



# Book of the Month

Presented by ADL's Education Department

**About the Book of the Month:** This collection of featured books is from Books Matter: The Best Kid Lit on Bias, Diversity and Social Justice. The books teach about bias and prejudice, promote respect for diversity, encourage social action and reinforce themes addressed in education programs of [A World of Difference® Institute](#), ADL's international anti-bias education and diversity training provider. For educators, adult family members and other caregivers of children, reading the books listed on this site with your children and incorporating them into instruction are excellent ways to talk about these important concepts at home and in the classroom.

## Starfish

Lisa Fipps (Author)

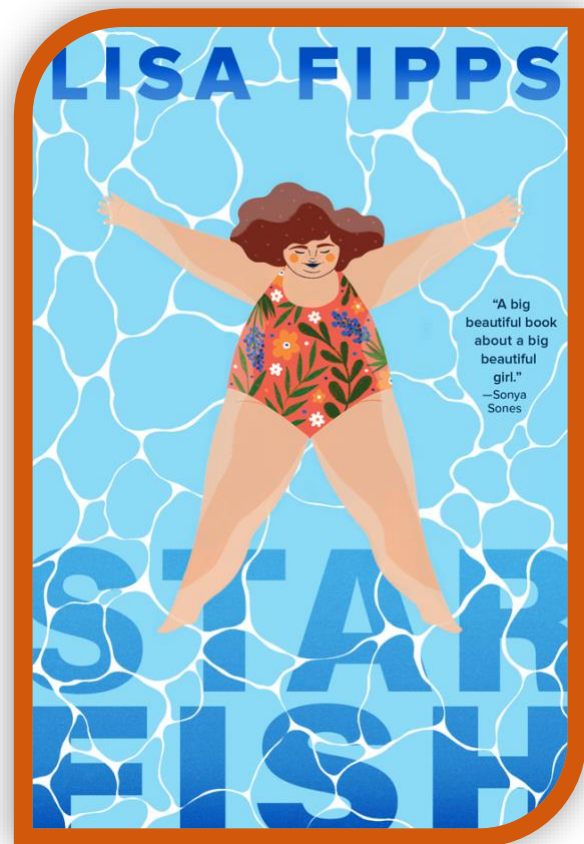
Ever since Ellie wore a whale swimsuit and made a big splash at her fifth birthday party, she's been bullied about her weight. To cope, she tries to live by the "Fat Girl Rules"—like "no making waves," "avoid eating in public," and "don't move so fast that your body jiggles." And she's found her safe space—her swimming pool—where she feels weightless in a fat-obsessed world. In the water, she can stretch herself out like a starfish and take up all the room she wants. It's also where she can get away from her pushy mom, who thinks criticizing Ellie's weight will motivate her to diet. Fortunately, Ellie has allies in her dad, her therapist, and her new neighbor, Catalina, who loves Ellie for who she is. With this support buoying her, Ellie might finally be able to cast aside the Fat Girl Rules and starfish in real life--by unapologetically being her own fabulous self.

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Publisher: Nancy Paulsen Books

Year Published: 2021

Age Range: 10–13



## Book Themes

Weight/Size Bias, Identity-Based Bullying, Acting as an Ally, Standing Up for Oneself

## Key Words

Discuss and define these words with students and remind them of the words' meanings as they come up in the book. See ADL's [Education Glossary Terms](#).

- |                     |               |                |                 |
|---------------------|---------------|----------------|-----------------|
| ■ ashamed           | ■ embarrassed | ■ pathetic     | ■ symbolize     |
| ■ bariatric surgery | ■ empowered   | ■ plus-size    | ■ therapist     |
| ■ body-shaming      | ■ enlighten   | ■ poor         | ■ torture       |
| ■ bullies           | ■ envious     | ■ prank        | ■ tsunami       |
| ■ chutzpah          | ■ humiliated  | ■ prey         | ■ unspoken      |
| ■ confidence        | ■ illegal     | ■ probability  | ■ venom         |
| ■ confronted        | ■ livid       | ■ psychiatrist | ■ ventriloquist |
| ■ devour            | ■ loners      | ■ self-image   | ■ weightless    |
| ■ disgust           | ■ offended    | ■ shame        | ■ wounds        |
| ■ distressed        | ■ obsession   | ■ stereotype   |                 |

## Note to Teacher

This book is about weightism, which is very common in schools today. It is important to reflect on and consider that you may have students in your classroom who have been the target of bullying, harassment, body shaming and discrimination because of weightism or sizeism. Be prepared and sensitive to those students, considering the extent to which you have already discussed these issues in your classroom, the severity of the harassment or bullying and your thoughts about how those students may feel about addressing the issue of weightism. Some students may feel relieved to have this conversation and others may feel embarrassed or upset. If you haven't already, be sure to [establish a safe learning environment](#) that includes creating group guidelines. You also may want to tell your students in advance about the book to give them an opportunity to talk with you privately about concerns they may have.

