

## Briefing: Eating Disorders and the Role of School in Treatment and Relapse Prevention

**Purpose:** This briefing document synthesizes key themes focusing on the intersection of eating disorders, school, treatment, and relapse.

**Sources:** These themes are described in our [online blog](#), by Dr. Julie O'Toole, founder and Chief Medical Officer of Kartini Clinic for Children and Families. Since 1998, we have treated more than 3000 children and families with all forms of disordered eating.

### I. Understanding Eating Disorder Cycles and Relapse Triggers

At Kartini Clinic, we identify recognizable patterns in the frequency of eating disorder admissions and referrals, which encompass both newly diagnosed patients and relapses.

- **Younger Patients and the Start of School:** A critical pattern we observe in younger patients is an increase in relapses and new diagnoses within the first few weeks after the start of school. This period sees children presenting with weight loss and food refusal.
- **Misconception of School as the Cause:** We suggest that the worsening of symptoms around the start of school is probably *not* directly caused by school stress. Instead, it frequently has its origins in mid to late summer, when wishful thinking took over and symptoms were ignored to prevent missing the start of school.
- **Summer's Double-Edged Sword:** Summer, while reducing academic stress, also signifies a significant reduction in the day-to-day structure of a child's life. This lack of structure, coupled with more unsupervised free time and more downtime, can be detrimental for children with eating disorders, allowing eating disordered behaviors to grow unwatched.
- **Parental "Wishful Thinking":** During the summer, children often begin to struggle with their meals and even lose weight. Parents, rather than seeking immediate help, hope that school will normalize everything and treatment will not be necessary.
- **Anorexia Nervosa and Mood Deception:** The apparent improvement in mood ("lose weight, get happy") associated with the weight loss of anorexia nervosa can fool us into complacency, leading parents to believe the disorder is satisfied with a small amount of weight loss. This allows the child to enter school already on the (invisible) downward path, which becomes evident as food refusal, social withdrawal, and increased arguments about eating emerge within weeks.

## II. Importance of Early and Decisive Intervention

At Kartini Clinic, we strongly emphasize the critical need for immediate action when an eating disorder is suspected.

- **Zero Tolerance for Weight Loss:** "in a child with an eating disorder, all weight loss is bad."
- **Immediate Action on Food Refusal:** "All food refusal must be taken seriously and treated immediately. Do not wait."
- **High Risk of Worsening:** The chances of spontaneous reversal are low, while the chances of worsening are high, "with the nearly inevitable disruption of school attendance to follow."
- **Salvaging the School Year:** Prompt and decisive action is crucial to "salvaging the school year."

## III. Kartini Clinic's Approach to Treatment and School Integration

We offer evidence-based, family-centered eating disorder treatment with a multi-disciplinary medical and psychiatric approach. A key component of our program is the integration of education through Kartini's certified [Oregon Alternative School](#):

- **Addressing Student Expectations:** Many of our patients are highly responsible and dutiful students. Kartini School helps them differentiate between simply "doing" assignments and genuinely "learning" from them.
- **Reducing Stress and Promoting Understanding:** Our school aims to alleviate stress for kids by helping them focus on the activities that facilitate understanding. By potentially reducing the volume of work, we aim to reduce stress, leading to faster recovery.
- **Prioritization and Real-World Skills:** Students learn to prioritize schoolwork and identify activities most helpful for their learning, preparing them for future academic challenges where time management is crucial. Our goal is to avoid the situation where students struggle for the first time.
- **Integration with Treatment:** Students in our [Partial Hospitalization Program](#) (PHP) do not spend all day in school, as they have other activities for recovery.
- **State-Registered Alternative School:** Kartini School is a state registered alternative school program, designed to address academic concerns during treatment for chronic illness.
- **Communication with Home School:** Kartini School providers can communicate with the child's home school to obtain assignments and learning goals, with parental consent.
- **Confidentiality:** Parents are advised to inform school officials about the diagnosis on a "need-to-know basis only" and allow the child to decide what friends and non-essential school officials should know.
- **Seeking Educational Support:** Parents are encouraged to conference with school counselors for educational support and post-treatment assistance.

- **Activity Restrictions and Triggers:** We can provide letters excusing children from PE classes if activity restrictions are necessary during transition back to school. PE or health classes, especially those discussing eating disorders, nutrition, or weight loss, can be very triggering, and alternative arrangements can be requested.
- **504 Plan:** Parents should consider developing a 504 plan with the school counselor to ensure adequate support during the transition back to school and for living with a chronic illness.