

How to talk to your child about weight bias

It can be difficult to know what to do as a parent if your child is being teased or bullied because of his or her weight. Many parents feel so badly for their child that they either avoid discussing the issue or they become over-protective. Before talking to your child, it can be helpful to acknowledge how uncomfortable and difficult it can be for you as a parent to address this issue. All parents want the best for their children, and it is painful to learn that your child is being victimized because of his or her weight.

Despite the difficulty of the situation, parents need to talk to their child about the problem. Avoiding the issue or becoming over-protective may lead a child to believe that they deserve to be teased. As a parent, it is important to communicate to your child that teasing is never acceptable, regardless of whether the teasing is directed at appearance, weight, skin color, accent, wealth, etc. Therefore, when talking to your child about being teased, keep the issue of “weight loss” separate from the conversation about teasing. They are different issues that require different strategies and solutions.

Here are some suggestions of ways to talk to your child if he or she is a target of weight bias.

1. Start an open conversation with your child

Kids may be reluctant to start this conversation on their own, and they will likely feel ashamed of their weight. There are different questions you can ask to initiate the discussion:

How was your day at school today?

- *Who did you play with at recess?*
- *Who did you sit with at lunch?*
- *How was the bus ride today?*

Is anyone making fun of you at school?

- *What happened when they made fun of you?*
- *Did this happen more than once?*
- *Did the person hurt you on purpose?*

How do you feel about this?

- *How did you react when you were teased/bullied?*
- *Do you feel upset or angry?*
- *What do you think about other kids at school?*
- *What do you want to do about this problem?*

2. Identify Ways to Resolve the Situation

Some children may want their parents to take action on their behalf to stop weight-based teasing, while others may want very little parental involvement. Here are some ways to talk to your child about how to deal with the problem.

- Encourage your child NOT to retaliate against the bully—this will just reinforce the bullying behavior. Brainstorm different responses with your child, such as walking away from the bully, or clearly stating to the bully to stop the behavior.
- Talk to your child about how to avoid situations where teasing might occur. For example, if your child is teased by peers in the cafeteria or the hallways, encourage your child to stay close to their friend(s) during these times.
- If your child feels scared or threatened, encourage your child to talk immediately to a teacher or the school principal.
- Emphasize the importance of allies. A child who has friends is less likely to be bullied or teased, so encourage your child to maintain friendships with peers. To help your child develop more friendships, help your child find social activities to join (in or out of school) that your child would enjoy. Not only will this provide more opportunities to interact with peers and develop friendships, but it can also increase self-confidence.

3. Help Repair Self-Esteem

Children and adolescents who are teased about their weight often suffer low self-esteem as a result of damaging comments. Common negative stereotypes that are attributed to obese individuals include perceptions that they are lazy, lacking in self-discipline, less competent, and are at fault for being overweight. Children often communicate these stereotypes to overweight peers during teasing encounters.

As a parent, it is therefore important for you to challenge these stereotypes, and to communicate to your child that he/she has important, desirable, good qualities that have nothing to do with weight. Kids need to be reinforced for their strengths, especially in the face of feeling insecure and ashamed. Here are some ways to help foster positive self-esteem in your child without focusing on body weight:

- Point out examples of your child's strengths to help your child recognize that they possess positive qualities. (e.g., *"You worked really hard on that project – that took a lot of discipline and effort,"* or *"You take such good care of the dog – it's a lot of responsibility, but you're doing a great job"*)
- Find activities for your child to get involved in that can help build self-confidence and avoid bringing attention to body weight.
- Find examples of role models who are NOT thin, and share these with your child. Children need to see people who are overweight leading successful lives and overcoming challenges of stigma. Look for examples in the media, or in areas that your child has interest.
- When you see examples of weight bias – whether in the media, in public, or targeted towards your child – express your disapproval and explain to your child why it is wrong. You need to model appropriate behavior and demonstrate that it is not acceptable to treat others unfairly because of their weight. Your child also needs to sense that you are there to provide support and be an advocate, which you can do by speaking up when you witness weight bias.