In the book, Ellie uses the term "fat" as a descriptive term to describe herself. Indeed, with the [body positivity movement](#) and "fat activism," language has evolved, and many people use the word fat as a descriptive, honest and direct term to talk about their body. However, that doesn't mean it is okay to use the term to describe someone else. Ellie notes that the term fat is oftentimes used as a put-down, slur and way to target and bully people, and we know this happens in school often. Therefore, throughout your discussion of the book and in this discussion guide, the term "overweight" or "perceived to be overweight" will be used. In addition, be mindful that students may ask about or reflect upon whether being "underweight" or "skinny" is included in the definition of weightism and whether it should be considered in the discussion. You can acknowledge that weightism does occur in this way, but that for the purpose of this book and its discussion, you will be focusing on weightism that targets people who are overweight or perceived to be overweight.

## Discussion Questions

If the students read the book in small groups or as a whole class, ask discussion questions throughout their reading to check comprehension and engage them on a deeper level. Some of these questions can also be used as writing prompts. When students have finished the book, choose from these questions to guide a group discussion:

- What is the book about?
- How would you characterize Ellie at the beginning of the book? How does Ellie grow and change as the story moves along?
- What happens at Ellie's fifth birthday party and how does that impact her for many years?
- When Ellie says, "But every time I try to stand up for myself, the words get stuck in my throat like a giant glob of peanut butter," what does she mean? Has that ever happened to you?
- What are the unspoken "Fat Girl Rules" that Ellie writes in her diary? In the end, what does she do with these "rules"?
- Why does Ellie feel like she has to make herself small?
- How does Ellie feel when she meets her new neighbor, Catalina?
- The pool is Ellie's "place," the place where she can escape. Where is your place?
- How do the members of Ellie's family treat her (her mom, dad, sister and brother)? How does Ellie feel about each of her family members and how they treat her? How do those relationships change throughout the book?
- When Ellie first meets her therapist, Dr. Wood, how does she feel about her? How does Ellie and Dr. Woods' relation change throughout the book?
- After Ellie spends time in Diana's clothing store for plus-size kids and teens, she wants to feel better about herself and says she wants the pool to be more than an escape, but also a place to express herself. How does she do that?
- When Ellie goes to the cafeteria for lunch, she reflects that, "School lunch is for bullies to dine on their prey." What does she mean by this? Who or what is the "prey"? Have you noticed that about school lunch?
- What is Ellie's relationship with her mom like? How does her mom treat Ellie and make her feel? What does Ellie do about it?
- Ellie reflects on the term "fat" and says her mom uses the term fat as an adjective to describe Ellie but "with her tone," she makes it a noun to define Ellie. What does Ellie mean by this? Can words have different meanings based on the tone of the speaker?
- How does Catalina's family treat Ellie? How is this different from how Ellie's own family treats her?
- What are the ways in which both Catalina and Ellie are targeted with bias?
- What are some of the stereotypes that people have about overweight people? What are Ellie's thoughts about those stereotypes?
- When Ellie reflects, "Could it be Mom's thinking that needs fixing and not me?" What does she mean by this?

- In her therapy sessions, Ellie and Dr. Wood talk about the difference between attacking back at people who target you and defending yourself? When does this happen in the book? Have you ever attacked back instead of defending yourself? How did that feel?
- What happens when Ellie and her family go out to eat and a little boy comes up to their table and calls Ellie a name? What is the boy's father's reaction? How do Ellie's mom and dad react? What are your thoughts about that whole scene?
- When Ellie and her family go to Niagara Falls and a girl they meet takes a picture of her and giggles, what does Ellie do to "defend herself?" Why do you think she does this? When she and Dr. Wood talk about it, what do they decide to do and why?
- When Ellie's classmates take the bolts off the screws of her chair to make her fall, what does her math teacher do? He says, "History books are full of horrible things happening because people sit back and do and say nothing." What does this mean and why do you think he says that?
- When her math teacher tells her to have a good cry and ignore what happens, how does Ellie feel about that, and what does she say?
- In what ways do Ellie's parents disagree about what should be done about the bullying that's happening to Ellie at school? Whose perspective do you share and why?
- Ellie's sister says she sees her physical wounds after the "prank". What does Ellie mean when she reflects "there are wounds she can't see?"
- What information is in the articles that Ellie tapes to the cabinets and refrigerator door? Why does she want her mother to see those articles? What impact does she hope it has on her mom?
- Why does Catalina get Ellie a beautiful mirror for Christmukkah? What does it mean to Ellie?
- When Ellie's mom takes her to doctors to explore bariatric surgery, what prompts Ellie to confront her mom? What does she say to her and what impact do her words have?
- When Marissa and Kortnee take Ellie's dog Gigi and try to exchange her for a cruel act of ransom (Ellie would have to eat a whole whale-shaped cake), what is Ellie's reaction? Who comes to help and act as allies to Ellie? How does Ellie feel?
- In a conversation later with her mom, Ellie's mom says that words can be used as tools or weapons. What does she mean by this? Have you ever used words as a weapon and words as a tool? What was the difference?
- Why is it difficult for Ellie to stand up for herself? How does she learn to do that and what are the ways that Ellie stands up for herself? Have you ever had to stand up for yourself and if so, what was that like?
- What is weightism and what can we as individuals do about it?
- The last scene in the book is when Ellie is with Viv and Catalina, and she tells them about starfishing. Why does she do that and why is it meaningful to her?
- How did you feel when the book ended? What do you think will happen next?
- Why do you think the author called the book *Starfish*?
- Why do you think the author used verse to tell the story?
- What messages does the author communicate through the story?

