



WHAT IS WEIGHT BIAS?

Bias, discrimination, harassment and bullying based on weight and size are prevalent in our schools, yet rarely discussed. The National Education Association's (NEA) report on size discrimination concluded, "For fat students, the school experience is one of ongoing prejudice, unnoticed discrimination, and almost constant harassment. From nursery school through college, fat students experience ostracism, discouragement, and sometimes violence." According to the [Centers for Disease Control](#), approximately one in three overweight females and one in four overweight males report being teased by peers at school, and peers regard obese children as undesirable playmates who are "lazy, stupid, ugly, mean and unhappy." Studies also show that a young person's appearance, including weight bias, is the number one identity category for bullying.

In addition to bullying and harassment by fellow students, research shows that bias can be exhibited in the actions and attitudes of teachers and school health care professionals as well. This lesson will provide an opportunity for students to discuss and define weight bias, identify stereotypes about overweight and obese people and explore what can be done about weight bias in their classroom, school and society at large.

[NOTE TO TEACHER: It is important to reflect on and consider that you may have students in your classroom who are overweight or obese and also have been the target of bullying, harassment and discrimination because of bias about their weight. Indeed, that may be the reason you want to teach a lesson on weight bias. Be prepared and sensitive to those students, taking into consideration the extent to which you have already discussed these issues in your classroom, the severity of the harassment or bullying and your consideration of how those students may feel about addressing the issue of weight bias. Some students may feel relieved to have this conversation and others may feel awkward and embarrassed. Be sure to carefully review [Classroom Guidelines](#) with your whole class prior to teaching the lesson. You also may want to tell your students in advance about the lesson to give them an opportunity to talk with you privately. You can say something like, "Tomorrow we are going to be discussing the issue of weight bias. It is a very important topic and affects many children. If anyone has any concerns or would like to tell me something in advance, please speak with me privately between now and tomorrow."]

See additional ADL resources on [Anti-Bias Education](#), [Bullying/Cyberbullying](#) and [Recommended Multicultural and Anti-Bias Books for Children: Size Bias](#).

Grade Level: grades 6-8

Common Core Anchor Standards: Reading, Speaking and Listening

Learning Objectives:

- Students will be able to define stereotype, bias and discrimination and understand the distinction between them.

- Students will identify stereotypes about overweight and obese people that they see in society, including media stereotypes.
- Students will define weight bias and discuss where they have observed it in their lives.
- Students will explore some of the myths and facts related to obesity and weight bias.
- Students will reflect on what can be done about weight bias as individuals, in their classroom, school and society at large.

Material:

- *Weight Prejudice: Myths and Facts* video (17 mins., Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, www.youtube.com/watch?v=92rWQ-OIb1Y)
- “Fat Prejudice Shown in Kids As Young as 4 Who Say They Would Be Less Likely to ‘Befriend’ A Fat Storybook Character: Stud” (*New York Daily News*, May 15, 2013, www.nydailynews.com/life-style/health/fat-prejudice-shown-kids-young-4-article-1.1344596), one copy for each student
- (Optional) [Information About Weight Bias](#), one copy for each student
- Chart paper and markers

Vocabulary:

Review the following vocabulary words and make sure students know their meanings. (See ADL’s “[Glossary of Education Terms](#)” and “[Definitions Related to Name-Calling, Bullying and Bias](#)”)

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|--------------|---------------|---------------|-----------|
| • Bias | • Intolerance | • Prejudice | • Target |
| • Befriend | • Media | • Self-esteem | • Teasing |
| • Bullying | • Myth | • Stereotype | • Torment |
| • Harassment | • Obesity | • Stigma | |

CLASSROOM GUIDELINES

If you have already set up classroom guidelines, review them. Because this lesson is about an aspect of bias and bullying, it is particularly important to go over terminology and remind students about not to engage in stereotyping and name-calling, to listen well and to respect other points of view.

If you do not already have classroom guidelines, write “Classroom Guidelines” on a sheet of chart paper and ask students to suggest behaviors and attitudes that will help everyone feel safe and that will promote a respectful discussion. Allow a few minutes for brainstorming and make sure the following guidelines are on the list:

- Respect each other’s points of view.
- Listen to others.
- Speak from your own experience.
- Participate as much as you can (to your level of comfort) and ask questions.

