

Helping my young person to develop healthy eating habits

Why is it important?

Research carried out has revealed that obesity is a common problem for Cared for Children. Obesity can cause many problems in the future, such as: **joint pains, diabetes, high blood pressure and some cancers**. It is important, therefore, to try and help prevent early excess weight gain.

In Cared for Children early excess weight gain may be due to abnormal patterns and/or behaviours around eating. This leaflet aims to let you know what to look out for and how you can help.

What behaviours should I look out for?

- **Hoarding food** – saving and storing food items
- **Taking food without permission** – could be at home or elsewhere, for example, school
- **Picky eating** – preferring to eat unhealthy food with high fat and sugar content and refusing to eat vegetables or drink water.
- **Hyperphagia** – having an excessive appetite and not being able to detect when they are full. This can cause tummy pain, bloating and vomiting.
- **Binge eating** – frequently eating large amounts of food quickly.

Why may these behaviours occur?

- **Attachment** – A young person may have been brought up in an environment where their needs were not met by their parents or previous carers. This can change a young person's development and lead to the eating behaviours listed above.
- **Abuse** – if a young person has previously experienced abuse, in particular neglect, this can cause problems with their eating. A young person may not have had a regular supply of healthy food and this may, in turn, cause them to feel the need to secure their own food by stealing it, hoarding it, or binge eating food when it is available. They may also have only been provided with unhealthy processed food which can lead to picky eating and the refusal of healthy food later on.
- **Emotions** – attachment and abuse can cause problems with emotional regulation and development. This can lead to a young person overeating or restricting their food intake as a way to control their emotions. They may also confuse emotions with hunger and therefore eat when they do not need to.

What can be done to help?

- **Having food available** – Having a well-balanced supply of food readily available for a young person. Doing this will show the young person that you are able to meet their needs and this can help build a secure bond between you and the young person.
- **Routine** – providing 3 regular meals a day and involving the young person in this routine (e.g. by allowing them to help you prepare a meal or simply setting the table) gives a young person predictability in their life. This can help them to learn what a normal eating experience should be and can also help them to build a trusting relationship with you.
- **Encouraging healthy food choices** – for example having healthy snacks freely available such as a fruit bowl, vegetable sticks or low calorie snacks like rice cakes that a young person can help themselves to without having to ask.

Try to avoid:

Locking up food – locking or securing the cupboards or fridge can reinforce past experiences that a young person has had, such as there not being enough food or that they do not have to access food. This can make the eating behaviours listed above worse. Let the young person know which healthy snacks for example the fruit bowl they are allowed to help themselves to without permission.

How to seek help:

If the child or young person in your care is demonstrating these behaviours and you need further advice and support please contact the Looked after Health team on (0191) 5699012 or through referral from the GP to Lifecycle in South Tyneside or the CYPS service in Sunderland.

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This information was correct at the time of publication. While the Trust makes every reasonable effort to keep its information leaflets up to date, very recent changes may not yet be reflected in the information and you should discuss this with the clinical staff at the time of your appointment.

Publication date:	October 2021
Review date:	October 2024
Ref:	STSFT/(To be allocated)