

## FITNESS

# Weight Bias in Schools and How Physical Educators Can Assist in Its Demise

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## Abstract

*One of the unfortunate side effects of the current global obesity pandemic is an increasing anti-fat bias toward overweight and obese individuals. The teaching profession is not immune from having its members included in the ranks of those possessing negative stereotypes associated with overweight or obese individuals. We provide the reader with a literature review of the bias held by individuals within society, provide the relationship of the bias to bullying, and suggest several avenues physical educators can explore in assisting to diminish the bias and its effects.*

During the past three decades, the prevalence of childhood obesity has doubled for adolescents and tripled for children (Faigenbaum, 2007). Accompanying this increase is the escalating prevalence of weight bias. By definition, weight bias is the tendency to judge an individual who is overweight or obese negatively based on assumed and/or false character traits, such as being physically unattractive, incompetent, lazy, or lacking self-discipline (Rukavina & Li, 2008).

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In 1996, 7% of the adult population within the United States reported weight discrimination. By 2006, that percentage had risen to 12%, demonstrating a 66% increase (Andreyeva, Puhl, & Brownell, 2008). This bias has also been reported in preschool children 3 to 5 years of age, who associated peers who are overweight with characteristics such as being mean, stupid, ugly, and having few friends (Obesity Action Coalition, 2012). Laziness, unhappiness, messiness, shiftlessness, brainlessness, and simply uneducated are common weight bias stereotypes (Schmalz, 2010). These negative labels are found in all facets of life including schools, job sites, and even doctors' offices (O'Brien, Hunter, & Banks, 2007). Because of these stereotypes, the negative labels follow individuals who are obese or overweight and are difficult to overcome as they move from childhood through adulthood.

The research literature seems to be consistent in dealing with the most common weight biases, namely, implicit and explicit. Rukavina and Li (2008) explained that individuals who knowingly exhibit their weight bias against people who are overweight (i.e., teasing or name-calling) have explicit bias. Implicit bias, which can be triggered by certain events or actions, occurs when one unconsciously exhibits bias by assuming an individual or a group of individuals possesses certain characteristics such as laziness or is unmotivated (Rukavina & Li, 2008).

Medical consequences connected with individuals who are overweight are the focus of the health community, and too often the mental and social issues are overlooked. These issues can have serious effects on the personal and social well-being of individuals who are overweight individuals and may lead to negative health consequences. Weight bias is still considered a socially acceptable form of prejudice today and is rarely challenged (Obesity Action Coalition, 2012).

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of weight bias in physical education (PE) programs and discuss interventions that may help to eliminate negative consequences. More specifically, we wanted to address two basic practitioner questions:

1. How does weight bias affect students within our schools?
2. When weight bias does occur, what can your school's physical education teacher do to help abolish it?

## **How Does Weight Bias Affect Students Within Our Schools?**

Educators' attitudes toward individuals who are overweight are significant and may influence whether the experiences individuals who are overweight encounter will be positive or negative. Physical educators need to be aware of weight bias and its stigma. This stigma will certainly create negativity in the classroom. Recognizing such attitudes, which may be exhibited by peers, teachers, and the individuals themselves, can assist in developing appropriate lessons and enhancing student motivation. Instructors in PE are not immune to weight bias, and this could subconsciously affect their teaching. The actions revealed in a PE class can have lifelong damaging consequences for students who are overweight. PE classes additionally provide the opportunity for healthy enhancement and improvement of self-esteem. Teachers need to be conscious of the innuendoes of their instruction practices as well as the dynamics of the class. Sadly, youth who are overweight are receiving this message from countless sources, including their PE classes. However, PE specialists within the school can play an enormous part in educating society of the negative stigma placed on these individuals.

As mentioned earlier, weight bias and discrimination may be the last socially "accepted" prejudice. However, given the current state of overweight, obesity, and sedentary lifestyles among youth, physical educators face a challenging task in promoting healthy weight principles and active lifestyles (Greenleaf & Weiller, 2005). Physical educators need to be cognoscenti of weight bias and understand how their influence can shape the attitudes of their students. Greenleaf and Weiller (2005) polled 105 professional members of the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) and reported that over 80% of the members believed not enough was being done in schools to fight obesity, but felt that the school setting was an appropriate place for dealing with youth weight problems.

