

Teachers: How to address weight bias in your classroom

How do you respond when overweight children in your school are being teased or bullied? You may be hesitant to address such a sensitive issue, but ignoring the problem could have serious consequences for an overweight child. Here are some strategies to help you address and reduce weight bias¹:

- 🍎 Weight bias can be expressed in both direct and indirect ways. Be aware of these behaviors among your students:
 - Verbal comments such as name-calling, derogatory remarks, teasing, or joking directed at overweight students
 - Social exclusion such as ignoring or not including overweight students in activities
 - Physical aggression such as shoving or physically intimidating an overweight student
 - Humiliation of an overweight student through spreading rumors or cyber-bullying

- 🍎 When you see or hear weight bias occurring in your school, intervene right away. Instead of reprimanding the student, discuss the behavior to help them see why such acts are harmful. When children are teasing or bullying others because of their weight, they may not realize how harmful their behavior is. Weight bias has become so ingrained in our society that children sometimes reflect what they have witnessed elsewhere. Let the student know that their behavior is inappropriate without making them feel embarrassed. You can also evoke empathy by asking the question: *“If someone said something like that to you, how would you feel?”*

- 🍎 Hold a classroom meeting in order to set expectations for behavior and foster a sense of classroom “community”. Introduce the goal of the meeting by saying, *“I’m concerned that there is some teasing and name-calling going on in our classroom. Let’s talk about why this isn’t good for our class and come up with ways that we can avoid it.”* Discuss the importance of respecting all types of diversity, including appearance and size.

- 🍎 With the help of your students, develop a set of classroom policies that prohibit the use of offending labels and words. Decide on each policy as a group and continually refer back to them to create a positive social and emotional environment in your classroom. Encourage students to respect these policies even when they are outside the classroom, in the cafeteria, or at recess.

- 🍎 Introduce the concepts of the *bystander* and the *ally* in order to explain the importance of looking out for one another and putting a stop to bullying. When students see someone being bullied or treated unkindly, they have a choice to be a *bystander* and do nothing or be an *ally* and help the targeted person. Have students role-play being the *bystander*, *ally*, and *target*. Afterwards, ask them how it felt to play each role. Brainstorm ways in which an *ally* can intervene to help someone who is being bullied.

For more information, please see our other handouts for teachers: *Weight Bias in Youth* and *Tips for Reducing Weight Bias*, available at www.yaleruddcenter.org.

¹ These and other classroom strategies can be found in *Don't Laugh at Me: Teachers Guides, Creating a Ridicule-Free Classroom* – A Project of Operation Respect, conceived and produced by Peter Yarrow Productions and Educators for Social Responsibility. Please visit www.dontlaugh.org.