## Extension Activities

Below are activities for students that can extend learning from the book.

### 1. Reader's Response Writing Activities

**Write the Next Few Pages in Verse:** First, elicit/explain that the book *Starfish* is a novel written in verse. This means that it is a novel told or written in verse rather than prose. Poets.org describes a **verse novel** as "A novel in poetry. A hybrid form, the verse novel filters the devices of fiction through the medium of poetry." After explaining this, quickly summarize the last few pages of the book or elicit a summary from students: Ellie stands up to Kortnee and Marissa after they take her dog. Ellie, at a therapy session with her parents, confronts her mom about how she feels about her mom's body-shaming and that she feels her mother doesn't love her. Viv visits Ellie and in the last scene Ellie, Viv and Catalina are swimming together and Ellie tells them about "starfishing" and not making herself small anymore. Ask students: *What do you think will happen next? How do things change between Ellie and her mom? Is the situation different in school after she stands up to Kortnee and Marissa?* Have students then write the next few pages (in verse) based on what they think will happen next in the book. They should title each page/passage and use a similar style that the author uses. Then have students share their additional pages with the class.

**Diary Entries of a Character:** Have students select one of the central characters of the book: Ellie, Viv, Catalina, Mom, Dad, Liam, Anaïs, Dr. Wood/Doc (Ellie's therapist), Marissa or Kortnee. Then have students write diary entries for the chosen character, writing 5–8 diary entries that the character might have kept before, during or after the book's events. Remind students that the character's thoughts and feelings are very important in a diary as well as their reaction to day-to-day events and other activities that take place throughout the book. Invite students to focus on their character's perspective. *How do they observe the events of the story? What assumptions do they make about other characters they interact with? What thoughts might they have that they wouldn't want to share with others, but share in their diary? What are their hopes and dreams?* You may choose to have students engage in prewriting discussions with a partner about their character in order to get their ideas out. After students have completed the diary entries, have them share their writing with the class and consider creating an online collection of all the diary entries.

**Favorite, Meaningful or Impactful Passage:** With students, brainstorm some of their favorite or most meaningful, memorable or impactful pages or individual poems/sections of verse. Have a few students share briefly why they selected that section/passage. Then have students choose one of the pages/passages to analyze. Explain to students that their selection does not have to be a positive or their favorite for it to be meaningful, memorable or impactful. Have students write a short analytical essay that responds to some or all the following questions: *Why did you select this passage or page? Why is it meaningful, memorable or impactful? What does the page/passage mean? What literary devices does the author use? What is the author trying to convey in this page/passage? How do you connect with the page/passage?* After students write their essays, have some or all share theirs aloud with the class.

### 2. Talk about Weightism/Weight or Size Bias

Talk with students about one of the main themes of the book, weightism or weight/size bias. Elicit a definition of **weightism** as the disrespect, harm and mistreatment of people who are viewed as overweight compared to people who are not seen as overweight. Ask students: *How do we see weightism taking place in our school, community, in the media and in society in general?* Have them share a few examples. Then share some or all the following information:

Bias, discrimination, stereotyping, harassment and bullying based on weight and size are very common in schools, yet rarely discussed. Negative attitudes begin in preschool and often worsen as children get older. The National Education Association's (NEA) report on size discrimination concluded, "For (overweight) students, the school experience is one of ongoing prejudice, unnoticed discrimination, and almost constant harassment. From nursery school through college, (overweight) students experience ostracism, discouragement, and sometimes violence." According to the [Centers for Disease Control](#), approximately one in three overweight girls and one in four overweight boys report being teased by peers at school, and peers regard overweight children as undesirable playmates. In a [study of adolescents](#), high school students perceived being overweight as a primary reason that peers are victimized at school; at least 84% of participants observed overweight students being teased in a mean way and teased during physical activities. Most students also observed verbal threats and physical harassment toward overweight and obese students.