Many components contribute to a person's ability to be physically active. Factors over which physical educators do not have much control are outside-of-school environmental or availability elements. Schmalz (2010) stated in her introduction, "Participation in physical activity is complicated by psychological barriers such as acute sensitivity to perceived weight status and consciousness of

weight stigma, lack of motivation, and low perceived competence” (p. 15). When participating in physical activity, many individuals who are overweight feel embarrassed or self-conscious because they compare themselves to those whose weight is within the averages (Greenleaf, Martin, & Rhea, 2008). Individuals who are overweight struggle with certain physical activities because of their weight and body awareness and therefore become discouraged. Name-calling by peers, along with the embarrassment when comparing themselves with others, can also generate unconstructive beliefs toward being active. The continual negative experiences discourage these individuals from being physically active and receiving the subsequent positive outcomes of exercise (Zabinski, Saelens, Stein, Hayden-Wade, & Wilfley, 2003). This negative lifetime cycle needs to be broken so engaging in physical activity can reduce the effects of being overweight.

According to Greenleaf et al. (2008), “One place where overweight youth should be able to engage in physical activity without encountering social stigma is in the K–12 PE setting which should be free from all types of bias and stigma” (p. S53). This is a challenge because PE classes are where individuals’ body and physical abilities are revealed in front of others. Peer groups play a major role in youth and anti-fat attitudes (Puhl, 2011). Being required to wear PE uniforms, changing in front of peers in the locker rooms, and comparing themselves to others based on their level of performance during physical activity are situations during which students who are overweight begin to witness the negative biases in PE class (Greenleaf & Weiller, 2005). This reinforces the negative stigma that these individuals already sense and can further impede their attempts to stay physically active.

Physical educators encounter individuals of all shapes and sizes in their classes and have the opportunity to be role models for being physically active, fostering physical activity, and reducing unhealthy habits and obesity (Greenleaf & Weiller, 2005). A weight bias mindset by instructors can cause enormous anxieties for individuals who are overweight or obese and their perceptions of being active. If the instructor exhibits negative weight bias, the likelihood exists that the class environment will be destructive for students who are overweight. The teacher who sets the standard within the PE class and remains positive and encouraging with all students creates a posi-

tive learning environment. Physical educators, who have reported weight-biased attitudes and negative stereotypes of individuals who are overweight, may diminish the effectiveness of PE (Greenleaf et al., 2008). Physical educators also hold biased beliefs about elements such as the physical condition of youth who are overweight, their ability to play sports, and their concept of themselves and their bodies (Peterson, Puhl, & Luedicke, 2012). In addition to current in-service teachers, preservice PE majors have shown significantly higher levels of implicit anti-fat bias than other majors (O'Brien et al., 2007). This is disturbing as students enrolled in PE teacher preparation programs are exhibiting weight bias before they enter the profession. A major function of physical educators is to promote lifelong fitness and physical activity by developing classroom environments that are welcoming and nonthreatening.

The PE program should be all-inclusive; however, at times weight bias may distract the instructor's intentions and direction. For example, if the class is participating in a fitness circuit activity and a student who is overweight is seen sitting down or walking through the exercise, this observation may trigger implicit weight bias from the teacher, which may cause the perception that the student is lazy or exhibiting poor effort and intensity. In reality, the student's heart rate may be above the workout zone. How the teacher reacts in this situation is crucial because it can affect the student's confidence. If the teacher announces, "Get going" or "You are not working hard" the student may react negatively and shut down. If, instead, the teacher approaches the student and asks, "How are you feeling?" or "Have you checked your heart rate?" or better yet says, "You have been working really hard. Why don't you go get a drink" the student may have a more positive reaction and may be recharged and work hard at the next station.

Professionals whose careers emphasize research or the clinical management of obesity show very strong weight bias, indicating pervasive and powerful stigma (Schwartz, O'Neal Chambliss, Brownell, Blair, & Billington, 2003). Individuals who are overweight seeking medical advice or care from physical educators and other health professionals who have a weight bias may be perceived as being lazy or not concerned about their health choices. This can further discourage these individuals from improving their health and activity levels.

Greenleaf and Weiller (2005) reported that over 80% of the subjects (105 professional NASPE members of AAHPERD) felt not enough was being done in schools to fight obesity, but believed the school setting was an appropriate place for dealing with youth weight issues. Most of the participants indicated that health curricula should include nutrition and weight control content. They also indicated that low calorie lunches should be accessible and weight control programs should be available in schools. Over 95% of the participants also strongly endorsed the belief that PE teachers should be role models by maintaining a normal weight and that PE classes should be focused on lifelong fitness activities. This study shows contradiction as physical educators firmly believed they needed to lead by example, yet the implicit weight bias continues to be high among these professionals.

