

REDUCING WEIGHT STIGMA: HOW FAMILIES CAN ENGAGE IN SUPPORTIVE COMMUNICATION WITH YOUTH OF ALL BODY SIZES

A Rudd/CSCH Brief by Rebecca Puhl

What is Weight Stigma?

Weight stigma refers to societal devaluation of people because of their body weight or size. In our society, people with higher body weight face judgment, bullying, and unfair treatment. At the foundation of this stigma are strongly ingrained, inaccurate stereotypes that people who have higher body weight or larger bodies are lazy, gluttonous, lacking in willpower and self-discipline, unmotivated to improve their health, and personally to blame for their weight.¹ These societal stereotypes are pervasive, and set the stage for different forms of victimization, prejudice and unfair treatment.

For youth, weight stigma is most commonly experienced as teasing, bullying, or harassment, which can be referred to as 'weight-based victimization'. This can include verbal teasing, cyber bullying, physical aggression, or relational victimization (such as being ignored, excluded, or the target of rumors). Across youth of diverse backgrounds, as many as half of girls and one third of boys report being teased or bullied about their body weight.² Youth are more likely to be bullied for their weight or physical appearance than because of their race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disability status.³ While peers are common perpetrators of weight-based teasing in youth and adolescents,⁴ **parents and family members are also common sources of weight stigma.**^{5,6} When youth experience weight teasing from family members, they are more likely to internalize these experiences and engage in self-blame.⁷

How does weight stigma affect youth?

Youth who are teased or bullied about their weight have an increased risk of psychological distress, including depressive symptoms, anxiety, low self-esteem, poor body image, and substance use.^{8,9} Weight stigma can also negatively affect their eating behaviors, leading to disordered eating patterns, emotional eating, and unhealthy dieting behaviors.¹⁰ It contributes to lower engagement and enjoyment in physical activity, often because physical activity settings (e.g., physical education classes or sports) are settings where youth with higher body weight are vulnerable to weight teasing from peers, leading them to avoid these settings to escape the teasing.¹⁰ Research evidence also shows that weight-based teasing in adolescence predicts increased weight gain and obesity in adulthood.¹¹ This can create a harmful cycle, as increased weight gain can make youth more vulnerable to experiences of teasing and bullying.

How do parents contribute to weight stigma?

The way that parents talk about body weight with their children has an impact on their health and well-being.

The majority of parents report that they talk about weight with their children.¹² Parental communication about weight can include weight teasing, but it often involves other types of conversations about body weight or physical appearance that occur during daily routines of families. Increasing research has studied parental “weight talk,” which includes critical comments that parents make about their child’s weight or body size, pressuring their child to diet in order to lose weight, or making comments about their physical appearance. Parental weight talk is associated with negative outcomes, particularly for girls, such as emotional distress, disordered eating, and harmful weight control practices.¹³ Parents are more likely to engage in weight talk if they are concerned about their child’s weight, if their child has a higher body weight, and/or if they themselves are dieting or have experienced weight stigma because of their body size.^{14,15}

The words that parents choose to use to refer to their child’s body weight can further reinforce blame and shame in youth, even if unintentionally. For example, when parents use words like *obese*, *fat*, or *heavy*, adolescents report shame, sadness, and embarrassment.¹⁶

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How can families engage in supportive communication about body weight and body size?

Body weight is an emotionally charged issue for many youth, especially as their bodies change with puberty and as they become more vulnerable to harmful media messages about weight and appearance.

Many adolescents report that they never want their parents to talk about their weight.¹² But, they report more willingness to engage in these conversations if their parents first

- ask their permission,
- engage in supportive communication, and
- use words to describe their bodies that adolescents feel comfortable with.¹²

In these conversations, **language choice matters.**

Adolescents have diverse perspectives about what words or terminology they prefer to describe their body size. There is not a universally acceptable word or phrase to describe higher weight that everyone is comfortable with. In general, youth prefer more neutral words, like *weight* or *high body weight*, but youth preferences vary according to their sex, race/ethnicity, weight status, and extent of internalized blame and teasing.¹⁶ It is important for parents and family members to avoid making assumptions about what words to use, and to ask their child what words they would prefer to describe their weight.

Additionally, research shows that adolescents want their parents to

- stop criticizing and pressuring them about their weight,
- focus more on listening to how they're feeling about their bodies, and
- provide support and encouragement, particularly if they feel down about their body weight or size.¹⁷

What this tells us is that listening and emotional support from parents may be what youth need the most. Youth need to hear from parents that how they look or how much they weigh is not as important as qualities like their character, how they treat others, and who they are as a person.

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Practical Tips for Parents and Family Members

Keep conversations focused on health

Rather than talking about weight or appearance, it's better for parents and guardians to keep conversations focused on health and healthy behaviors that everyone in the family can engage in. This can include talking about the importance of engaging in nutritious eating and physical activity for improved energy and well-being, and for maintaining health and preventing chronic disease. Before initiating a conversation about weight, parents should first consider their goal. Usually, the same goal can be achieved by focusing the conversation on health, rather than emphasizing weight or physical appearance, which can instead backfire.

Model healthy eating

All parents want their children to be healthy; this is more likely to happen if parents focus on their actions instead of their words and model the healthy eating and physical activity behaviors that they want to see in their children. It is particularly important for parents to create a home environment where children can make healthy choices, and to promote healthy behaviors that everyone in the family can engage in together. Making healthy lifestyle behaviors habits for the whole family is a more effective approach.

Model respectful attitudes and behaviors

Finally, parents and family members can help reduce weight stigma by modeling respectful attitudes and behaviors towards people of all body sizes. In our thin-obsessed culture, youth are inundated with harmful messages about their bodies and physical appearance. It can be helpful for parents to challenge these messages and negative stereotypes about weight, and to model healthy body esteem and respect for body size diversity. They can also communicate to their child, both verbally and with their own actions, that people of all body sizes deserve respect, equal treatment, and dignity.

Additional Resources

UConn Rudd Center: information and resources on weight stigma for parents and youth.

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