

Help your child be **INCLUSIVE** of all bodies and avoid weight stigma.

The role of weight stigma in shaping children's body image

Weight stigma is the attitudes and beliefs held about others based on their body/appearance. It often presents as stereotypical attitudes, bias, or prejudice about a person's weight, size, or shape.

Weight and body attitudes develop early and are influenced by family, friends, teachers, sport coaches and the media. In children, studies have shown that weight stigma presents as positive attitudes about individuals with thin bodies (e.g., that they are kind, clever and popular) and negative attitudes about individuals with large bodies (e.g., that they are mean, dumb, and unpopular).

The two ways weight stigma can influence body dissatisfaction:

1. It can affect how children treat others by increasing stigmatisation, victimisation and bullying, particularly of children in a large body.
2. Internalising negative weight attitudes can make children judge their own bodies more harshly. This can increase body dissatisfaction and unhelpful eating habits (e.g., restriction, binge eating), and contributes to poorer social and emotional wellbeing.

Parents play a significant role when it comes to influencing children's weight and appearance attitudes, beliefs and values.

The good news is that encouraging and modelling inclusivity and acceptance of ALL bodies can help to reduce weight stigma, appearance teasing and exclusion, and improve body image.

Tips for reducing weight stigma

Try

- ✓ Checking your own weight attitudes and biases. Ask yourself who and what have influenced them.
- ✓ Role modelling positive/neutral attitudes about different body shapes and sizes. Be inclusive and kind to people with all body shapes and sizes.
- ✓ Encouraging your family to celebrate and accept different body shapes, sizes and appearances.
- ✓ Reinforcing that being different is what makes each person special and interesting.
- ✓ Encouraging children to see ALL bodies as valuable and deserving respect.
- ✓ Having zero-tolerance to comments, teasing and bullying about weight or appearance. ([Our BRAVE tip sheet has more](#)).
- ✓ Discouraging 'fat' as a derogatory, mean or shaming term.
- ✓ Reminding your child their body and appearance is one aspect of who they are. They are more than a body!
- ✓ Learning about the [Health Not Weight mindset](#) (i.e., Healthy bodies come in different shapes and sizes.)
- ✓ Reminding your child bodies naturally grow, develop and change, and that's OK. Bodies are shaped by many genetic and lifestyle factors.

Avoid

- ✗ Using a child's weight or BMI as the only measure of their health.
- ✗ Making negative comments about individuals with large bodies (e.g., they're unhealthy, should lose weight, eat better, or do more exercise).
- ✗ Passing judgement about a person's body or suggest that their size is the result of lifestyle habits (i.e., eating certain foods or not being active).
- ✗ Celebrating or reinforcing ideal bodies or suggest one type is better (e.g., thin/muscular).
- ✗ Making negative comments about your body size, shape or weight.
- ✗ Criticising your or others' weight or shape in photos. Take a breath and say something kind instead.
- ✗ Suggesting your child's body type is more suitable to one activity over another. Find body inclusive clubs or groups.
- ✗ Discussing weight stigma with children – pointing it out can reinforce weight stigma.
- ✗ Using words that reinforce one body size is right/wrong (e.g., underweight, overweight or obese).

What to do if you're worried about your child?

- If you're worried about your child's physical development, speak to your GP - ideally one who is not focused on weight or Body Mass Index (BMI). Because children grow and develop differently, BMI scales and charts aren't the best way to determine how healthy your child is.
- Don't put your child on restrictive diets. These are harmful and can increase body dissatisfaction, disordered eating and potential for eating disorders.
- Get ALL children (and the family together), regardless of shape or size, to do fun, joyful physical activity and promote positive eating behaviours.
- Read our [HAPPY](#) and [THOUGHTFUL](#) tip sheets or look in our [Concerned About a Child resources](#).