

# CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH POLICY RESEARCH PROGRAM

UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

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## Preventing and Treating Eating Disorders in Children and Youth

### A RESEARCH SUMMARY FROM THE Children's Mental Health Policy Research Program

#### Our Research Reviews

In 2003, the BC Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) made a long-term commitment to improving the mental health of children and youth in the province. The resulting five-year *Child and Youth Mental Health Plan* for BC takes a coordinated approach to strengthening prevention and treatment services, monitoring outcomes for children's mental health and enhancing public accountability for programs and services.

Our program supports the MCFD *Plan* by reviewing the best available research evidence on effective strategies for preventing and treating a variety of children's mental health problems, and by making recommendations to inform the development of related policies and services. Our full report on *Preventing & Treating Eating Disorders in Children* is available at: [www.childmentalhealth.ubc.ca](http://www.childmentalhealth.ubc.ca)

#### If You Have Concerns About Your Child or Youth

The BC Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) provides a wide range of direct clinical services and targeted community supports for children and youth at-risk or dealing with mental health problems, and for their families.

For more information, please contact your local MCFD office (listed in the Blue or Government Pages of the phone book) or visit: [http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/mental\\_health/help.htm](http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/mental_health/help.htm)

To learn more about BC's *Child & Youth Mental Health Plan*, please visit: [www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/mental\\_health](http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/mental_health)

#### Understanding Eating Disorders in Children and Youth

There are two major eating disorders that affect about 1,000 young people in British Columbia at any given time. *Anorexia nervosa* involves an intense fear of gaining weight and refusal to maintain a normal body weight. *Bulimia nervosa* involves repeated episodes of binge eating followed by behaviours meant to prevent weight gain, such as self-induced vomiting, laxative use or excessive exercise.

Both of these disorders usually begin in adolescence. While people suffering anorexia often have severe and noticeable physical symptoms, individuals with bulimia frequently maintain a normal weight and can be difficult to identify. Many young people with eating disorders have other mental health issues that add to their difficulties, such as obsessive compulsive disorder or anxiety.

There is no one "test" to determine if a child or youth has an eating disorder, and secrecy or denial

can make identification difficult. Clinical diagnoses are made based on multiple reports from parents, teachers, health professionals and young people themselves.

Where possible, it is important to deal with the underlying social or biological issues that may cause mental disorders to develop. Current research suggests multiple factors influence the development of eating disorders. We do know more girls than boys are affected by eating disorders, and that factors such as dieting, perfectionism, social pressure, negative media images and family history may all play a role.

While we do not fully know what causes mental health problems such as eating disorders to develop in some children and not others, we do know there are effective strategies for both preventing and treating them.

# Preventing and Treating Eating Disorders in Children and Youth

Eating disorders, including anorexia and bulimia, affect about 1,000 children and youth in BC.

Research evidence indicates these disorders can be both prevented and treated.

For preventing eating disorders, targeted cognitive-behavioural and media literacy programs can be effective.

Family therapy is effective in treating anorexia, while CBT and IPT are supported for the treatment of bulimia, particularly in older children.

Physicians should also be involved in treatment, given the potential medical complications associated with eating disorders.

## About Us

The Children's Mental Health Policy Research Program is located within the Department of Psychiatry at UBC. We provide research, education and policy consultation services to build a broad public health strategy to improve the mental health and well-being of children and youth in British Columbia and Canada.

## Review Results

It is crucial that children and youth with established mental health symptoms get the care they need. But research shows that this is not always the case. Large studies in Canada and elsewhere have demonstrated that only about one in four young people with mental health problems (or 25%) currently receive specialized treatment services.

To reduce the overall number of children and youth who suffer from mental health problems, we must both treat children with existing problems and develop programs to prevent the problems from occurring.

Our research summarized findings from relevant systematic reviews published between 1999 and 2004 on preventing or treating eating disorders in young people (ages 0-18). In total, 22 reviews were retrieved. Of these, two prevention reviews and one treatment review met our inclusion criteria; the number of original studies included in each review ranged from eight to 53. All programs demonstrated significant reductions in symptoms and behaviours related to eating disorders.

## Recommendations from the Research

- Make prevention programs part of the spectrum of mental health strategies available to children in BC.
- Focus prevention programs on CBT approaches and media literacy skills for high-risk groups.
- Support family therapy programs for treating anorexia. For treating bulimia, particularly in older children, focus on CBT and IPT. Given the serious medical complications associated with eating disorders, physicians should also be involved in treatment.
- Ensure all new prevention and treatment programs are consistent with the research evidence or are evaluated to ensure they improve outcomes for children and youth.

## Effective Prevention

Prevention programs for eating disorders are most effective when they are targeted to older, high-risk individuals and use an interactive approach over multiple sessions. Successful programs either use cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) techniques or focus on developing media literacy skills.

CBT approaches help young people challenge unhealthy attitudes and reduce body dissatisfaction, while media literacy interventions teach children and youth how to recognize and critically analyze cultural pressures about body shape and weight.

## Effective Treatment

CBT approaches that focus on altering abnormal eating behaviours also work well for treating established bulimia symptoms. IPT (inter-personal therapy) is also supported as a treatment for bulimia.

While CBT and IPT can be somewhat helpful in treating the symptoms of anorexia, family therapy is the most strongly supported treatment. Variations on traditional family therapy, such as multiple family group therapy where family members learn by identifying with other families, can also be effective.

## A Public Health Approach to Improving Mental Health for Children and Youth