- Respect confidentiality (don't share what others have shared).
- Be open to new ideas.
- Share air time so that everyone who wants to speak has an opportunity to do so.
- No put-downs.

DEFINE TERMS: STEREOTYPE, BIAS AND DISCRIMINATION

1. Discuss and define the words: stereotype, prejudice and discrimination. Ask the students if they can define each of the words. If they do not know, give the following definitions below, adding that a stereotype is a belief about a person or group of people, bias is an attitude about a person or group of people and discrimination is an action that can follow prejudicial attitudes.

Stereotype: An oversimplified generalization about a person or group of people without regard for individual differences. Even seemingly positive stereotypes that link a person or group to a specific positive trait can have negative consequences. Example, "All boys like sports."

Bias: An inclination or preference either for or against an individual or group that interferes with impartial judgment. Example, "I hate girls because they don't like sports."

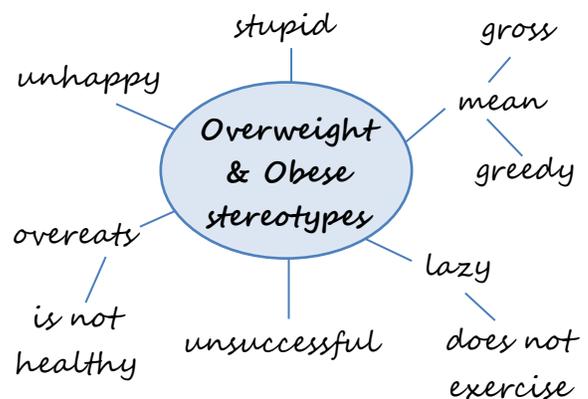
Discrimination: The denial of justice and fair treatment by both individuals and institutions in many arenas, including employment, education, housing, banking and political rights. Discrimination is an action that can follow prejudicial thinking. Example, "Let's not have any girls on our team."

2. The word "stigma" will be used throughout the lesson. Define stigma as "a mark of disgrace (based on a set of negative and often unfair beliefs) that a society or group of people have about something."

SEMANTIC WEB BRAINSTORM: STEREOTYPES OF PEOPLE WHO ARE OVERWEIGHT

1. Remind students about the definition of stereotype. Ask students: *What are some stereotypes about people who are overweight or obese? How do the media (television, commercials, videos, movies, magazines, etc.) portray and/or stereotype people who are overweight or obese?*
2. Record their responses on the board or chart paper in a semantic web as illustrated to the right.

NOTE: Some students may feel reluctant to express stereotypes for fear that people will think they believe those stereotypes. Emphasize that the words students share do not necessarily reflect their actual beliefs but they underscore how deeply ingrained stereotypical thinking is in all of us. Assure students that they should share without fear of judgment.



3. Discuss the web brainstorm by asking the following questions:
 - What do you notice about the words and phrases?
 - Are they mostly positive or negative?

- How do you feel looking at the web?
- What are your reactions to the stereotypes of overweight and obese people?

DISCUSSION: WHAT IS WEIGHT BIAS?

1. Ask students: *How would you define weight bias?* Come to a definition of weight bias (sometimes called “weightism”) as “prejudice and discrimination against overweight and obese people.”

NOTE: Some students may ask whether being underweight or skinny should be included in the definition of weight bias and whether it should be considered in the discussion. You can acknowledge that weight bias does occur in this way as well, but that for the purpose of this lesson, you will be focusing on weight bias for overweight and obese people.

2. Ask students, by a show of hands, to indicate *Has anyone witnessed weight bias?* Clarify that they may have seen or experienced weight bias in a variety of places. Ask them to share where they have seen weight bias; for example, at school, home, after school, on television, on social media (Facebook, Instagram, etc.) or somewhere else.
3. Ask students to think about a time they witnessed weight bias. Cautioning that they shouldn’t reveal any specific information or names of students, ask the following questions:
 - How do you think the targeted person felt?
 - Where do you see the most weight bias (school, home, television, social media, etc.)?
 - How big of a problem do you think weight bias is in our school? In our society?

INFORMATION SHARING ABOUT WEIGHT BIAS

Share the following information from the Centers for Disease Control’s special report on [Childhood Obesity: Issues of Weight Bias](#). You can also make a copy for each student and read out loud.

