

Weight bias: Important information for parents

You may not be surprised to learn that many overweight children and adolescents are teased and made fun of by peers at school. This has damaging effects on children's emotional and physical well-being. But, did you know that parents can also be a source of weight bias?

Research studies show that as many as 47% of overweight girls and 34% of overweight boys report that they are teased and victimized by family members¹. Other research indicates that family members are frequent sources of weight bias – even more common than peers or classmates of overweight children. In a study that examined experiences of weight bias among 2400 overweight women, family members were the *most frequently reported source of weight stigma*, with 72% of adults reporting that they had experienced weight bias from family members, and 62% reporting that family members had stigmatized them about their weight on multiple occasions².

Here are some examples of weight bias from parents that were reported in this study:

My dad has called me “hippo” and “ox” in front of company. I cried. It made me very sad and made me believe I was stupid and ugly.

My mother would always get mad when we went to the store to buy me clothes because it was hard to find clothes that fit me very well. She would tell me I was fat when we were in front of other people. I would react by trying to get away from her as soon as I could and cry. The impact is that no matter how much weight I have lost, I never feel really good about my weight.

My father used to pinch my arm and call me lazy.

My mother put little signs on the fridge – “little snacks make bigger slacks.”

My dad use to call me a “big cow” as I was growing up. It still hurts to this day.

When I was a teenager my mother would frequently tell me that “Boys just don't like fat girls.” To this day, I still don't ever feel attractive, or comfortable.

As a parent, it is important to be aware of ways that you may be expressing negative attitudes about your child's weight. Be cautious in the language that you use when talking about weight with your child, and recognize that this is a sensitive issue for your child. Your child needs your support to cope with the social and physical challenges of being overweight. To learn more about what you can do to reduce weight bias in your child's life, please refer to resource 6.07: “*Ways for Parents to Combat Weight Bias.*”

¹Eisenberg ME, Neumark-Sztainer D, & Story M. Associations of weight-based teasing and emotional well-being among adolescents. *Archives of Pediatric & Adolescent Medicine.* 2003; 157 733-738.

²Puhl R, Brownell KD. Confronting and Coping with Weight Stigma: An Investigation of Overweight and Obese Adults. *Obesity.* 2006;14:1802-1815.