

NEDA TOOLKIT for Educators

Tips for school nurses

“Mental health is as critical to academic success as physical well-being... School nurses are uniquely qualified to identify students with potential mental health problems. In addition, school nurses serve as advocates, facilitators, and counselors of mental health services both within the school environment and in the community.”—National Association of School Nurses (NASN)

Actions the school nurse can undertake to reduce the interference of mental health problems on school performance:

- Provide mental health promotion activities at school to enhance self-esteem, problem-solving techniques, positive coping skills, and anger and nonviolent conflict management
- Educate school staff to enable them to identify the signs and symptoms of mental health problems
- Provide on-going assessment, intervention, and follow-up of the physical and mental health of the school community
- As a trusted professional, school nurses can help families acknowledge and begin to address mental health issues
- Act as liaison between students and families to assess the family’s ability and willingness to seek services for a student at risk
- Act as a liaison between family and mental health providers in the community
- Actively engage in school committees including curriculum committees, child-study teams, student assistance teams, and crisis intervention teams
- School nurses, along with school psychologists, counselors, social workers, and other support staff should be part of the mental health treatment service team

Participate in health education or physical education lesson planning, and facilitating classes on the following topics:

- Healthy, balanced, and flexible nutrition
- Finding fun ways to move your body and risks of over-exercise
- Adequate hydration and nourishment during sports activities
- Body changes associated with puberty and adolescence (including weight gain)
- Health and legal risks associated with anabolic steroids

Body mass index (BMI) guidelines for school nurses

If a school is weighing all students to calculate BMI, the following protocol is recommended. BMI charts for children are available online at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Be aware that weighing students with an eating disorder can exacerbate the situation. Consider excusing those students from weigh-ins.

- Inform parents or guardians in writing (letter, email, school note) that you will be weighing and measuring each student. Let parents know that they may opt out of the weigh-in by providing a physician’s health examination from the child’s physician.
- Respect student privacy by weighing and measuring each student individually in a private location.
- Do not comment on any student’s height or weight, because these are sensitive issues for almost anyone.
- Mail or email all letters containing height and weight measurements to the parents’ home. Do not give the letter to the student to deliver or place it in a student’s backpack. Send reports home on all students, not only to students who scored below the 5th percentile or above the 95th percentile for BMI. Children who are smaller or larger in size should not be made to feel as though something is wrong with their bodies.
- Include with all letters, if possible, educational information to parents about nutrition and exercise, as well as tips on recognizing potential problems.

Please note that your professional rights and responsibilities may vary by state and school system; please consult your school administration as well as any relevant local and professional organizations for information on regional guidelines.