- Approximately 1 in 3 overweight females and 1 in 4 overweight males report being teased by peers at school. Among the heaviest group of youth, the figure increases to 3 in 5.
- Peers regard obese children as undesirable playmates who are lazy, stupid, ugly, mean, and unhappy.
- Negative attitudes begin in preschool and can worsen as children age.
- As a consequence, obese elementary school children miss more days of school than do their non-obese peers.
- Obese adolescent females are less likely to attend college than are non-obese females.
- Students who were obese at age 16 years had fewer years of education compared with non-obese peers.
- Youth who are victimized because of their weight are more vulnerable to depression, low self-esteem and inferior body image.
- Weight-biased teasing makes the young person more likely to engage in unhealthy eating habits and to avoid physical activity in school.

VIDEO: WEIGHT PREJUDICE MYTHS AND FACTS

1. View the video [Weight Prejudice: Myths and Facts](#). Explain that in the video, a teenager named Bene turns a biology assignment into an important lesson about weight prejudice. Bene based the video on her own personal experiences with weight bias, uses expert commentary and has “actor” friends role play situations that she herself has faced. For more information, see the [discussion guide](#) to the video.
2. If time permits, while students are watching the video, stop it intermittently in 5–7 minute intervals and take a minute and have students jot down notes, thoughts, feelings and questions that emerge as they watch. This process provides short opportunities for reflection and students can later refer to their notes during the class discussion.
3. After watching the video, engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:
 - Why do you think Bene made the video?
 - What are the ways that stereotyping and prejudice happened in Bene’s school and home?
 - What did Mr. Tully, Bene’s teacher, say and do? What did you think about his actions?
 - Have you seen examples like that in our school?
 - What myths are uncovered in the video?
 - What are the causes of obesity?
 - How does Bene feel about the weight prejudice directed at her?
 - What did the video say about the impact of weight bias?
 - What did you learn that you didn’t know before?

READING ACTIVITY

1. Have students read the article: [“Fat Prejudice Shown in Kids As Young as 4 Who Say They Would be Less Likely to ‘Befriend’ A Fat Storybook Character: Study.”](#) Give students 10–15 minutes to read the article in class or give it to them for homework the night before doing the lesson.
2. Engage the students in a discussion by asking:
 - What did you learn about weight bias after reading the article?
 - Did anything surprise you?
 - According to the article and study, when does weigh bias/prejudice begin?
 - How did the study show that weight bias begins at four?
 - What is the perspective of the writer?
 - When the researcher said, “Parents and teachers should be aware of this,” what did he mean?

ACTION: WHAT CAN WE DO TO REDUCE OR ELIMINATE WEIGHT BIAS?

1. Ask students: *Now that you understand what weight bias is and the impact of it, what do you think we can do to reduce or eliminate it?* Brainstorm a list of ideas. If the list does not emerge naturally from the brainstorm, explain to students that there are things we can do as individuals, in our classroom, in our school and in society as a whole. The list might look like this:

- Don't call people names.
 - Make posters about weight bias and hang them around the school,
 - Be aware when you stereotype someone because of their weight
 - Write to magazines about the stereotypes in their publication,
 - Intervene when someone calls another student a name,
 - Hold a school assembly about weight bias.
2. Divide the students into four groups: (1) Individual (2) Classroom, (3) School and (4) Community/Society. Students will work together to brainstorm ideas, choose at least one of those ideas and begin planning the steps needed to implement the idea. If the groups are too large, you can create sub-groups for each of the four categories. This will be a longer project and will likely take a few weeks to bring to fruition.

CLOSING

Have each student share one idea they have for reducing or eliminating weight bias. If students have brainstormed ideas in their groups, those can be shared as well.

ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES

- [“Fat Is the New Ugly on the Playground”](#) (CNN, March 16, 2014)
- [Teachers: How to Address Weight Bias in Your Classroom](#) (The Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity)
- [Teens, Are You Being Bullied Because of Your Weight?](#) (The Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity)
- [Playgrounds and Prejudice: Elementary School Climate in the United States](#) (GLSEN, 2012)
- [Overweight Kids and Discrimination](#) (Family Education)
- [Childhood Obesity: Issues of Weight Bias](#) (Centers for Disease Control)
- [CBS WKBT News Anchor's On-Air Response to Viewer Calling Her Fat](#)
- [Weight Bias: A Social Justice Issue](#) (The Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity)

COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS

Content Area/Standard
Reading
Standard 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
Speaking and Listening
Standard 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

INFORMATION ABOUT WEIGHT BIAS

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