Mental Health and Weight Bias in Schools

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What educators can do to support inclusive and safe environments for all.

Did you know?

Weight-based stigmatization is the most common cause of bullying in schools[1]. When children enter elementary school they have already been exposed to and adopted negative attitudes about people in larger bodies. Weight-based bullying occurs in primary grades and escalates by middle school. It can be severe, frequent, and upsetting and causes stronger emotional reactions than teasing for other reasons.

What is weight bias?

Weight bias refers to the beliefs, assumptions and judgments towards individuals based on their weight, shape, or size. Weight bias is a result of our conscious and unconscious thoughts, feelings and attitudes. It can affect people at all weights and can lead to treating people differently because of their size. People in larger bodies are often more negatively affected and experience stigma and discrimination.

> Body weight is a result of many complex factors. A person's body weight, shape or size doesn't tell us anything about their overall health or their health behaviours (e.g., eating well, being active).

Why should we reduce weight-based stereotypes and bias in schools?

Weight bias exists in the classroom, on the playground, and through interactions children have with adults and their peers. Students experiencing weight stigma are more likely to:

Source: UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity.

- Have poor body image and low self-esteem
- Have increased stress, depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts
- Suffer from bullying and harassment
- Experience social isolation
- Avoid physical activity and engage in unhealthy eating practices
- Be assessed differently in school compared to smaller bodied peers (e.g., receive lower grades for similar work)
- Poorer attendance and academic achievement

Reducing weight bias promotes positive body image and will improve student well-being and success.

> Body image is our attitudes, beliefs and feelings about how we look and what our body can do. A healthy body image means feeling comfortable in your body. Individuals of any body size can have a positive body image. Positive body image is linked to good self-esteem, confidence and resilience.

What can we do to reduce weight bias and promote a positive body image?

1. Reflect on our own attitudes, beliefs and biases about body size and eating patterns

We all have weight bias; it would be surprising not to in our current culture. When we start to be aware of this bias, we might notice it in conversations or interactions with students and colleagues, including:

- Commenting on weight or weight loss of others (e.g., "you look great, you've lost weight!")
- Promoting physical activity and eating well as a way to lose weight
- Admiring someone's restraint with certain foods (e.g., "You are being so good not having any of that cake!")
- Questioning whether or not a student needs a second serving at Breakfast Club

Source: UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity.

"Using a flexible and balanced approach and avoiding rigidity regarding food rules and guidelines can reduce potential triggers to body image and eating concerns. Sensitivity regarding weight and shape and personal values regarding "what is healthy" are important when considering instruction. What can always be stressed, however, is that healthy eating and regular physical activity are essential requirements for maintaining good health over the long term." Ontario H&PE curriculum (Gr 1-8), 2019. p. 42.

2. Reframe messages about food, activity, bodies and health

Children learn from the conversations they hear about food, activity, bodies and health from trusted adults. Focusing on weight can be detrimental to health. Gaining weight is a normal part of growth throughout childhood and adolescence. Focus on what bodies can do, not what they look like.

When teaching about food, activity and health:

Instead of...	Try...
Focusing on nutrients	Encouraging satisfying meals and snacks to support healthy growth and development. Focus on the benefits of fuelling the mind and body with a variety of food.
Labelling food as "good" or " bad", or "healthy" or "unhealthy"	Questioning experiences students have had with food - where they have eaten it, what they were doing, who they were with, what they enjoyed about it. Providing opportunities to see, smell, touch, taste, grow and cook nutritious foods without talking about the "need" to eat them for health.
Commenting on the food in a student's lunch, which may make students and parents feel badly	Not commenting at all. Students don't necessarily have control over what foods are in their lunch. Many factors, including family income, education or time, may influence foods packed by families.
Talking about dieting, watching calories or being more active to lose weight before vacation	Talking about how much fun it is to learn new activities and move your body. Discuss other benefits including socializing with others, having more energy and reducing stress.
Talking about using food or physical activity to control weight, change body shape, size, or appearance or prevent obesity	Promoting acceptance of and appreciation for different bodies. There is no "ideal" body. All bodies are worthy of being respected, celebrated and cared for to feel good – not to change weight or appearance.
Imposing our personal views about food or dieting practices (e.g., "I don't eat dairy so students shouldn't either")	Explaining different ways to enjoy and experience food. Acknowledge that healthy eating looks different to everyone and can be influenced by our culture and family situations.
Focusing on nutrition, physical activity or weight as the only contributors to health	Explaining that health is influenced by income, education, genetics, and social connections. These factors may have more influence on health than health behaviours.

"The issue of body image and the detrimental effects of homogenized standards of beauty and physical appearance promoted in the media also have implications for equity and inclusiveness that may affect students." Ontario H&PE curriculum (Gr 1-8), 2019. p. 76.

3. Create a weight inclusive school environment

Educators can create a school that supports a child's healthy growth and development, including positive mental health, by ensuring the classroom is an emotionally safe place to be.

- Promote positive body image for students of all shapes and sizes

- Reinforce that people come in diverse body shapes and sizes

- Redirect students away from a focus on weight and appearance when discussing the benefits of physical activity, eating well, and sleep

- Challenge students' assumptions about people based on their weight or appearance to dispel weight-based stereotypes

- Address weight-based teasing and help students recognize the harm

- Foster an understanding of weight bias as an equity issue

- Teach students to critically assess media and cultural portrayals of bodies

- Never weigh students or have them calculate Body Mass Index (BMI)[2]

"Any effort you make to promote a healthy body image through positive health messaging (e.g., enjoying foods, engaging in fun physical activities) instead of problem-based messaging (e.g., weight loss, inactivity, obesity) will have a positive impact." - A Tool for Every Educator

Creating a supportive environment allows students to feel valued, respected and comfortable in their bodies and supports physical, mental and social well-being. Educators can reduce weight bias by reflecting on their own bias, positively framing messages, and addressing weight-based bullying. Educators have a unique opportunity to influence children and youth to develop positive relationships with food, activity, bodies and health.

For more information, contact your local public health unit.

[1]Weight discrimination and bullying. Puhl and King. Best Practice & Research Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism 27 (2013) 117–127. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23731874

[2]Ophea & OASPHE. Quality Assessment to Support the Development of Physical Literacy Skills in Health and Physical Education. Part of the OPHEA Open Dialogue Position Paper Series. https://www.ophea.net/sites/default/files/pdfs/articles/OPH019_E_Screen.pdf