After sharing this information, ask students: *What can we do about weight bias in our school? What can we do about it in our community and in society?* If time permits, have students engage in a project that educates others or takes actions to address weight bias.

### 3. Identity-Based Bullying and Acting as an Ally

Talk with students about bullying and how it is addressed in the book. Define **bullying** as when a person or a group behaves in ways—on purpose and over and over—that make someone feel hurt, afraid or embarrassed. (Note: This definition is for elementary students. For older students, use the definition in our [Glossary](#).) Elicit/explain that **identity-based bullying** is when the bullying is based on an aspect of someone's identity. In the case of Ellie, elicit from students that she was bullied based on her appearance and size. Point out that identity-based bullying takes place not because of the identity of the target but because of the bias of the person who is engaging in bullying, the aggressor. Explain that in a bullying situation, there are several roles that people can play, as follows:

**Aggressor:** Someone who says or does hurtful things on purpose over and over.

**Ally:** Someone who helps or stands up for someone who is being bullied or the target of prejudice.  
**Bystander:** Someone who sees bullying or prejudice happening and does not say or do anything.

**Target:** Someone who is bullied or treated in harmful ways by a person or group of people on purpose over and over.

Explain that most people have played each of these roles at different points in their lives and in different situations. Ask students to provide examples of bullying and ally behavior that takes place in the book. Explain that with ally behavior, people can also be allies to themselves, as Ellie struggled throughout the book to stand up for herself and act as an ally to herself. This is critically important, while also being helpful and important for others to act as an ally. Share [6 Ways to be an Ally](#) with students and elicit from them examples in the book when someone acted as an ally based on these different strategies, either Ellie herself or another person. Have students choose a passage or scene from the book when ally behavior took place, draw a picture of that scene and then write a blurb, quote or slogan that goes along with the illustration. Share those with the class by creating a gallery of the drawings and have students move around the room to look at all of them.



## ADL Resources

The following are curriculum and educational resources on weight bias, identity-based bullying and ally behavior.

### Curriculum Resources

Cyberbullying: Understanding and Addressing Online Cruelty, [www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/cyberbullying-understanding-and-addressing-online-cruelty](http://www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/cyberbullying-understanding-and-addressing-online-cruelty).

Identity-Based Bullying, [www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/identity-based-bullying](http://www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/identity-based-bullying).

What is Weight Bias?, [www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/what-is-weight-bias](http://www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/what-is-weight-bias).

### Websites

6 Ways to Be an Ally

[www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/6-ways-to-be-an-ally-en-espanol](http://www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/6-ways-to-be-an-ally-en-espanol)

Some simple things a student can do to be an ally to targets of name-calling and bullying. (Also in Spanish.)

Bullying and Cyberbullying Prevention Strategies and Resources

[www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/bullying-and-cyberbullying-prevention-strategies](http://www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/bullying-and-cyberbullying-prevention-strategies)

Provides a collection of ADL resources on bullying and cyberbullying for educators, administrators, students and families and caregivers.

National Bullying Prevention Month

[www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/national-bullying-prevention-month](http://www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/national-bullying-prevention-month)

Some resources to help students be motivated and empowered to act as allies and help contribute to creating a positive "ally culture" at their schools.

Safe and Inclusive Schools for All

[www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/safe-and-inclusive-schools-for-all](http://www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/safe-and-inclusive-schools-for-all)

This resource provides information about how to promote a safe, respectful and inclusive school community.

Table Talk: Family Conversations about Current Events

[www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/table-talk](http://www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/table-talk)

Provides the tools parents and family members need to engage their families in conversations about important news stories and other timely discussions about societal and world events. Includes discussion guides containing a topic summary, questions to start the conversation and dig deeper, ideas for taking action and additional resources. See "[What Bullying Is and Is Not](#)."

### Children's Books

Below are links to lists of recommended anti-bias and multicultural books for the indicated category.

Bias, Discrimination & Hate: Size Bias, [www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resources-for-educators-parents-families/childrens-literature?tid\[180\]=180](http://www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resources-for-educators-parents-families/childrens-literature?tid[180]=180)

Bullying Awareness & Prevention, [www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resources-for-educators-parents-families/childrens-literature?childrens-lit-select-all-2=1&tid\[165\]=165&tid\[166\]=166&tid\[167\]=167&tid\[168\]=168&tid\[169\]=169](http://www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resources-for-educators-parents-families/childrens-literature?childrens-lit-select-all-2=1&tid[165]=165&tid[166]=166&tid[167]=167&tid[168]=168&tid[169]=169)