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Weight-Based Bullying among LGBTQ Youth Associated with Increased Frequency of Binge Eating, Unhealthy Weight Control, and Poor Weight-Related Health

LGBTQ youth who are teased or bullied about their body weight are more likely to engage in unhealthy eating behaviors, such as binge eating, unhealthy weight control, and dieting, and to have poor weight-related health, according to the latest study from researchers at the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity and the Department of Human Development and Family Sciences at the University of Connecticut, in collaboration with the Human Rights Campaign Foundation.

Approximately 20% of U.S. adolescents have obesity, and sexual minority females are even more likely to have higher body weight compared to their heterosexual peers, making them particularly vulnerable to weight-based teasing and bullying. While recent evidence suggests that many LGBTQ youth report experiencing weight-based bullying, this is the first study to examine how weight bullying affects eating behaviors, dieting, and weight-related health among this population.

“Clear health disparities in obesity and eating disorders exist between heterosexual and LGBTQ youth, and during adolescence especially, youth have increased risk for poor body image and peer influences that promote unhealthy eating behaviors,” says Mary Himmelstein, lead author of the study. “Given that health consequences of weight-based bullying in adolescence persist into adulthood, it is important to better understand these health issues in this vulnerable population.”

The study, published in *Appetite*, is the first large-scale evidence of links between weight-based bullying, unhealthy eating behaviors, and weight-related health in LGBTQ youth. Researchers surveyed a large national sample of sexual and gender minority adolescents (using the *LGBTQ National Teen Survey*) about their daily experiences, health, and wellness.

Key findings of the study include:

- 50.4% of adolescents reported weight teasing from peers, and 55.4% reported weight teasing from family members.
- Adolescents who experienced more frequent weight-based teasing and bullying at school engaged in more dieting, severe binge eating, and unhealthy weight control strategies compared to their peers who experienced less teasing.
- Adolescents who were teased about weight by family members also reported poorer health behaviors, including more dieting, lower physical activity, more difficulty falling asleep, more coping with stress by eating, and higher levels of stress in general.

Considering that sexual and gender minority youth are already at risk for parental rejection because of their sexual orientation and gender identity, they may be vulnerable to added health consequences in the home setting stemming from additional victimization related to their body weight.

“These findings highlight the importance of considering multiple forms of victimization (weight, sexual identity, and gender identity) when assessing health in sexual and gender minority youth,” says Himmelstein.

“Awareness that weight-based teasing and bullying may contribute to poor weight-related health of these adolescents is especially important for educators and healthcare providers, who can help address negative consequences of these experiences as they happen with family members or at school,” says Ryan Watson, Assistant Professor of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Connecticut and co-author of the study.

Study co-authors include Mary Himmelstein, Rebecca Puhl, and Ryan Watson of the University of Connecticut.

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About the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity

The Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at the University of Connecticut is a multidisciplinary center dedicated to promoting solutions to childhood obesity, poor diet, and weight bias through research and policy. The Rudd Center is a leader in building broad-based consensus to change diet by conducting research and educating policy makers. For more information, visit www.uconnruddcenter.org, follow us on Twitter at www.twitter.com/UConnRuddCenter, or on Facebook at www.facebook.com/UConnRuddCenter.