Children who are overweight or obese are often teased or bullied because of their weight. Puhl, Luedicke, and Heuer (2011) found that 84% of the high school students reported observing students who are overweight being teased or treated in a mean way because of their weight during physical activity. It was also reported that 34% of adolescents felt excluded, ignored, rejected, teased during gym class, and dismissed from physical activity because of their weight. Teasing and bullying can also affect children of normal weight. Nauert (2014) surveyed students who were normal weight and overweight pertaining to being teased or bullied during physical activity. Physical activity of students of a healthy weight who were bullied decreased, and health-related quality of life for students who were overweight decreased. In a follow-up survey, the children who were of normal weight and overweight and were often teased when they exercised were less likely to participate in physical activity 1 year later. The awareness of bullying in schools has become customary in today's society. Weight bias is a form of bullying. This subject must not be overlooked in schools when implementing bullying prevention. Weight bias awareness can easily be included. The message need not be long, just clear and direct. Teachers should take a few minutes during class to educate their students about weight bias and confirm its connection to bullying.

## **When Weight Bias Does Occur, What Can Your School’s Physical Education Teacher Do to Help Abolish It?**

The first place to start in reducing anti-fat bias is the “ideology of blame” (Greenleaf & Weiller, 2005). This is the idea that people are overweight because they are at fault. This is not necessarily true, but the stereotypes that follow individuals who are overweight support this blame. Interventions need to be focused on deterring the negative stereotypes. Providing professionals the information to change the focus of overweight stereotypes is another way to counter the negativity. Rukavina and Li (2008) also pointed out that by giving examples of people who are overweight and are stars on athletic teams, or actors, or screenwriters, can provide optimizing effects. This should be done at all levels of PE teacher preparation programs. The knowledge that instructors can obtain about weight bias and its effect can positively influence the learning environments of their students. Being able to recognize the negative bias and having methods to redirect the situations into more positive experiences can help students who are overweight feel more confident and willing to be active.

Education is the key. As with many of society’s issues, educating the public with accurate and pertinent information can alleviate many of the misconceptions and biases. Schools and educators need to begin early with children and send the message that weight bias is bullying and will not be tolerated. Many perceptions about the causes of obesity contribute to weight bias. There are many causes of obesity such as genetics and biological and environmental factors over which the individual has no control. The media’s portrayal of individuals who are overweight and the unrealistic ideas of thinness are critical areas that need to be addressed. Highlighting positive associations with people who are overweight and focusing on their accomplishments are other positive examples. An educator’s goal must be to provide discussion opportunities in which feelings and actions in different scenarios of weight bias can be the focus. Having students role-play how to stand up for their peers and not allow negative statements to occur in their schools may also be a successful strategy.

Friedman and Puhl (2012) recommended the following tips for reducing weight bias: (a) be sensitive to potentially embarrassing situations, (b) do not allow weight-based teasing in your classroom, (c) question your own assumptions and use of language about weight, and (d) emphasize the importance of health, rather than being thin. PE is an area of children's lives in which they should feel safe to be active. Children who are overweight should be no exception. In addition to the obvious ways physical educators can help these children, social and personal acceptance need to occur. As teachers, we need to be aware of weight bias and be willing to educate our students to be attentive to name-calling or put-downs of individuals who are overweight and be able to intervene. Students need to understand the causes of obesity and be encouraged to work as hard as they can to achieve the goals in class.

## **Conclusion**

In a study of 1,555 adolescents, almost one third had experienced weight-related victimization, with youth who are overweight being 6 times more likely to report such experiences than thinner youth. Of the adolescents, 92% reported they had witnessed their peers who are overweight and obese being teased at school (Puhl et al., 2011). Because of their weight, many individuals who are overweight and obese experience a stigma perceived by themselves and others. These attitudes and stereotypes are mainly negative and have an adverse influence on their self-worth and confidence. Physical activity can assist individuals who are overweight in bettering themselves physically and mentally when the environment is friendly and positive. The attitudes of physical educators can affect students and be detrimental to youth who are overweight or obese. Physical educators have been conditioned to recognize the characteristics of a healthy body, and that very perception can lead to weight bias. Education is the key to trying to alleviate these negative attitudes. Understanding what weight bias is and how it can affect individuals who are overweight physically and mentally is the beginning. Physical educators need to create fair and accepting classroom environments using supportive techniques. Allowing students to choose their own workout clothes and select from a variety of activities that promote success, no matter the body type or ability level, must be the goal of the educator. Last, focus should be on reducing the number of mental and

physical barriers that individuals who are overweight must endure. Only then can motivation increase and the road to a healthy lifestyle begin.

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