

Teachers: Weight Bias in Youth

What is weight bias?

Children who are overweight or obese are vulnerable to weight bias – negative attitudes that result in stereotypes, prejudice and unfair treatment because of their weight. Weight bias can be expressed in multiple forms, such as name-calling, teasing, physical aggression, and social exclusion. Weight bias towards children most often occurs in the school setting, thus *teachers have an important opportunity to take a role in reducing weight bias.*

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 who are overweight are often wrongly presumed to have negative characteristics (e.g., such as being lazy). These messages are so common in television, film, advertising, books, and magazines that it has become socially acceptable to stigmatize people who are overweight. Unfortunately, youth are frequent targets of this form of bias.

How does weight bias affect students?

Children and adolescents who experience weight bias are vulnerable to a number of consequences that can affect their emotional and physical well-being. Often, children who are teased because of their weight 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 *‘binge-eating’.*

Why is it important to address weight bias?

It is important for teachers to recognize and reduce weight bias to avoid the serious social and emotional toll it can take on students. Taking action against weight bias is a fundamental part of fostering a positive emotional climate in your classroom and school. Just as a teacher would not tolerate racial or gender bias among students, weight bias needs to be given the same consideration. In order to create a positive learning environment, every student in a classroom must feel a sense of safety, respect, and acceptance among their peers.

To learn how you can reduce weight bias among your students, please refer to the resources “*Teachers: How to Address Weight Bias in Your Classroom*” and “*Tips for Reducing Weight Bias*”

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

