

# Weight Bias and Stigma in Schools

Weight stigma is widespread, not well understood, and harmful. Schools have made gains reducing stigma around race, gender, and ability. This resource can help schools extend this work to create weight-inclusive environments that are safe for all students.

## What is weight bias and stigma?

**Weight bias** refers to internally held beliefs about individuals or groups based on body size and can be conscious or unconscious. Some examples include:

- Believing that people in large bodies lack discipline, are unintelligent, unfit, unhealthy, unsuccessful, gluttonous, and/or unattractive
- Believing that people in small bodies are fit, smart, athletic, successful, attractive, healthy, and/or take good care of themselves

**Weight stigma** refers to the discriminatory acts and misconceptions about people because of their weight and size. It is a result of weight bias. People in larger bodies experience more stigma and discrimination. Some examples include:

- Hiring a person in a small body with equal or less qualification over a person in a larger body
- Making comments about food choices, body size, or weight of a person in a larger body at home, school, grocery stores, restaurants, and other spaces



## Why is it important to address in schools?

Schools should be a safe place for students to learn. Weight bias is widespread in our communities, including schools. It exists in the classroom, on the playground and through interactions that students have with school staff and their peers.

## Students experiencing weight stigma are more likely to:

- Face discrimination in schools, health care, and employment.
- Suffer from bullying or harassment.
- Have poor body image and low self-esteem.
- Have increased stress, depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts.
- Develop harmful eating behaviours that can lead to disordered eating.

## What does weight bias look like at school?

**School environment:** Chairs, desks, or equipment with size limits or sports uniforms that do not fit children in larger bodies.

**Weight-based bullying:** Students being teased or bullied based on their weight or body size. This is the most common cause of bullying in schools. It can be severe, frequent, and upsetting.

### Subtle weight bias in action:

- Talking about weight, body shape, or body size
- Commenting on, or removing items from a student's lunch
- Allowing diet talk or any form of [diet culture](#)
- Peers using social media platforms that modify body size or shape
- Having lower academic expectations for students in larger bodies
- Teaching materials that lack size diversity

**School staff can make a difference by reflecting on, and challenging their own assumptions about weight and role modelling acceptance of all body shapes and sizes.**

## What about health?

Health is complex and includes physical, mental, social, and emotional factors and cannot be determined or measured by weight.

Connecting healthy behaviours with weight or using weight loss as a motivator for healthy eating or being active is not health promoting and can be harmful.



### Positive health messaging

Help students build a positive relationship with food and their bodies. All students benefit from opportunities to eat well and engage in enjoyable movement and activities that promote mental wellness.

# What can schools do to create a weight-inclusive environment?

## School policies and guidelines

- Treat weight acceptance as you would racial or religious acceptance.
- Include body shape and size discrimination in the school bullying policies.
- Set [guidelines](#) for meal supervision roles and respect parent's role in food selection.
- Set ground rules for guest speakers to ensure that they refrain from diet and weight talk.
- Have staffroom and classroom expectations: no diet talk.

## Physical environment

- Commit to creating size-inclusive physical environments by ensuring that school desks, chairs, and playground equipment accommodate all body sizes.
- Ensure plus sizes are available for school clothing and sports uniforms.
- Remove scales.

## Weight-inclusive classrooms

- Ensure [books](#), posters, pictures, and materials used in the classroom are body inclusive.
- Watch for and [address weight-based bullying](#).
- Use [neutral language when talking about bodies](#).



## Whole school approach

Schools can take steps to address weight bias and stigma and support the health and wellbeing of all students and staff by taking a weight-inclusive approach to Comprehensive School Health.

## What can schools do? (*continued*)

Teach PHE curriculum in a weight-inclusive way	
<b>Physical literacy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide inclusive activities for all bodies</li> <li>• Promote the benefits of physical activity for wellbeing</li> <li>• Do not obtain student body metrics (weight, BMI, body fat, etc.)</li> </ul>
<b>Healthy and active living</b>	<p><b>Food Literacy</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teach about food and nutrition through <a href="#">food exploration</a></li> <li>• Refrain from categorizing food as healthy/unhealthy, good/bad</li> <li>• Review <a href="#">teaching and talking to students about food and nutrition</a></li> </ul> <p><b>Media Literacy</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teach students to become critical consumers of the media</li> <li>• Create awareness about unrealistic body norms</li> <li>• Check out <a href="#">Beyond Images</a> and <a href="#">MediaSmarts</a></li> </ul>
<b>Social and community health</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include body size as part of <a href="#">diversity and inclusion</a> activities</li> <li>• Teach about <a href="#">body confidence and self-esteem</a></li> <li>• Foster an understanding of weight bias as an equity issue</li> </ul>
<b>Mental well-being</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Normalize increases in weight, body fat, and appetite during puberty</li> <li>• Promote <a href="#">identity safety</a> in schools and in the classroom</li> <li>• Teach the importance of behaviours affecting well-being including sleep, stress, media use, self-compassion, and self-care.</li> </ul>

Provide resources and training for educators	
<b>Resources</b>	<a href="#">Comprehensive School Health</a> <a href="#">Jessie's Legacy</a> <a href="#">National Eating Disorder Information Centre</a> <a href="#">Foundry – Body Image, Disordered Eating and Eating Disorders</a> <a href="#">BC Dairy Healthy Attitude and Healthy Bodies</a> <a href="#">Healthy Bodies: Healthy Minds</a>