



PARENTS

IS YOUR CHILD A TARGET
OF WEIGHT BIAS?



What is weight bias?

Children with high body weight are vulnerable to weight bias. This means that they may be the target of negative attitudes in the form of stereotypes, prejudice and unfair treatment because of their weight. Weight bias can be expressed in different ways, such as verbal comments (e.g., name-calling, derogatory comments, and teasing), physical aggression (e.g., being pushed, shoved, kicked, and bullied), and social exclusion (e.g., being avoided, ignored, and excluded by others).

Why does weight bias happen?

We live in a culture where being thin is desirable. The mass media and our billion-dollar diet industry communicate messages that it is “bad to be fat” and good to be thin. A consequence of these messages is that people with high body weight are often wrongly presumed to have negative characteristics, such as being lazy. These messages are so common in television, film, advertising, books, magazines, and social media that it has become socially acceptable to stigmatize people with high body weight. Unfortunately, youth are frequent targets of this form of bias.

How does weight bias affect my child?

Children and adolescents who experience weight bias are vulnerable to a number of consequences that can affect their emotional and physical well-being. Children who are teased because of their weight often have lower self-esteem, poor body image, and are more likely to experience symptoms of depression and anxiety. They are also more likely to avoid physical activities at school (where teasing often occurs), and they may be more likely to cope with the stress of being teased by eating food or 'binge-eating'. These are all serious problems that warrant your attention.

How do I know if my child is being targeted?

Look for the following signs that may indicate your child is a target of weight bias:

- Your child is teased about his/her weight by peers, friends, siblings, cousins, or other family members
- Your child is very sensitive about his/her weight, or does not want to talk about it
- Your child does not like going to school, or wants to avoid school activities
- Your child is self-conscious about his/her appearance and how clothes fit
- Your child is self-conscious about participating in physical activities
- Your child is showing signs of sadness or depression
- Your child doesn't seem to have many friends
- Your child is bullying others – sometimes, children who are teased about their weight react by becoming bullies themselves

What can you do?

It can be difficult to know how to best handle a situation in which your child is a target of weight bias. Here are some suggestions on ways you can help your child:

- Ask your child if he/she is being teased or bullied. Your child may be hesitant to talk about it, so it is important to communicate to your child that you are there to be supportive and to help.
- Listen carefully to what your child tells you. His or her stories may cause distress – for both of you. Communicate empathy, and give your child time and space to talk about his/her experiences.
- Make yourself available to have more discussions with your child. Some children may not want to talk about everything right away, and may be afraid that if they “tell” someone that they will get in trouble, that the bully will retaliate, or that nothing will improve the situation. So, it’s important to realize that your child may be frightened and feeling insecure.
- Tell your child that it is not his/her fault, and that he/she does not deserve to be teased and bullied. Remind your child of all his/her positive qualities, and help increase your child’s self-confidence by focusing on his/her strengths.
- Ask your child what he/she thinks should be done to improve the situation. Has your child tried certain strategies already? Which strategies worked, and which ones didn’t?
- Identify where you need to intervene:
- If your child is being bullied at school, ask to meet with your child’s teacher and explain your concerns. Set up a follow-up meeting in several weeks’ time to talk again and to discuss progress.
- If your child continues to be bullied after reporting this to your child’s teacher, speak to the school principal.
- If your child is being bullied by another family member, talk to that family member about his or her behavior, and clearly communicate that it needs to stop.

For more information on how to help you child please see our other handouts: Ways for Parents to Combat Weight Bias, Talking to Your Child About Weight Bias, and more – all available at www.uconnruddcenter.org.