



# Schools & Eating Disorders

Working in partnership with your child's school is crucial when supporting them through an eating disorder or if you suspect your child is showing signs of one. What can or should schools be doing to manage the situation in "loco parentis"? How knowledgeable are they about eating disorders? Does the support of individual teachers, the "ethos" of the school, the curriculum and other "systems in place" make any difference to the welfare and recovery of a pupil with an eating disorder?

We interviewed Melanie Edwards, housemistress of Edwards Girls Boarding House at Wells Cathedral School in Somerset, an independent co-educational senior school with 507 pupils and one of 4 specialist music schools in the country. Edwards House has 32 boarders from 14 -18 years and 43 day girls.

## Many people have the impression that eating disorders are a real problem nowadays in boarding schools. Do you see an increase?

Actually it's far less of a problem here than it was when I arrived 12 yrs ago. We had a serious case of a boy then with anorexia and so we set up an eating disorders committee to find out more about the illness, how better we could help him and any other pupil facing difficulties.

## Who made up the committee and what did it achieve?

It consisted of the deputy head, the nursing staff, and the house staff for both boys and girls houses, a proportion of which are day pupils. It established good communication between staff and a greater understanding of eating disorders. We have a very strong pastoral team here too, involving PHSE teachers and individual tutors.

## What is your personal understanding of eating disorders?

I know they are very complex psychological issues. It's not easy to always pinpoint causes. Tact, time and a lot of trust are needed. Reasons I've seen include parents having problems at home

and difficult marriage break ups. Pressure also that girls put themselves under to be high achievers and perfectionists.

## How do you spot an eating disorder?

We know our pupils very well so we notice changes in behaviour - withdrawal and sadness, the "lights go out" with a pupil. They may wear baggy jumpers. Their friends will often come and alert me to a problem, either they're worried or they notice their friend isn't eating enough or going in to lunch.

## What is your approach?

We try firstly to avoid major problems developing by

- Good communication and opportunities for pupils to talk to staff and be listened to. I spend a lot of time with the girls in house socially at the end of the day and am always available for them.
- Providing and maintaining an attitude of trust which is vital.
- Being aware of eating disorders generally and the signs in our pupils.
- Receiving training about eating disorders and going on refresher courses.

- Liasing with the medical team here and with the tutors and dining staff and with parents.

It sounds very "cut and dried", but in reality it's a case of relationships - of caring about and understanding individual young people and trying to "steer them gently" through many a difficulty including issues about food and eating, self esteem and development.

## How do you monitor a potential problem?

Some schools tick pupils in and out of the dining room for all three meals. We don't, but kitchen staff notice and inform me, or a teacher would, if a child is not eating enough or being "choosy". Boarders are expected to go in three times a day for meals and because staff are on duty they would very quickly come to attention.

If I knew there was a problem, a member of staff would "glide by" and I would ask the kitchen staff about the content of the meal.

## What do you do about a suspected eating disorder?

I would "find out" very discreetly and generally first of all. Then when the time seemed right, I'd have a word with the girl herself, just a chat really,

or she may well come to talk to me herself. Sometimes girls find a girl excusing herself from a trip or going to the loo at odd times, particularly after meals so I'd go and check afterwards.

## How do you approach parents?

I do not inform parents immediately and often I've found girls ask me specifically not to. I would be directing them towards talking to their parents but to begin with it may be to another adult at school, the school nurses or the counsellor or a tutor. I would involve day parents because they're responsible and I would involve all parents if ever a child's health were in danger.

## Is it difficult when you need to approach parents?

Yes, but they do need to know. On the whole they are pleased we are "looking out" for their children. We did have a mother once, a GP actually who was adamant that I was wrong, who couldn't cope with the thought, especially as she was having problems herself. Some parents approach me of course with a concern.





### What else can be done to help a pupil with an eating disorder?

I would go in and 'survey', go in and sit with a girl, finding out about her situation, her issues and problems. I'd want to look at timetabling, maybe taking some academic pressure off her if she was overloaded, some girls take on so much extra curricula activities too.

I think prevention is better than cure. Sometimes, in fact often, we can steer pupils away from an eating disorder so that it doesn't "get a grip". We weigh and height termly for boarders. Being aware of fluctuations is very important, particularly after a holiday - we often notice a difference in weight or personality.

The relationship between adults and pupils, the atmosphere of trust, good awareness and having strategies in place are all vital, so too is working with parents and providing continual support for pupils.

### What support and back up do you receive?

The medical team at our school goes on training courses about eating disorders regularly.

Our PHSE director is very aware of eating disorders and educates and supports all pupils via the curriculum, so too our sports teachers.

The Boarding Schools Association (BSA) runs very good courses on eating disorders for house matrons, house staff and gap students.

I believe, just because you've done one course don't think you can't go on more and learn further. We then share our findings amongst the rest of the staff.

### Have you had a case of severe anorexia or bulimia?

Recently we worked with the mother of a pupil who had anorexia nervosa and despite all our considerable effort she did need first

specialised out patient care and then very sadly had to miss a term of school, as she needed inpatient care.

This was our worst case, our only severe one. We liaised with the unit's school, to help her continue her education and she did really well.

We asked her mother with whom we had developed a strong supportive relationship to come into school to talk to the year group, and other interested girls in house, so that we could help her settle back into school again. It was also to reassure her friends and help them come to terms with the shock of finding their friend needed hospital and specialist care despite their support and encouragement.

### So how do you help "see" a pupil through an eating disorder?

It is always wonderful to see children who have struggled with anything earlier in their school career and go on to "blossom".

Recovery is a slow business. You can't take your eye off them just because you think their weight looks more stable. Understanding just how difficult coming back into school is, if (like the girl I mentioned) she has been away. Trying to keep the atmosphere "normal" so that she can feel relaxed, have a focus, and not feel isolated. Being sensitive to how she might be feeling on some days or when facing some "challenges". Supporting her via her friends, her tutor. Making her teachers aware, but without betraying confidence, or making her feel that everyone is talking about her. Keeping a discreet watchful eye generally but obviously with regard to eating and emotional well being.

Keeping in touch with her parents and supporting them too, gives them the reassurance that we are looking after their daughter whilst she's in school, helping to motivate her, recognise her achievements and think well of herself.