians if food was not completed.

Caregivers will decide what works best for your child and family.

Having your child's weight checked regularly at their outpatient 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.

Families can be flexible and adjust the nutrition in order to have meals and snacks at more convenient times during the day i.e. when a caregiver is available to supervise. Some suggestions are:

- Pack a ready-to-eat snack (ex. granola bar, a muffin/loaf or yogurt drink) for your child to eat quickly in between classes. It may not fully meet their needs but will provide them with some nutrition in between breakfast and lunch.
- Incorporate two afternoon snacks between when they get home from school and dinner.
- Have a larger afternoon or evening snack.

- Talk to the schools about accommodations for children and teens to have their snacks and then return to their class when completed.

Your child may require a significant amount of food to restore health and it could be tricky to add on to other meals to make up for that nutrition. Include energy-rich options (spreads, dips, higher fat dairy products, bars, nuts etc.) where possible.

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

Once your child is ready to eat with peers...

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 their recovery.
- Remind your teen that this amount of nutrition is needed to meet their current health needs.
- If your child is required to gain weight, remind them that they will not have to eat this way forever. It is necessary until your child's health has recovered and they are maintaining weight.
- Choose energy-rich foods to help reduce volume of nutrition.
- Talk with your child's therapist so that they can help your child develop coping statements to challenge their anxious thoughts.
- Remind your child that they only see a “snapshot” of what others are actually eating. Your child 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, or doctor.