

Youth who are overweight often experience stigma, teasing, social exclusion, and even bullying from their peers. They may also feel ashamed of their body. Here are some things parents can do to help their children cope with weight-related stigma.

- **Examine your own beliefs about weight.** If you hold negative assumptions about weight, you may unintentionally communicate them to your child. You may want to examine and reconsider your views about the causes of obesity, and whether you believe stereotypes about people with obesity.
- **Use sensitive language about weight.** Avoid drawing negative associations between weight and unfavorable characteristics (e.g., that people with overweight or obesity are lazy or lack self-control). When discussing weight with your child, try to use terms that they do not find stigmatizing.
- **Combat teasing and bullying.** Parents should monitor whether their child is experiencing teasing or bullying, and take appropriate action to protect your child. This could involve speaking with other parents, teachers, or the school principal if necessary. Additional resources on dealing with bullying are provided below.
- **Help children put their body image in context.** Our society places too great of an emphasis on physical appearances – especially body size. You can help your child challenge unhealthy thinking about the importance of being thin by encouraging them to challenge these beliefs. *Would their lives be perfect if they were thin? Are they unable to have any fun because they are overweight?*
- **Focus on health rather than weight.** Weight loss can lead to important health benefits (which is one reason we are doing this study). However, it is important that children know that you care about your child's long-term health – not their appearance.

DOs & DON'Ts:

talking to your child with weight stigma

- **DON'T use negative body image as motivation to change.** Children are in a constant state of growth, so their bodies are constantly changing. Instead of “You’ll like how you look if you do this,” try, “It is important to learn how to take care of our bodies.”
- **DON'T use exercise negatively.** If exercise is used in a punishing way, we are much less likely to do it for the long term. Instead of “If you don’t like your belly, then stop being lazy and work out!”, try: “Why don’t we strengthen our belly muscles with some movement? Let’s see who can do more crunches!”
- **DO focus on the benefits of healthy eating.** Communicate to your child that to be healthy we need many nutrients, including quality carbohydrates, proteins, and fats, in *appropriate* portions (MyPlate is a great tool for portions). Instead of, “No more potatoes! You’ve had enough carbs,” say: “I noticed you ate all of your potatoes. You gave your body carbs, now it needs some nutrients from the vegetables!”
- **DO mind your word choices.** Finding words appropriate to say around children is more effective at helping them want to change than shaming language. Instead of, “We need to do this because we’re fat,” try, “It is unhealthy for my body to be at this size.” Children tend to respond better to “unhealthy size” or “unhealthy weight” than “fat,” “overweight,” or “obese.”
- **DO be a self-care role model.** When you want your children to choose healthy behaviors, the most effective thing to do is choose healthy behaviors yourself. In the same way, if you want your child to have more positive self image, let them know that you are making positive changes, too.

Resources

Bullying:

Stop Bullying.gov

<https://www.stopbullying.gov/resources/all>

<https://www.stopbullying.gov/sites/default/files/2017-10/how-youth-can-protect-themselves-from%20bullying-research-summary.pdf>

The Bully Project

<http://www.thebullyproject.com/>

Pacer Center's Kids Against Bullying

<https://www.pacerkidsagainstbullying.org>

<http://www.pacer.org/bullying/resources/>

Healthy Chicago Bullying Prevention

https://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/cdph/supp_info/healthy-living/bullying_prevention.html

IL State Board of Education Bullying Prevention

<https://www.isbe.net/Pages/Bullying-Prevention.aspx>

Body image:

Nutrition.gov

<https://www.nutrition.gov/subject/weight-management/body-image>

National Institutes of Health

<https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/weight-management/helping-your-child-who-is-overweight>