



## Weight Bias is a Major Reason that Students are Bullied in Schools: A Fact Sheet on School Climate

### WHAT IS WEIGHT BIAS?

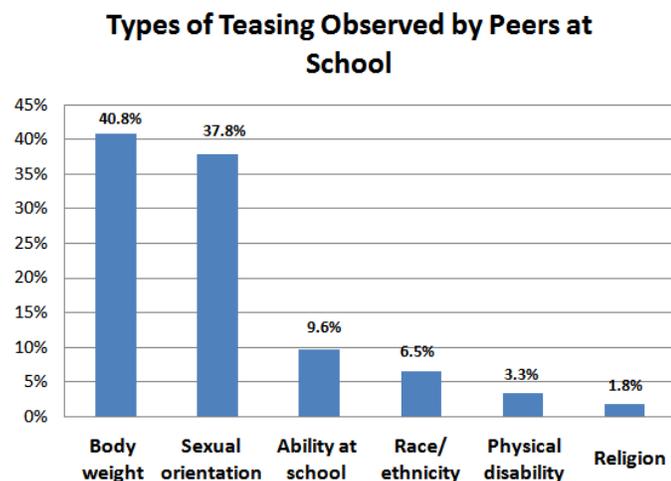
**Weight bias occurs when students are teased or bullied because of their body weight. This is especially common among students who are overweight or obese.**

#### Examples of weight bias include:

- Being the target of derogatory jokes and name-calling from peers
- Having peers spread negative rumors about you
- Being excluded from social activities
- Being verbally or physically threatened or harassed
- Receiving harassing phone calls, emails, or text messages

### HOW COMMON IS WEIGHT BIAS AT SCHOOL?

- One out of every three youth is now overweight or obese<sup>i</sup>. This means that many students are at risk for weight-based teasing and bullying at school. The more obesity rates climb, the more bullying increases.
- Overweight and obese students are more likely to be victims of bullying (including teasing and other types of verbal and physical aggression) compared to their average-weight peers<sup>ii</sup>, and their chances of being bullied increase with body weight.
- Adolescents (of all different weights) report that they see weight-based teasing happening at school *more* often than other types of teasing<sup>iii</sup>. (See figure below.)



### HOW DOES WEIGHT BIAS AFFECT STUDENTS?

- Students who are teased or bullied because of their weight may experience problems that are harmful to their emotional and physical well-being, such as:
  - Depression
  - Social isolation
  - Anxiety
  - Suicidal thoughts and behaviors
  - Poor body image
  - Unhealthy eating (binge-eating & eating disorders)
  - Low self-esteem
  - Avoidance of physical activity<sup>iv</sup>



## HOW DOES WEIGHT BIAS AFFECT STUDENTS' FUNCTIONING IN SCHOOL?

- Overweight students who are teased or bullied
  - may perform more poorly in school;
  - may be more likely to skip school if they are teased about their weight;
  - report that being bullied at school harms their grades<sup>v</sup>.
- Overweight students report that school bullying policies are not being enforced when it comes to weight-based teasing and bullying. Schools show little awareness or recognition of this problem<sup>vi</sup>.



## WHAT CAN SCHOOLS AND PARENTS DO TO REDUCE WEIGHT BIAS AT SCHOOL?

- Address the issue of weight-based bullying in anti-bullying trainings for school personnel.
- Ask Boards of Education to include body weight as an example of bullying in anti-bullying policies.
- Treat weight bias as a legitimate form of bias – it is just as serious as other forms of teasing and bullying.
- Be on the lookout for weight bias, and intervene when students are teased about their weight.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

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<sup>i</sup> Ogden, C. L., Carroll, M. D., Curtin, L. R., Lamb, M. M., & Flegal, K. M. (2010). Prevalence of high body mass index in US children and adolescents, 2007–2008. *JAMA*, 303, 242–249.

<sup>ii</sup> Fox, C. L., & Farrow, C. V. (2009). Global and physical self-esteem and body dissatisfaction as mediators of the relationship between weight status and being a victim of bullying. *Journal of Adolescence*, 32, 1287–1301; Hayden-Wade, H. A., Stein, R. I., Ghaderi, A., Saelens, B. E., Zabinski, M. F., & Wilfey, D. E. (2005). Prevalence, characteristics, and correlates of teasing experiences among overweight children vs. non-overweight peers. *Obesity Research*, 13, 1381–1392; Janssen, I., Craig, W. M., Boyce, W. F., & Pickett, W. (2004). Associations between overweight and obesity and bullying behaviors in school-aged children. *Pediatrics*, 113, 1187–1193

<sup>iii</sup> Puhl, R. M. & Luedicke, J. (under review) In the trenches: Nature and extent of weight-based victimization experienced by overweight adolescents at school. *Journal of Adolescence*; Puhl, R. M., Luedicke, J., & Heuer, C. (in press). Weight-based victimization toward overweight adolescents: Observations and reactions of peers. *Journal of School Health*

<sup>iv</sup> Eisenberg, M. E., Neumark-Sztainer, D., & Story, M. (2003). Associations of weight-based teasing and emotional well-being among adolescents. *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine*, 157, 733–738; Griffiths, L. J., & Page, A. S. (2008). The impact of weight-related victimization on peer relationships: The female adolescent perspective. *Obesity*, 16, S39–S45; Libbey, H. P., Story, M. T., Neumark-Sztainer, D. R., & Boutelle, K. N. (2008). Teasing, disordered eating behaviors, and psychological morbidities among overweight adolescents. *Obesity*, 16, S24–S29; Neumark-Sztainer, D., Falkner, N., Story, M., Perry, C., Hannan, P. J., & Mulert, S. (2002). Weight-teasing among adolescents: Correlations with weight status and disordered eating behaviors. *International Journal of Obesity*, 26, 123–131; Strauss, R. S., & Pollack, H. A. (2003). Social marginalization of overweight children. *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine*, 157, 746–752; Haines, J., Neumark-Sztainer, D., Eisenberg, M. E., & Hannan, P. J. (2006). Weight teasing and disordered eating behaviors in adolescents: Longitudinal findings from project EAT (Eating Among Teens). *Pediatrics*, 117, 209–215; Faith, M. S., Leone, M. A., Ayers, T. S., Moonseong, H., & Pietrobelli, A. (2002). Weight criticism during physical activity, coping skills, and reported physical activity in children. *Pediatrics*, 110, e23–e31

<sup>v</sup> Puhl, R. M., Luedicke, J. (in press) Weight-based victimization among adolescents in the school setting: Emotional reactions and coping behaviors. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*.

<sup>vi</sup> Bauer, K.W., Yang, Y.W., Austin, S.B. (2004). "How can we stay healthy when you're throwing all this in front of us?" Findings from focus groups and interviews in middle schools on environmental influences on nutrition and physical activity. *Health Education*, 31, 34–46.