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American Academy of Pediatrics Policy Statement Calls For Improved Care, Advocacy to Address Weight Stigma

Hartford, Conn. – Being teased or bullied about weight is one of the most common reasons that youth are victimized, and these experiences have serious consequences for emotional and physical health. With high rates of overweight and obesity in America’s youth, millions are vulnerable to weight stigma and its harmful effects.

In response to this widespread problem, the American Academy of Pediatrics has issued its first policy statement on weight stigma. The academy’s policy, published today in *Pediatrics*, seeks to raise awareness about the negative effects of weight stigma on youth, and provides clinical practice and advocacy recommendations for health professionals to help reduce weight stigma in the medical setting and the broader community.

“This policy statement is a call to action to encourage pediatric professionals to address weight bias as part of their efforts to improve the quality of life for vulnerable youth and adolescents,” said Rebecca Puhl, an author of the policy statement. Puhl is Deputy Director of the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at the University of Connecticut, and Professor of Human Development and Family Studies.

Importantly, peers are not the only sources of weight stigma. Research documents weight stigma by parents and other family members, teachers, health care professionals, and society at large, including the popular media, according to the statement. Thus, children are vulnerable to weight stigma in school, at home, and in clinical settings, placing them at risk for psychological distress, social isolation, and poor physical health.

Reducing stigma through supportive, respectful care from pediatric professionals is a theme that resonates in the academy’s clinic practice recommendations; the academy asserts the need for health professionals to use supportive and non-stigmatizing language in communication about weight with youth and families, to use patient-centered and empathic counseling approaches such as motivational interviewing, to create a welcoming and supportive medical environment for youth with obesity, and to assess children and adolescents for signs of weight-based bullying and associated emotional distress.

The academy recognizes that, beyond the clinical setting, it is important to promote home, community and school environments that support and empower youth and families to be healthy rather than reinforcing societal shame or stigma.

The academy's four advocacy recommendations call upon pediatric health professionals to:

- Work with schools to ensure anti-bullying policies include protections for students who are bullied about their weight.
- Advocate for a responsible and respectful portrayal of individuals with obesity in the media.
- Continue to advocate for the inclusion of training to address weight stigma in medical school and residency curricula, and through ongoing continuing medical education programs.
- Work to empower families and patients to manage and address weight stigma in schools, communities and their homes.

“By examining our own weight biases, modeling sensitive communication and behavior to children and families with obesity, and taking steps to address weight stigma with our staff, in clinic environments, and in the broader community, pediatric health professionals can make important shifts in the culture of care for children with obesity. With these concerted efforts to reduce weight stigma, interventions can more effectively help and empower patients to improve their weight-related health,” said Stephen Pont, M.D., lead author of the statement. Pont is the past chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics Section on Obesity and an Assistant Professor of Pediatrics at the University of Texas Dell Medical School.

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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 distinguished multi-disciplinary policy research 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 and activity patterns by conducting research and educating policy makers and the public. For more information, visit www.uconnruddcenter.org or follow us on Twitter at www.twitter.com/uconnruddcenter or on Facebook at www.facebook.com/uconnruddcenter.