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Words Really Matter When Talking to Youth About Their Weight

Hartford, Conn. – Body shaming and weight stigma have become commonplace in American society. Whether highlighted in the [news](#) or in research [studies](#), it's clear that there is widespread negative bias against people with overweight or obesity. Unfortunately, children are vulnerable targets of weight stigma. In fact, weight-based bullying is one of the most prevalent forms of bullying reported by youth.

In efforts to reduce negative societal weight stigma, words matter when it comes to talking about body weight. Research shows that adults feel stigmatized and blamed when certain words are used to describe their excess body weight, and that individuals with obesity may avoid future health care if a doctor uses stigmatizing language to talk about their weight.

While this research has highlighted the importance of considering language about weight with adults, until now no studies have addressed these issues among youth.

In the first systematic examination of views about weight-based language among youth, the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at the University of Connecticut found that adolescents struggling with overweight or obesity prefer neutral words such as “weight” and “body mass index” rather than “obese” or “big.” But there were gender differences in word preferences.

Boys preferred having their weight described as “overweight” and “heavy,” while girls preferred to be described as “curvy,” according to the study.

“These findings highlight the importance of considering one’s choice of words when talking to youth about body size, which is especially important for doctors and other health care providers who talk to children and families about weight-related health,” said Rebecca Puhl, PhD, lead author of the study and Professor of Human Development and Family Studies at UConn.

The study, published today in the [International Journal of Obesity](#), involved 50 adolescents enrolled in a summer weight-loss camp in 2016. Adolescents were provided with a list of 16 words commonly used to describe excess body weight. They were then asked which words they would most want their family to use to

refer to their weight, as well their emotional responses in reaction to their parents' use of various words to talk about their body weight.

Approximately one-third boys and girls felt ashamed if their parents described them as "obese," and more than 40 percent of girls reported feeling sad, embarrassed and ashamed in response to their parents using words like "fat," "big" or "heavy."

These findings suggest that parents may benefit from education about the importance of using sensitive, supportive language when communicating about their child's weight, according to the study.

"Youth who are struggling with overweight or obesity already face considerable shame and victimization in their daily lives," Dr. Puhl said. "As parents, educators, and health providers, we need to ensure that the words we use to talk about weight with youth do not contribute to these distressing experiences or reinforce shame and stigma."

Co-authors include Mary Himmelstein of the UConn Rudd Center, Sarah Commisso Armstrong of Duke University, and Eliza Kingsford, Executive Director of Wellspring Camps.

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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 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.