

Weight Bias: School Climate and Bullying

What is school climate?

School climate refers to a student's feelings of connection to his or her school community and major areas of school life (e.g., safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the overall organization and environment of the school). Studies have linked school climate with youth academic achievement, school success, self-esteem, students' relationships with educators, and bullying.

What is the ideal school climate?

- All individuals are respected and engaged in school life; however, a system is in place to handle instances of student disrespect and disengagement
- Students, families, and educators collaborate to develop and contribute to a shared school vision (i.e., operations and care for the environment)
- Clear, well-accepted values and expectations support social, emotional, and physical safety
- Educators set positive examples by modeling and nurturing attitudes that emphasize benefits gained from education, civic engagement, and social justice

Why should bullying be addressed as part of school climate?

- Bullying of any kind is an example of disrespect that disrupts students' ability to learn and interferes with a school's ability to educate students in a safe environment

What is unique about weight-related bullying?

- Overweight youth are especially vulnerable to teasing or bullying
- Like other types of bullying, weight-based teasing ranges from verbal comments, social exclusion, physical aggression, to cyber-bullying, humiliation, rejection, and rumors
- Overweight youth may also be bullied for other reasons, and this bullying may increase over time
- Weight-related bullying may be concentrated in specific settings such as the classroom, lunch room or gymnasium

How should bullying be addressed from a school climate approach?

- Preventive action is preferred, but reactive action is sometimes necessary
- Students should be aware of (1) what constitutes bullying behavior, (2) what to do if bullying is observed, and (3) how to establish a positive environment that reduces the tolerance and effectiveness of bullying behavior
- When bullying occurs, do not label students (e.g., bully, victim, perpetrator, or aggressor); emphasis should instead be on the behavior (e.g., name-calling, teasing, aggression, cyber harassment, etc.)
- Ensure that attention is paid to the recipient of the behavior as well as the instigator

Specific recommendations:

- Ensure that there are similar expectations and opportunities for students regardless of their body size
- Be a role model: do not allow weight-based teasing in your classroom; if it occurs, intervene early
- Ensure that overweight youth do not become disengaged or feel unsafe as a result of bullying or disrespect at school

For more information, please see our other handouts for educators: *Weight Bias in the Classroom*, *How to Reduce Weight Bias Among Students*, and *How to Address Weight Bias in Your Classroom*, available at www.yaleruddcenter.org

For more information on weight bias, please visit
www.UConnRuddCenter.org



Additional resources:

National School Climate Center. (2009). Retrieved from <http://schoolclimate.org/index.php>

Ross, S., Hornder, R. H., & Stiller, B. (2009). *Bully Prevention in Positive Behavior Support*. Retrieved from www.pbis.org

Sugai, C., Horner, R., & Algozzine, B. (2011, April 19). *Reducing the Effectiveness of Bullying Behavior in Schools*. Retrieved from [http://pbis.org/common/pbisresources/publications/PBIS Bullying Behavior Apr19 2011.pdf](http://pbis.org/common/pbisresources/publications/PBIS_Bullying_Behavior_Apr19_2011.pdf)

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