

# Review on weight-related bullying: underlying mechanisms and psychosocial impact in childhood and adolescence

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## Abstract:

This study reviews the particularities of weight-related bullying, its underlying mechanisms, and its impact at a psychosocial level. Specifically, it addresses the role of stigma towards obesity, the main transmission agents, and the factors associated with a greater risk of victimization, such as suffering from severe obesity or being female. This kind of bullying, with a typical appearance during childhood and adolescence, is associated with the presence of psychological symptomatology, altered eating behaviors, and social and academic difficulties. All this justifies the importance of developing universal prevention strategies and individualized attention plans for the most vulnerable groups in education and health settings.

## Keywords:

- Weight-related bullying
- Obesity stigma
- Childhood
- Adolescence
- Universal prevention

## Introduction

Bullying affects approximately one out of three children globally (1). Bullying is commonly defined as an aggressive behavior expressed either verbally (i.e., taunting, insults, threats), physically (i.e., kicking, hitting), or relationally (i.e., being excluded by peers, ridiculed publicly). Bullying is maintained over time by a person or a group, exercising real or perceived power and control over a third person to harm physically or emotionally (2,3). The victimization rate is higher during schooling stages 9-13 than at higher stages 14-16. Moreover, being bullied during primary school increases the risk of revictimization at later stages (4). Being a victim of bullying during childhood is associated with severe psychological effects that could prolong into adolescence and adulthood (5).

Bullying is often aimed at people with perceived emotional, intellectual, or physical differences (2). Specifically, high weight status is a differential feature that increments the risk of being bullied (6). In fact, weight teasing is one of the most common bullying practices during these developmental stages (7). Given the high prevalence of obesity in the infant-juvenile population in Spain (39.8% of overweight and 15.9% of obesity amongst 9-18 year-olds) (8), it is essential to understand weight-related bullying thoroughly. Therefore, this study aims to examine the existing literature on weight-related bullying in childhood and adolescence, as well as the underlying mechanisms and the associated psychosocial impact. Lastly, it will determine the clinical implications of weight-related bullying in the academic and health care contexts.

## Scientific evidence and bases of weight-related bullying

Weight-related bullying is a common phenomenon in childhood and adolescence (9). Among other risk factors, high weight status is associated with a greater likelihood of being bullied during childhood and adolescence (6,7,10,11). More specifically, youth with severe obesity are more vulnerable to this type of victimization (12), while results are mixed regarding victimization rates in youth with overweight (11,12).

In Western societies, weight-related bullying is an extreme form of the widespread stigma toward people with obesity. Concurrently, people with obesity are subjects of social devaluation through weight bias and negative beliefs (13). This stigma is settled on the overall slenderness as an ideal societal standard (14). The sociocultural pressure of the slenderness aesthetic ideal is higher on women, whereas being muscled is on men (15). These differences could explain variations in the magnitude of weight-centered victimization (6). Although this type of bullying involves both boys and girls, girls tend to be at greater risk of being bullied because of their weight, contrary to the trend found in general bullying (15,16). These trend differences have also been found in the type of victimization, pointing to physical abuse in boys and relational abuse in girls (11,16). However, studies around gender differences are still limited; therefore, the available evidence should be considered cautiously.

Mass media, families, and peers act as powerful channels and broadcasters of beauty standards and weight bias (17). For example, cartoons and children's popular movies often show very stereotyped profiles of people with obesity (18). Regarding peer-to-peer transmission, children use adjectives such as "sloppy, stupid, and ugly" to describe those peers with excess weight and generally prefer the thin playmate (19). In short, the transmission of weight status stereotypes is an ongoing phenomenon during childhood, happening both implicitly and explicitly, and weight-related bullying is an extreme form of it (7).

## Psychosocial impact associated with weight-related bullying

There is a large amount of evidence demonstrating the negative short- and long-term effects of weight-related bullying.

### Psychological symptomatology

The rising research on this field points to a worse mental health state for those girls and boys suffering from weight-related bullying (2,9). Specifically, these boys and girls are

more prone to having anxious-depressive symptomatology (20), self-harming behaviors (21), general low self-esteem (22), high levels of dissatisfaction, and low body esteem (9,23,24). Previous studies have also found gender differences on the topic. For example, evidence shows a more significant association between weight-related teasing and depressive and psychosomatic symptoms, and lower body esteem concerning appearance in girls compared to boys (23-25).

### Altered eating behavior

Weight-related teasing also affects the way youngsters eat. In a longitudinal study with adolescents, this teasing significantly correlated with the beginning of restrictive eating (26). Likewise, Jendryca and Warschburger found that girls who were stigmatized due to their weight status showed a more restrictive diet one year later, not having seen that association in boys. Restrictive eating is a dangerous strategy that may be used to deal with the pain associated with being bullied (28).

### Social relationships and academic well-being

Underages with obesity that suffer weight-related bullying tend to be excluded from their peers and be less popular (2,16). Moreover, they show more difficulties in making and maintaining friendships (29), increasing the probability of showing social anxiety (23). Weight-related bullying can also impact their academic well-being (9). A recent longitudinal study revealed that adolescents who reported being bullied for being overweight in their educational and familiar settings were likelier to drop out of school than those who were bullied only in the educational setting (30).

## Clinical Implications

The scientific evidence about the effectiveness of programs against bullying is limited in our country. Most do not cover a specific action plan in their design about weight-related bullying (31). Universal prevention strategies and more individualized counseling for vulnerable groups are recommended to diminish this kind of bullying, bearing in mind aspects such as age, gender, or corporality (16, 32). Among the recommended strategies, those directed toward normalizing body diversity are included to develop tolerant attitudes to prevent the internalization of weight-related prejudices (16). Such interventions could reduce the psychological consequences (5) and the effects of social stigma in adulthood. Recent research has related experiences of weight stigma with altered eating behaviors or physical activity performance, including individuals with increased vulnerability to excess weight-related stigma (e.g., seeking bariatric surgery) (33,34).

Therefore, the school environment is ideal, given its broad scope for developing universal prevention strategies (31). Likewise, healthcare professionals have a crucial role in detecting alarm signs and symptoms of victimization and intervening on the impact of bullying (2,35). Given that neither health nor education professionals are exempt from presenting weight-related prejudices (36,37), it is recommended to develop strategies to reduce these prejudices and thus avoid unfair treatment of underage with overweight.

## Conclusions

As previously mentioned, weight-related bullying is a common phenomenon in childhood and adolescence, negatively impacting their psychological and social well-being. Future interventions should incorporate a multidisciplinary understanding of bullying.

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