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A NEWSLETTER FOR PROFESSIONALS

Nutrition Update Newsletter

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Weight Bias at School

Weight bias refers to negative attitudes towards individuals due to their weight. These negative attitudes result in stereotypes, prejudice and unfair treatment towards people who are larger or smaller than “average”. Weight bias can be expressed in multiple forms, such as name-calling, teasing, physical aggression, cyber bullying, rumours, and social exclusion. It can also occur unintentionally when discussing health and weight issues. Weight bias towards children and youth most often occurs at school and at home. In elementary school, an obese child has a 63% higher chance of being bullied than a non-overweight peer (7).

Weight bias occurs because we live in a culture where there is a perception that being thin is desirable (but not *too* thin, because these people may be stigmatized as well). Our culture also tends to believe that people are responsible for their life situation and “get what they deserve.” Despite research suggesting that body weight is determined by a complex interaction of genetic, biological and environmental factors, most people believe that weight gain or loss is something people can easily control if they just “try hard enough” or “have the motivation.”

We are exposed to misleading messages about weight from various sources such as television, movies, books, magazines, social media and websites. A consequence of these messages is that it is thought to be socially acceptable to judge someone's

character, personality and behaviour based on weight.

Students who experience teasing or discrimination because of their weight can have low self-esteem, poor body image, and are more likely to experience symptoms of depression and anxiety. These students are also more socially isolated, less likely to be chosen as friends, and more likely to engage in suicidal thoughts and behaviours. Children and youth who experience weight bias are more likely to try unhealthy weight control measures, binge eat, and avoid physical activities. Research shows that children and youth who have been victimized because of their weight report missing more days of school, and experiencing lower expectations by their teachers, which can result in poorer academic performance.

Tips for Addressing Weight Bias in Schools:

- Treat the importance of weight tolerance as you would racial or religious tolerance.
- Set up policies that ban teasing based on appearance.
- Educate students about the multiple causes of obesity.
- Increase awareness of how the media perpetuates weight bias.
- Do not allow weight-based teasing in your classroom.
- Question your own assumptions and use of language about weight.

- Include examples of role models with various body types and abilities in your teachings.
- Encourage all students to succeed in all school activities.

Information and resources on reducing weight bias can be found at www.YaleRuddCenter.org

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Ask A

NUTRITION

Expert



What are some ways to promote positive body image in the school and classroom?

- **Empower students to feel good about themselves.**
- Research shows that it might be harmful to teach students about eating disorders. Some students might learn to glamorize disturbed eating patterns. Information must be age appropriate. Instead teach students about healthy lifestyles, media literacy, and coping strategies, etc.
- **Provide children with alternative images of healthy bodies:** Showcase pictures of athletes of all different sizes, shapes, and abilities with the title, "Healthy bodies come in all shapes and sizes." Normalize and celebrate diversity by having a range of pictures around the school.
- **Avoid and discourage 'fat talk,'** e.g. "I can't eat that, it'll go straight to my hips," or "do these jeans make me look fat?"
- **Teach children critical-thinking skills to**

help them identify and resist cultural messages that could promote negative body image. Refer to the *Beyond Images* curriculum noted in the resource section below).

- **Feature books and videos** appropriate for different age groups **in the library** on topics such as non-dieting, weight acceptance, etc.
- Have students post messages about their peers on a wall focusing on their **positive characteristics that have nothing to do with the way they look.**
- Help parents and teachers to think about their own attitudes towards weight. Their behaviour, language, eating and physical activities influence children.
- Make time and space for meals at school. Discourage "starve-a-thons". Set up policies that ban teasing about physical appearance.
- Promote understanding and tolerance for natural weight gain and fat among girls going through puberty.

For other ideas visit: NEDIC nedic.ca/give-get-help/prevention-health-promotion and www.pinterest.com/rqhealth/promoting-positive-body-image-activities-videos-id/

Does our school need a weight loss program for our students?

Measuring children and youth within the school setting can be more harmful than beneficial. Children and youth are often teased about their size and shape. Measuring weight or body composition at school can increase the amount of teasing children may already be receiving.

Regardless of their size or shape, children and youth may be pressured to try harmful diets. Body composition can influence health, but research has shown that shaming people for their size does not improve their health (9).

All students need to be physically active, eat well, and have positive mental health regardless of their size and shape. It is important to be supportive of all children and youth by keeping the focus **on** health and wellness and **off** size and shape. Health classes can talk about natural weight gain during puberty, coping skills, self-esteem, healthy exercise, the problems with restrictive eating, marketing commodities, etc.

How to promote health at various sizes?

Try implementing wellness programming or concepts for all kids (not just kids who appear overweight). Assess the school environment and make it easier for all kids to eat healthy and be active. For example, have outdoor education, integrate movement into the classroom, offer active after school programming with healthy snacks, or kids cooking programs.

Everyone can make a difference.

PUBLIC HEALTH NUTRITIONISTS OF SASKATCHEWAN WORKING GROUP

Distributed by:
Chelsea Belt, R.D.
Public Health Nutritionist
Saskatoon Health Region
P: 306-655-4687

Public Health Nutritionists
of Saskatchewan



E: chelsea.belt@saskatoonhealthregion.ca



Teaching Nutrition in Saskatchewan: Health and Physical Education Nutrition Concepts and Resources

Teaching Nutrition in Saskatchewan (TNS) identifies nutrition concepts and resources relating to Saskatchewan health and physical education curriculum outcomes. [Teaching Nutrition in Saskatchewan: Grade 6](#) has links to activities for classroom learning to support the outcomes related to weight bias and body image.

One resource referred to in TNS is the [NEDIC Beyond Images](#) curriculum. It is a free downloadable self-esteem and body-image curriculum for grades 4-8 with 5 lessons per grade. These resources were developed by the National Eating Disorder Information Centre (NEDIC) with sponsorship from

Dove. The curriculum focuses on media messages and building resilience towards negative messaging. Beyond Images explores current concepts of male and female beauty and what it means to 'fit in.' It provides opportunity to explore key issues around body image and self-esteem while developing critical thinking skills. The learning opportunities in this program fit into collaborative inquiry in the classroom setting. NEDIC Beyond Images also links to Saskatchewan curriculum outcomes in language arts.

NEDIC is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to helping those impacted by eating disorders and body-image issues by providing information, resources, referrals and support.

REGISTERED DIETITIANS (RD) WHO CONTRIBUTED TO THIS ISSUE:

Chelsea Belt, RD
Audrey Boyer, RD
Chelsea Brown, RD
Cathy Knox, RD
Barb Wright, RD